

Does executive coaching work?

... and if so, how? Nadine Page and Erik de Haan consider the evidence.

The field of executive coaching has grown considerably in recent times. The empirical research conducted to explore the effectiveness of executive coaching, which has struggled to keep pace with developments in the field, suggests there are many personal and organisational benefits from engaging in an executive coaching relationship. However, the research studies provide an uncertain message about what makes an effective coaching relationship and how this might differ for all parties invested in the coaching journey – client, coach and organisational sponsor. This article provides a brief review of the field of executive coaching and summarises the active ingredients of effective executive coaching that have been identified in the empirical research to date.

questions

Why is there a large degree of diversity in executive coaching and what are the implications of this?

What variables have been identified as 'active ingredients' of effective coaching? Are these the same for clients and coaches?

resources

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www.ashridge.org.uk/centreforcoaching

Executive coaching is a form of organisational learning through one-to-one conversations that facilitates development for a leader. It can be used in a variety of ways, for example, getting past an impasse, removing a stumbling block or drawing out and building on strengths. Undoubtedly, there has been a flurry of activity around coaching, and people are asking why. Why are there so many books, so many courses, even master's programmes, on executive coaching? Why are so many consultants and therapists interested in becoming coaches? Why do you see professional coaching accreditation, international foundations and conferences?

The first reason is probably the most influential. Over the last 15 years or so there's been a profound change in how coaching is viewed. In the past it was seen as remedial: if you heard the word coaching you'd assume there was a problem. Now coaching has progressed from having a stigma attached to it to affording status: coaching has become an indication that one's company considers one worth an investment. Moreover, we think this is because something else has happened in many business cultures – people are more willing to admit to themselves and to others that they need the help of professionals to understand themselves and to grow and develop in their working environment. Senior executives now often acknowledge that they have had coaching and that it has informed them as leaders and influenced their value systems, the way they deal with other people or their approach to their

work. This is increasingly seen as something to be proud of, as demonstrating emotional intelligence and insight.

The second development is that nowadays coaches are much less interested in making dogmatic statements about one view or another. They want to use whatever works, borrowing ideas from different approaches, like sports coaching for example. They ask themselves what will work for this particular person, at this particular moment, with this particular question.

Third, the coaching profession globally is becoming more professional, mature and regulated. The 2012 International Coaching Federation Global Coaching Study reported the number of professional coaches was estimated to be 47,500 worldwide and it is continuing to grow. Coaching is also becoming more prevalent in organisations. In 2004 the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development in the UK reported that 64 per cent of organisations surveyed use external coaches, 92 per cent of the survey participants judged the coaching to be 'effective' or 'very effective', and 96 per cent reported that coaching is an effective way to promote learning in organisations (Jarvis, 2004). In the same year, the *Harvard Business Review* reported that business coaching – including mentoring – was a \$1 billion industry in the US and a \$2 billion industry worldwide (Sherman & Freas, 2004).

Despite an increase in prevalence, the coaching profession remains in a state of flux and it is only just beginning to be regulated. There is a large degree of diversity in the professionals who claim to practise coaching as well as in the range of fields in which coaching interventions are delivered (Bono et al., 2009). Individuals are entering coaching from very diverse backgrounds, such as clinical and occupational psychology, senior management, organisation development, and counselling. They bring influences as far apart as the GROW-model, solution-focused brief therapy, positive psychology

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and person-centred counselling (De Haan & Burger, 2005). Individual professionals therefore tailor coaching interventions to their own background, theoretical orientation and interests, as well as to the needs and interests of the individual client or 'coachee'.

With the tightening of training budgets, and more variability, visibility and scrutiny in the coaching profession as a whole, it is critical to consider the active ingredients of effective coaching relationships and their impact, if any, on outcomes. Needless to say, there have been too few serious attempts to explore such active ingredients of coaching practices in a reliable and validated way (as noted by Grant, Passmore et al., 2010). This is, perhaps, because there is no central commissioning for the profession, a lack of funding for research, and little pressure and demand from coaching clients to conduct rigorous outcome research. Those coaches who do engage with research often do so because of personal curiosity and interest. This has resulted in very few robust quantitative and objective examinations of effective coaching. Arguably, none of these satisfy the 'gold standard' of large randomised control-group trials that are used in other disciplines, such as medicine or

psychotherapy (see Wampold, 2001).

Of course it is a big and costly commitment to conduct a rigorous outcome study, and it is right that coaches seek to satisfy the needs of their clients and their own coaching commitments first rather than studying, with detachment, their own effectiveness. However, it is also important and necessary for the practice to develop a better understanding of overall coaching outcomes based on true scientific evidence rather than assumptions. If this is neglected, then the profession is vulnerable to criticism, and open to risks such as misjudging the situation, aggravating the status quo, or abusing the coach's power (Berglas, 2002).

Even if we make this commitment to robust research on coaching effectiveness, what do we ask? Consider questions such as: 'What is effective coaching?' 'Does our coaching work, i.e. can it be demonstrated to be effective?' 'Does it help clients with their critical objectives?' 'What are the active ingredients?' 'Under what circumstances do they work best?' There can be significant variability in the operationalisation of what is being measured as an outcome as well as a large degree of subjectivity in what counts as 'good' or effective. Moreover, the heterogeneity of issues that can be the

focus of a coaching intervention and the rapid growth and diversification of the profession as a whole have, we believe, impeded the development of an objective outcome-oriented evidence base on effective coaching. Empirical research struggles to keep pace with developments in coaching practice.

In this article we attempt to do just that, to answer the question 'does coaching work?' and to define the potential indicators of coaching effectiveness. We then seek to distinguish the 'active

ingredients' of effective coaching and explore how each of these can be shown to be critical to the success of executive coaching relationships. Some of the factors that we present are supported by our own empirical research, the largest quantitative study on coaching effectiveness to date. To bring these coaching factors to life, we present a case example to illustrate how some of the active ingredients of effective coaching work in practice, during a live coaching conversation.

What can we expect from executive coaching research?

Outcome studies on executive coaching have tended to favour a qualitative approach, with robust quantitative research on executive coaching lagging behind (Jones et al., 2014; Theeboom et al., 2014). Individual studies on coaching effectiveness are often commissioned by organisations or as part of a leadership-development or organisational-change programme. The data collected are often based on smaller, select and potentially homogeneous samples of participants. This makes it very difficult to draw firm conclusions based on cross-study comparisons.

The quantitative research on executive coaching that has been conducted comes from two main classes of outcome research, one that includes a control group and one that does not (see De Haan & Duckworth, 2013, for a review). The studies without a control group have shown the effectiveness of executive coaching using the techniques of multisource ratings from self, managers and coach (Peterson, 1993), and also when outcomes are measured by various different behavioural indicators including: productivity (Bowles et al., 2007; Olivero et al., 1997); leadership effectiveness (Thach, 2002); and leadership behaviours as observed in meetings and rated by the coach (Perkins, 2009).

When a control group is included in the design (e.g. Evers et al., 2006; Smither et al., 2003; Sue-Chan & Latham, 2004), it



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is often done so opportunistically rather than through a process that is truly random. The inclusion of a control group makes it possible to identify and compare the effective characteristics in a more systematic way, to tease out the 'active ingredients' or common factors of the approach. Smither et al. (2003) conducted one of the largest impact studies on executive coaching to date. It included 1202 senior managers assessed over two consecutive years. The results showed that multisource feedback from clients' supervisors, peers and subordinates, as well as evaluations by independent researchers, was found to be overall more positive for those managers who did work with a coach. The specific areas of improvement were goal-setting, soliciting ideas for improvement, and ratings from direct reports and superiors.

Over the past decade there has also been a small series of studies that have adopted truly randomised controlled trials. These, however, have generally been smaller scale and they have explored mainly self-scoring rather than independent outcome measurements. Grant et al. (2009) found that executive coaching significantly enhanced goal attainment, resilience and workplace well-being, and reduced depression and stress in healthcare managers in comparison to a wait-list control group. Similar patterns of results were also found for high-school teachers who received work-related coaching compared to a random wait-list control group (Grant, Green et al., 2010). Some of these findings are substantial but they may well be influenced by same-source or common-methods bias (see Grant, Passmore et al, 2010).

The overall effectiveness of executive coaching has also been reported in two recent meta-analyses. Theeboom et al. (2014) found that executive coaching had moderate and positive impacts on individual-level performance and skills, well-being, coping, work attitudes and goal-directed self-regulation. They

concluded that coaching is an effective intervention in organisations. Jones et al. (2014) further reported that executive coaching also has a greater impact on performance compared with other popular workplace development tools.

So what can we conclude from this body of research? First, that outcome research in coaching is developing but that the holy grail of executive coaching – proof of effectiveness from a controlled study with random assignment and multiple, objective behavioural and performance outcome measures – is yet to be found (see De Haan & Duckworth, 2013, for an overview). Second, there is no agreed research standard like the randomised controlled trials used in psychotherapy outcome research (see Wampold, 2001). Third, there is a large degree of variability in the research designs that might themselves affect outcome. And fourth, effect sizes are substantially larger when the data are self-reported.

Overall, outcome research provides some indication that executive coaching is an effective intervention. It does not, however, conclusively identify those factors that contribute to effectiveness.

Active ingredients

An emerging body of research *assumes* the general effectiveness of coaching and then compares conditions to determine the *degree* to which various aspects of coaching relationship, such as the coach or the client, have an effect on outcomes. If one accepts the assumptions of general effectiveness, then the experimental conditions of this type of research can be a lot less stringent. First, it is not necessary to employ randomised control groups because the various conditions



Variables such as coach credibility and client-coach compatibility positively impact the coaching outcome

create proper comparison samples within the study. Second, it is possible to use self-reports because in psychotherapy, studies using self-report data in realistic settings have consistently corroborated results from more rigorous studies with randomised controlled trials (Shadish et al., 2000; Stiles et al., 2008). However, self-reports tend to be a more reactive dependent variable and may well be overestimated. This needs to be considered in future coaching research.

The studies that have explored *which coaching factors* are effective have included the personality profiles of both coach and client, along with the self-efficacy of the client; the strength of the coaching relationship; and the type of coaching intervention. We briefly discuss the empirical research on these factors below.

Personality

There is a significant influence of personality on coaching effectiveness. Stewart et al. (2008) explored how client personality and client self-efficacy influence coaching outcome. In so doing, they measured the 'Big-Five' personality

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traits (Digman, 1990) and general self-efficacy (Schwarzer et al., 1999) for 110 coaching clients and correlated these with outcome. They found moderate and positive effects for Conscientiousness, Openness, Emotional Stability and general self-efficacy. Considering the design of the study, they also cautioned that other factors might also play a role as well.

Moreover, Scoular and Linley (2006) looked at how both (a) personality (dis)similarities between coach and client in terms of Myer-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI: Myers et al., 1998) profiles and (b) a 'goal-setting' intervention at the beginning of the coaching conversation affected perceived effectiveness. They found that when the coach and client differed *more* on aspects of their MBTI profiles, the outcome scores were significantly higher. There was no effect of goal-setting.

Relationship

In a study of 30 internal coach/client pairs, Baron and Morin (2012) found that the coaching relationship, as measured by clients' ratings of the Working Alliance Inventory (Horvath & Greenberg, 1986), a commonly used measure of coaching relationship, predicted the coaching outcome of client self-efficacy. The coaches' ratings of the working alliance were not a significant predictor. Client-coach relationships have also been found to mediate other dependencies. Boyce et al. (2010) found that variables such as coach credibility and client-coach compatibility positively impact the coaching outcome through supporting the development of the coaching relationship.

Type of intervention

Research suggests that coaching effectiveness is not a function of specific coaching techniques or interventions, but

more linked to factors common to all coaching interventions, such as the quality of the coaching relationship, empathic understanding, and positive expectations (De Haan et al., 2011). In support of this, De Haan et al. (2013) found that the client-coach relationship was the key factor in how clients perceive the outcome of coaching; it mediated the impact of self-efficacy and the range of coaching techniques.

Why these active ingredients?

Clearly there is a need for further research, given that the evidence is largely from the perspective of the client and often fails to hear from everybody invested in the coaching journey. After all, executive coaching is an organisational intervention and should therefore have a measurable and positive effect beyond the primary coaching client. But the evidence we have suggests that client and coach demographics and self-efficacy are influential to a certain extent, but it is the relationship that develops between client and coach that is critical and has the largest impact on coaching outcome.

This is a conclusion supported by our own empirical research, what we believe is the largest international coaching outcome research to date (see De Haan & Page, 2013a; 2013b). Participating

client-coach pairs were initially selected through our own networks of experienced and qualified executive coaches. Each coach completed an online 'coach survey' and then invited their clients to complete an online 'client survey'. Clients then invited their organisational sponsor to complete the equivalent 'sponsor survey', where appropriate. A snowball sampling technique was used.

The study results strongly indicated that the coaching relationship – as rated

by both client and coach – correlates with client- and coach-rated outcome to a considerable degree (r ranged from .43 to .56 for coaches, and from .46 to .55 for clients). In contrast to some previous research (e.g. Scoular & Linley, 2006), we found little evidence for a differential impact of client personality, coach personality or client-coach personality matching. An important difference of our research compared with some of the earlier literature is that our significant results have been from predictor variables that were rated by both clients and coaches. This means the results are less susceptible to the common-methods bias (Mead et al., 2007). We found a significant degree of consistency in the perceived effectiveness of coaching between client and coach.

So how can each of these 'active ingredients' be applied in real-life coaching conversations?

The strength of the *coaching relationship* or working alliance between client and coach is the most powerful predictor of coaching outcomes. Spending time building a strong relationship with a client is critical for successful and effective coaching, and it is perceived this way by both coach and client alike. Specifically, our research suggests that it is important to build a rapport that is task-focused, with clear and achievable goals, as this leads to successful outcomes more so than just focusing on developing a close relationship or bond. On a practical level, this implies that it is important for coaches to work in tandem with their clients in a manner that is task- or goal-focused. This gives the coaching conversation a clear direction that is action-oriented, and facilitates the strengthening of the relationship between both parties.

Another important predictor of effective coaching is the degree to which clients can motivate themselves, their *self-efficacy*, or if you like, ego strength or self-confidence. Considering this finding in conjunction with the first, it could be suggested that a well-functioning coaching

"it is the relationship that develops between client and coach that is critical"

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relationship might also help to ignite and maintain a client's self-motivation over time. Successfully achieving set goals could certainly boost ego strength and support momentum in the long term. This, in turn, might have a direct bearing on personal and career development.

The role of *personality structure* on coaching effectiveness is much smaller than anticipated and suggested by previous research. Moreover, matching on the basis of personality preferences appears to produce no clear improvement in the effectiveness of coaching. We suggest it might be more important to focus on coach selection in terms of qualifications, accreditation and supervision records rather than on client-coach matching.

Our final point takes us back to the importance of the *coaching relationship*. We found that effective coaching relationships do produce real and observable impacts in the eyes of *all* parties invested in the coaching journey. There is real consistency between coaching outcomes as reported by client, coach and sponsor, suggesting that they see similar benefits from the process. This finding emphasises the value of executive coaching as a highly effective development intervention.

What does effective coaching look like in practice?

To conclude, we would like to present a case study that brings some of the 'active ingredients' of effective coaching to life. As part of our research we offered participating coaches a confidential and anonymous insight into their own effectiveness as a coach. In one of those conversations, we talked to a coach who had slightly below-average effectiveness scores, but his relationships scores were much lower, nearly 50 per cent below the average, particularly for the *bond* dimension of the measure. This pattern was applicable across all clients. On



further questioning, it emerged that this was a coach who does mainly remedial work. In other words, he works with senior managers who are being given a final chance to keep their jobs by taking sessions with him and demonstrating that they can improve as a result.

The way of working and the tone in which this coach gave direct feedback to his clients about their performance sounded tough and frightful. It appeared almost astounding that this coach's effectiveness scores were nevertheless hovering around the average. That could probably be best explained by the fact that many of his clients did indeed manage to keep their jobs by working productively with this coach.

The remainder of the conversation was devoted to whether it is possible to coach clients who are backed up against the wall in such a way, while *maintaining*, or even *strengthening* the relationship. In other words, would it be possible for the coach to give the same feedback in such a way that it actually strengthens the relationship? The coach could do this, for example, by showing warmth or empathy at the same time. Or by assuring the client firmly that, as a coach, he is truly on the client's side and is only trying to help him or her learn and grow, even under difficult circumstances.

This is precisely what this study and

others alike has shown. The best predictor of the effectiveness of the coaching relationship, including in an objective sense, is the client's assessment of its strength. Moreover, the coach's own assessment of the strength of the relationship is also a good predictor of the coaching outcome. In a nutshell, we can summarise the three ingredients of the 'working alliance' measurement as follows:

It pays off in coaching to make the relationship as strong as we can, by reaching agreement on the way in which we work and the objectives we are seeking to achieve; and making the chemistry, the 'click' or bond between coach and client, as strong as possible.

In conclusion, we hope that this article has offered some insight into the current status of the coaching profession, and executive coaching in particular. Our aim was to summarise the latest on coaching outcomes research, including our own recent research, which is moving towards a more conclusive evidence base on the effectiveness of coaching. In so doing, we have found evidence for the central importance of the *quality* of the working relationship as seen from both the client's and the coach's perspective and for the importance of general *self-efficacy* of the client who comes to the coaching relationship. We have also suggested that personality factors and personality matching are likely to play a lesser role as a predictor of success in executive coaching. These are important findings that, we hope, will guide the development of the profession and the choices that are made in the recruitment, development, deployment and matching of executive coaches, and the coaching field as a whole.



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