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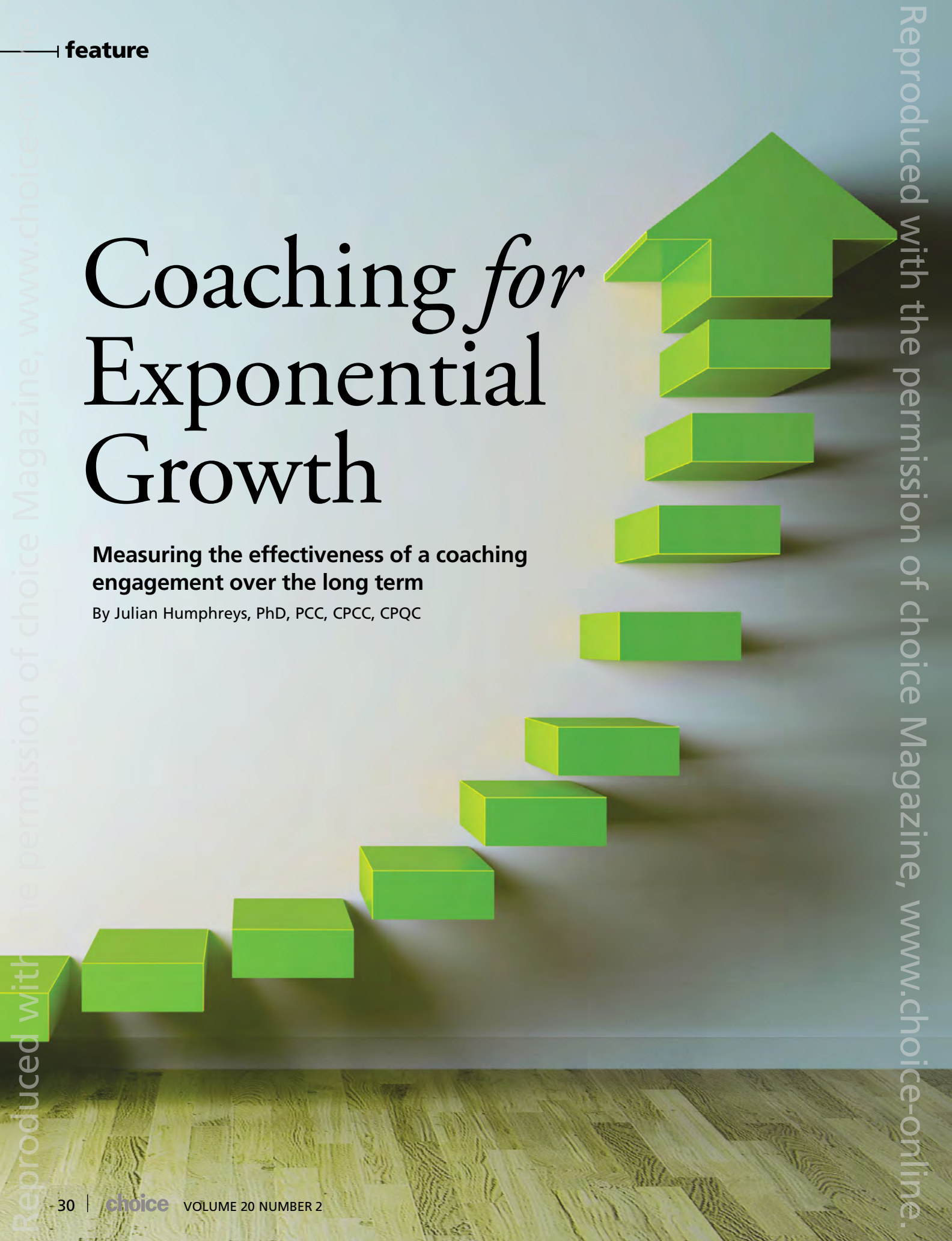
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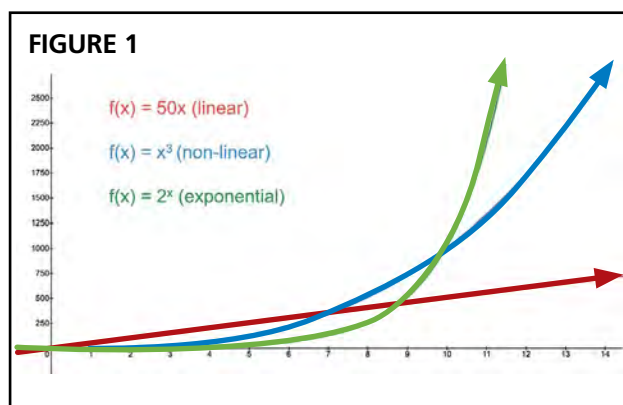
Coaching *for* Exponential Growth

Measuring the effectiveness of a coaching engagement over the long term

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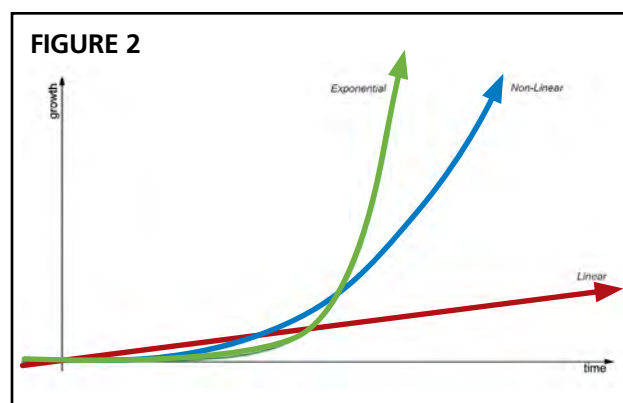
If the global pandemic has taught us anything, it's the power of exponential growth. For years now, I've been aiming for exponential growth in my coaching. In this article, I illustrate what I mean by "coaching for exponential growth." I also show how traditional measures of the effectiveness of a coaching engagement often discourage the delivery of what, over the long term, is measurably the most effective coaching a client can receive.



To set the context for what follows, see Figure 1 above for three kinds of growth trajectory, based on math that I remember from high school (with a bit of help from my sister, who studied math at Oxford).

- The first trajectory is linear – for every increase in x , y increases by x multiplied by n
- The second is non-linear – for every increase in x , y increases by x to the power of n
- The third is exponential – for every increase in x , y increases by n to the power of x

So, what does all this have to do with coaching? Well, despite working primarily through the medium of language, coaches seek to create specific, measurable outcomes for their clients. And in general, the outcomes we're looking for are growth-oriented, which means they can be understood as movements along a growth trajectory, with time on one axis and growth on the other.



For instance, a productivity coach might assess if, at the end of an engagement, their client is producing more value per hour worked than they were at the beginning of the engagement (this might be possible to measure if the client is a sales or similarly quantitatively-oriented professional).

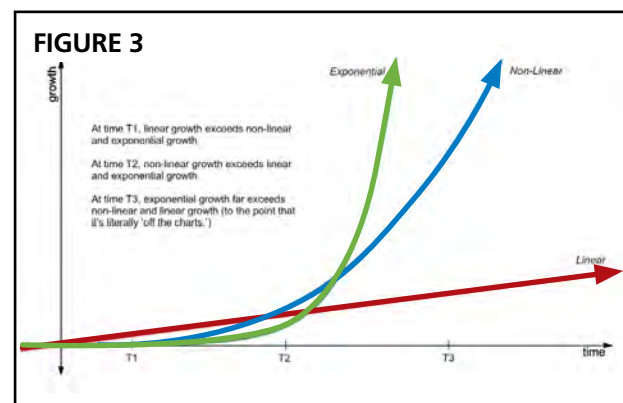
As Figure 2 (lower left) shows, this shift in productivity, when graphed with time on the x axis and productivity on the y axis, could be the result of:

- a change in the red function, changing the steepness of the line
- a change in the blue function, changing the gradient of the non-linear curve
- a change in the green function, changing the shape of the exponential curve.

Often the most effective coaching represents a movement from one of these growth trajectories to another.

For instance, someone who has plodded along carefully in their career, diligently jumping through hoops to get the next promotion (i.e. they are on a linear trajectory), might receive coaching that leads them to hold higher expectations for themselves, motivating them to work harder and achieve more as they align with their core values and strengths. Sustainable, "transformational" coaching of this kind can be understood as a hop from a linear to a non-linear or even exponential growth curve.

It is interesting to conceive of coaching in this way because the difficulties of measuring the effectiveness of coaching become more readily apparent. For, although non-linear and exponential growth trajectories ultimately produce more significant outcomes over time, they also produce less significant outcomes in the short term (see Figure 3 below).



There are a couple of ways of bringing this idea to life.

The first is the famous "pond" example. On the first day of the month, there's just one lily pad in the pond, on day two there are two, and on day three there are four. By the end of the month, the pond is completely covered with lily pads. Most people will tell you that the pond was likely half covered in the middle of the month, but actually, it takes

right up until the day before the end of the month for the pond to be half covered.

The second example is a favorite of parents who like to boggle their children's minds. If you ask the average child if they'd rather receive a million dollars today or a magic penny that doubles itself every day for a month, most will take the million dollars. But that's the wrong choice (assuming you're looking to maximize returns). A penny that doubles itself every day for a month yields over 10 million dollars. But if a month only had 25 days, you'd be out by almost \$900,000 from choosing the magic penny over the \$1,000,000.

What these examples illustrate is the time sensitivity of certain kinds of growth trajectory. What may look like almost no growth in the short term may add up to substantial growth over the long term, if the growth trajectory is a non-linear or exponential one. Or, put another way, the most powerful coaching for long-term outcomes is likely to look dismal when measured in the short term.

As the old saying goes, "Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day; teach a man to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime." For the first few days, though, the fisherman may be struggling to learn his craft and not catch anything. So, what do you do when HR is breathing down your neck saying, "When are we going to eat?"

What may look like almost no growth in the short term may add up to substantial growth over the long term, if the growth trajectory is a non-linear or exponential one.

The solution to this problem is to be very clear from the outset – with yourself, the client and HR – about what you are being contracted to achieve, and what you believe the growth trajectory for that particular outcome looks like.

Many coaches can deliver quick fixes, and often a quick fix is all that's needed. As Oxford Brookes professor and coaching supervisor Tatiana Bachkirova puts it in her paper, "Beautiful ideas that can make us ill":

"Coaching as an intervention is traditionally promoted as suitable for people who are reasonably productive and content with major areas of their life. This is how coaching is typically differentiated from counselling. Therefore, it would be logical to assume that only minor adjustments need to be made to move them forward."

In other words, transformation through coaching is not always necessary or desirable.

APPLYING THE DISTINCTIONS

There are lots of ways you can apply the distinctions between linear, non-linear and exponential growth to your coaching practice. Here are some distinctions I came up with based on my own experience as a coach. Feel free to add your own.

LINEAR	NON-LINEAR	EXPONENTIAL
Tips and Tricks	Structures and Frameworks	Experience-Derived Principles
Advising	Modeling	Cultivating
Satisfying	Challenging	Frustrating

But when transformation *is* desirable, as it often is in my experience (with new leaders who need to stop doing what they're good at and start doing what they're not yet good at, with implications for how they see themselves at the identity level), coaches need to advocate for a clear understanding of the growth trajectory their clients are on, particularly when it comes to measuring the effectiveness of the coaching engagement, in both the short- and long-term.

The problem, of course, is that there are so many confounding variables when you measure anything over the long-term that a meaningful assessment of the success of a coaching engagement becomes almost impossible.

Ultimately, then, the best measure may be the subjective experience of the client, captured at different moments in time.

For my own part, if a client tells me, as one did recently, that the coaching we did several years ago was a key contributor to their recent promotion, that it was "impactful and important," and they "shout it from the rooftops," my heart sings.

That may not be the most rigorous measure of coaching success but, realistically, it may be as good as it gets.

Practically speaking, though, clients and sponsors want measurable results sooner rather than later, so I often find myself serving the overt agenda of short-term measurable results through linear change, while fulfilling a second, more covert agenda of long-term measurable results through non-linear or exponential change.

My hope is that, as more clients and sponsors understand the unique characteristics of different growth trajectories, non-linear and exponential growth will be intended outcomes of a typical coaching engagement, along with more traditional 'quick wins' from linear growth. ●

REFERENCES

Bachkirova, Tatiana & Borrington, Simon. (2020), "Beautiful ideas that can make us ill: Implications for coaching." *Philosophy of Coaching: An International Journal*. 5(1), 9-30.