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# Conceptual foundations of coaching for the emotional recovery of leaders

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## Abstract

The article examines the theoretical foundations of coaching aimed at the emotional recovery of leaders operating in a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) environment. The relevance of the study is justified by the growing level of stress experienced by executives. The absence of systemic recovery mechanisms leads to reduced productivity and increased staff turnover, underscoring the economic significance of the topic. The objective of this work is to develop a conceptual coaching model that integrates five key theoretical frameworks to form a managed five-stage cycle of a leader's emotional recovery. To achieve this aim, a systematic analysis of 16 sources was conducted: meta-analyses, industry reports, ICF standards, and APA regulations, as well as a comparative content analysis of theories and quantitative effect indicators. The novelty of the research lies in the synthesis of diverse psychological and neurobiological approaches into a single, integrative coaching model, in which each intervention is grounded in a specific mechanism of action and has a measurable outcome. A logic-structural matrix matching theories to coaching phases is proposed, and based on this, a managed five-stage cycle (diagnosis, awareness development, experimentation, integration, evaluation) is adapted to the intensive pace of executive work. The key results show that using together emotional intelligence methods, positive interventions, resilience programs, and executive coaching makes a leader's return to normal psychological balance successful and creates a good economic impact. This five-step cycle makes the process repeatable and allows quick changes in interventions using both personal feelings and objective measurements. This article will be particularly beneficial to executive coaching practitioners, HR directors, and researchers in organizational psychology.

**Keywords:** Coaching; Emotional Recovery; Leadership; VUCA; Emotional Intelligence; Positive Psychology; Self-Determination Theory; SCARF; Resilience; Integrative Model

## 1. Introduction

The world described by the acronym VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) creates an environment of continuous turbulence for leaders: decisions must be made faster than information becomes outdated, and the consequences of errors become systemic. Under such conditions, even top managers express intentions to resign for the sake of better well-being. A recent Deloitte survey showed that nearly 70% of C-suite executives are seriously considering changing jobs to restore their health and resilience, turning leaders' emotional burnout into a strategic risk for organizations (Silverglate, 2022). Increased pressure is felt at all levels: a Gallup study reports that 44% of employees worldwide experienced stress for most of yesterday, and leaders become the first points of failure – their emotional state rapidly transmits to their teams and the corporate culture. Without precise recovery mechanisms, costs rise: according to the same surveys, high stress levels correlate with increased turnover and declining productivity, confirming the economic relevance of leaders' emotional recovery (Almeida, 2023). The International Coaching Federation (ICF) defines coaching as a partnership in which, through creative and provocative dialogue, the client uncovers potential and translates insights into action (ICF, 2024). Emotional recovery is interpreted as an individual's ability to return to baseline psychological equilibrium after high emotional loads—that is, as a specific case of resilience,

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defined by the American Psychological Association as the process and outcome of successful adaptation to adversity (American Psychological Association, 2025). A leader is understood as a subject of social influence who intentionally directs others' efforts toward common goals. These operationalizations set the analytical framework in which coaching is viewed not as a universal panacea, but as a specific method for developing a leader's capacity for emotional recovery.

## 2. Materials and Methodology

This study is based on the analysis of 16 sources, including five meta-analyses and systematic reviews (O'Boyle et al., 2011; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Joyce et al., 2018; Nicolau et al., 2023; MetrixGlobal/Stracke, 2025), six industry reports and surveys (Silverglate, 2022; Almeida, 2023; Gallup, 2023), two ICF standards (ICF, 2019; ICF, 2024), and APA normative documents on resilience (American Psychological Association, 2025). The theoretical foundation comprised key frameworks of emotional intelligence (O'Boyle et al., 2011), positive psychology (Fredrickson, 2004; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), self-determination theory (McAnally & Hagger, 2024), the SCARF model (Campbell et al., 2022), and the concept of dynamic resilience (Joyce et al., 2018) (American Psychological Association, 2025).

Data were collected via a systematic literature review using the following criteria: publications from 2002 to 2025, peer-reviewed journals, and official reports. In the first stage, materials were thematically classified into five theoretical domains: emotional intelligence, positive psychology, self-determination theory, neuroleadership, and resilience. In the second stage, quantitative effect metrics (correlations, Hedges' g) were extracted from meta-analyses and systematic reviews, allowing for a comparison of each approach's contribution to emotional recovery (e.g., r = 0.24–0.30 for EI controlling for cognitive ability and personality traits (O'Boyle et al., 2011), r ≈ 0.29–0.31 for positive interventions (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), mean g = 0.44 for resilience programs (Joyce et al., 2018), g = 0.36 for key behavioral indicators of executive coaching (Nicolau et al., 2023)).

The analytical toolkit included a comparative analysis of theoretical models, identifying shared and unique mechanisms that influence recovery. This analysis was followed by the construction of a logic-structural map (matrix) that matched theories to coaching phases, and subsequently integrating these into a unified process. Content analysis of ICF standards (2019; 2024) and industry reports (Silverglate, 2022; Almeida, 2023) clarified the operationalization of mindfulness, reframing, need-crafting, and somatic micro-pauses in practical cases. Finally, the integrative model was developed by synthesizing all five frameworks into a managed five-stage cycle—diagnosis, awareness development, experimentation, integration, and evaluation—each stage underpinned by specific mechanisms from EI, positive psychology, SDT, SCARF, and resilience.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Emotional recovery of the leader relies on several complementary theoretical blocks that describe how experiences, motivation, and neurodynamics shape the capacity to return rapidly to optimal functioning after stress. None of these frameworks exhausts the phenomenon in its entirety; their strength lies in integration, which provides the coaching process with a clear roadmap of leverage points—from cognitive processing of experience to the calibration of the leader's immediate social microenvironments.

Emotional intelligence, in Daniel Goleman's classical interpretation, demonstrates that accurate identification and regulation of one's own and others' emotions possesses independent prognostic value for on-the-job behavior. Meta-methods confirm this: an expanded sample of 65 studies revealed adjusted correlations of r = 0.24–0.30 between the three principal streams of EI measurement and individual performance even after controlling for cognitive intelligence and Big Five traits (O'Boyle et al., 2011). For coaching, this implies that the development of emotional competencies is not a soft bonus, but a measurable resource that enhances a leader's capacity under load.

Positive psychology completes the picture by explaining how positive emotions broaden cognitive-behavioral repertoires and build long-term personal resources. Within the broaden-and-build theory, it has been demonstrated that joy, interest, and gratitude initiate processes of exploration and acquisition of new strategies that can subsequently be deployed in times of crisis (Fredrickson, 2004). A meta-analysis of 51 clinically randomized trials reveals an average effect size of r = 0.29 for increases in well-being following positive interventions, while simultaneously reducing depressive symptoms by r ≈ 0.31—statistics that underscore the practical benefits of brief exercises, such as a gratitude journal or acts of kindness (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's self-determination theory introduces the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness into the model. A 2024 conceptual review documents a robust association between the

satisfaction of these needs and high engagement, productivity, and reduced burnout; conversely, frustration of these needs correlates with increased turnover and stress symptoms (McAnally & Hagger, 2024). This self-determination theory is illustrated in Fig. 1.

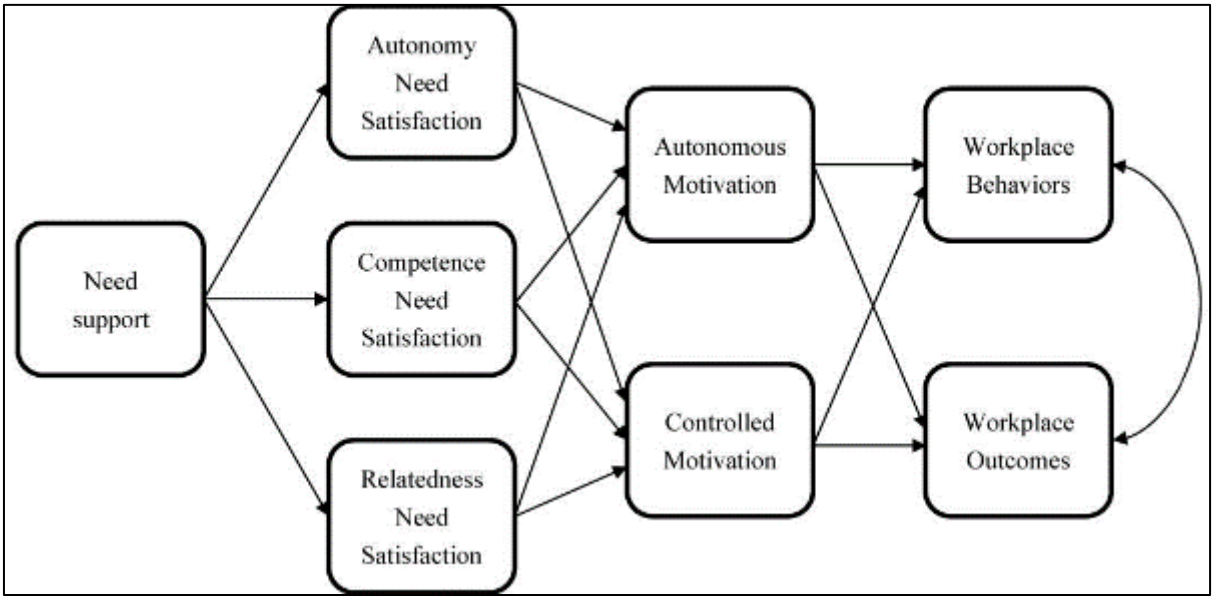


**Figure 1** Model proposing associations among constructs from self-determination theory and workplace outcomes (McAnally & Hagger, 2024)

In coaching, this translates into the practice of need-crafting: the leader experiments with structuring work rituals to reclaim choice, a sense of mastery, and supportive connections.

David Rock's neuroleadership flexibly connects psychophysiology and management: the SCARF model describes five social domains—Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness—whose activation triggers either threat or reward responses in the limbic system. Randomized applications of the SCARF questionnaire in change management demonstrate that systematic work with these domains increases staff readiness for transformation and reduces defensive reactions (Campbell et al., 2022). For a leader's emotional recovery, this is critical: minimizing social-threat triggers conserves cognitive resources and shortens the time it takes to return to a productive state.

Finally, the concept of resilience—developed by Froma Walsh and further refined by Katharine Hunter—considers resilience as a dynamic systemic process encompassing the individual, family, and organization. Its focus is on meaning-making of events, flexible structure, and open communication. A systematic review of 111 resilience-training programs yields an average standardized mean effect of g = 0.44 (95% CI, 0.23–0.64), with combinations of cognitive-behavioral and mindfulness techniques demonstrating the most consistent gains (Joyce et al., 2018). This confirms that resilience is not a fixed trait, but rather a skill amenable to targeted development through coaching.

Together, the theories as mentioned above form a multi-layered matrix: emotional intelligence determines how the leader perceives internal signals; positive psychology offers tools for rapid regeneration of positive affect; self-determination theory describes the architecture of motivation; SCARF translates threats and rewards into the language of neuroplasticity; and resilience sets the systemic indicators of outcome. Such an overlay of frameworks enables the coach to design protocols in which each technique is logically tied to specific theoretical mechanisms and measurable behavioral outcomes.

The theoretical frameworks presented above establish the logical architecture of practice, indicating which psychic mechanisms need to be activated so that, after experiencing intensive stress, the leader returns to a productive state and retains the capacity to influence others. The emotional-recovery coaching model, built on these foundations, treats the process as a managed cycle in which precise expected results are formulated, methods are selected, and success criteria are specified in advance, so that each session is linked to subsequent behavioral change.

The model's goal is to provide the leader with a durable psychological core that safeguards the quality of strategic decisions and team relationships. At the outcome level, this is measured not only by subjective stress reduction but also

by economic effects: the MetrixGlobal study showed that executive-coaching programs generate a cumulative return on investment of approximately 788 % due to productivity growth and staff retention (Stracke, 2025), and a 2023 meta-analysis reports an average standardized effect of g = 0.36 on key behavioral indicators—such as adaptability and managerial flexibility—as shown in Table 1 (Nicolau et al., 2023).

**Table 1** Effect sizes for specific outcomes (Nicolau et al., 2023)

| Outcome | Samples | N | Hedges' g | Standard error | 95 % CI (LL) | 95 % CI (UL) | Z-value | p-value | Q | $I^2$ (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Self-efficacy | 5 | 254 | 0.31 | 0.13 | 0.04 | 0.58 | 2.25 | 0.02 | 5.78 | 30.88 |
| Goal attainment | 3 | 155 | 1.32 | 0.35 | 0.63 | 2.00 | 3.77 | < 0.001 | 7.46 | 73.19 |
| Job satisfaction | 3 | 154 | 0.36 | 0.27 | –0.17 | 0.91 | 1.31 | 0.17 | 5.86 | 65.92 |
| PsyCap | 3 | 144 | 0.83 | 0.17 | 0.49 | 1.17 | 4.80 | < 0.001 | 1.84 | 0.00 |
| Resilience | 3 | 133 | 0.57 | 0.17 | 0.23 | 0.91 | 3.31 | < 0.001 | 0.34 | 0.00 |

The fundamental principle of partnership is based on the ICF competence model, in which the coach co-creates the relationship and shares with the client the responsibility for selecting goals and means of their achievement. Such a format increases the leader's autonomous motivation and reduces resistance to change: the client adopts techniques as self-chosen decisions rather than external recommendations (ICF, 2019).

The principle of integrity entails working simultaneously on three levels—cognitive, affective, and somatic. In practice, this is expressed by complementing cognitive reframing with somatic micro-pauses and exercises designed to elicit positive affect; thus, a single objective is reinforced via multiple independent adaptation pathways, radically enhancing its durability.

The normalization of stress addresses the paradox leader = resilience by default. Instead of attempting to eliminate stress as an anomaly, the coach helps the client view it as a normal biological reaction requiring competent resource management. The American Psychological Association emphasizes that discussing one's stress states and engaging in regular self-regulation can reduce the risk of professional burnout, even among highly skilled specialists, provided these activities become part of routine practice (DeAngelis, 2002).

The principle of iterativity is grounded in dose–effect data: the study that constructed the first dose curve for executive coaching demonstrated that the great skill gains occur within the first six sessions, after which a plateau is reached; regular micro-interventions following the primary phase maintain the effect without excessive load, as shown in Fig. 2 (De Haan et al., 2020). This explains why the model is structured as a brief intensive course followed by a series of short booster sessions and independent practices.

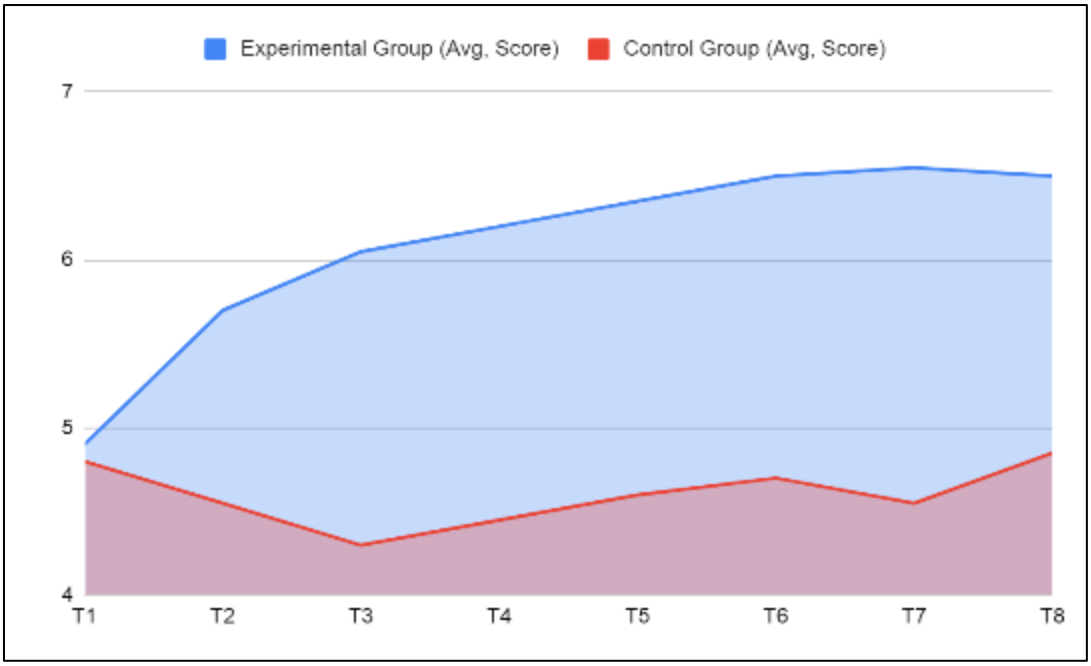


**Figure 2** The first dose-effect curve in executive coaching (De Haan et al., 2020)

Measurability closes the cycle: baseline indicators—e.g., PSS-10 score, HRV, and key team KPIs—are recorded before commencement; after each iteration, shifts are assessed and evaluated. Recent validation of the PSS-10 confirmed its high reliability and construct validity, rendering the scale suitable for short-term monitoring of change. The combination of subjective and objective metrics enables the client to observe the direct link between practice, well-being, and business outcomes. It allows organizations to justify the economic efficiency of the intervention (Xiao et al., 2023).

The five-stage cycle transforms general methodological principles into a managed practice. Each successive phase builds upon the previous one, creating a continuous feedback loop that permits rapid process adjustments when the leader encounters high stress levels.

At the outset, a diagnosis is conducted and a coaching contract is formulated. Combinations of objective biomarkers and subjective questionnaires are employed, and the desired outcome, interaction format, and degree of responsibility of each party are discussed. Such a working alliance not only sets the direction of work but also strengthens trust, which is critical for subsequent experimental steps.

Next, the coach assists the leader in developing awareness and conducting cognitive reframing. Mindfulness-based exercises facilitate the recognition of automatic emotional reactions, and positive psychology methods help reframe stressors as sources of learning rather than threats.

The following phase is devoted to experimentation with brief recovery practices. Together, coach and client select breathing techniques, movement micro-pauses, or written gratitude exercises, then safely test which practice yields the greatest increase in energy and clarity of thought. Selection follows the principle of small action–tangible effect, allowing the leader to integrate the practice into an intensive schedule readily.

Once the effective set of techniques is confirmed through personal experience, they are integrated into daily and team rituals. Practices are scheduled into meetings, retrospectives, or individual planning sessions, becoming an integral part of the organizational culture. Thereby, the leader's resilience extends to the team, strengthening collective adaptability to change.

The final stage is dedicated to evaluation and adjustment. The coach and leader compare current physiological and subjective well-being indicators with baseline values and analyze trends in key business metrics. If progress decelerates or a practice no longer aligns with new task demands, goals, and tools are revised, and the cycle recommences from a higher level of maturity. This approach renders emotional recovery not a one-off intervention, but a reproducible managerial technology.

In light of the theoretical foundations presented—from emotional intelligence and positive psychology to neuroleadership and dynamic resilience—emotional-recovery coaching emerges as a holistic, systemic practice enabling leaders not merely to extinguish the effects of stress, but to construct a sustainable psychological core. The integration of diverse frameworks ensures logical coherence between the mechanisms of effect and measurable outcomes. At the same time, the five-stage working cycle guarantees regular diagnosis, adaptation, and reinforcement of acquired skills. As a result, emotional recovery becomes not a singular intervention but a reproducible technology capable of sustaining leaders' strategic effectiveness and well-being even in a VUCA environment—and it is precisely this systemic approach that lays a solid foundation for subsequent practical application and empirical validation of the model.

## 4. Conclusion

The conceptual coaching model for leaders' emotional recovery proposed in this article demonstrates a holistic and systemic approach to supporting executives in a VUCA environment. The integration of five key theoretical frameworks—emotional intelligence, positive psychology, self-determination theory, SCARF-based neuroleadership, and dynamic resilience—enables the construction of a sequence of interventions, each grounded in clearly identified mechanisms of action and measurable behavioral or physiological outcomes. Such an architecture allows the coach not merely to extinguish the effects of stress but to cultivate a leader's sustainable psychological core that preserves the quality of strategic decision-making and the capacity to inspire the team.

The practical implementation of the model through a five-stage cycle—diagnosis; development of awareness and reframing; experimentation with brief practices; integration into work rituals; and evaluation with adjustment—ensures a managed and reproducible process in which each phase is supported by both subjective (PSS-10 survey, self-reports of stress levels) and objective (HRV, key KPIs) metrics. The collected empirical data indicate a high return on such interventions.

Thus, the emotional-recovery coaching model emerges not as a one-off therapeutic technique but as a reproducible managerial technology capable of regularly diagnosing a leader's needs, adapting methods, and reinforcing achieved outcomes. It is precisely the systemic overlay of theoretical foundations and the clear methodological structure that lays a solid groundwork for subsequent scaling of the practice and empirical refinement of its effectiveness within real organizations.

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