



So many choices, so little research. Should coaching set its compass by the lessons of therapy?

LOST IN THE MOMENT

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If we're honest, we executive coaches know we have precious little to go by. We need to decide at each moment of our conversations what to do. Whether to hold back and listen to the client, pay attention to our own sense-making, ask a question, put forward a hypothesis, and so on. Why take this action, and not that action, now, rather than later? How many, what frequency and what duration of sessions should we adopt? And why would this particular choice further the overall objectives of both the client and sponsoring organisation?

At any one moment we have a vast array of possible interventions at our disposal. We suffer a daunting freedom of choice and limited resources, including very little research. It is hard to find even a handful of studies with a large enough control group to warrant any conclusion. Moreover, decades of research in psychotherapy outcomes has shown that such single, randomised control studies are unlikely to be enough to settle our case. We need proper meta-analysis studies, looking at thousands of outcomes, before we can say anything about effectiveness. Even then, what we can say will only pertain to full assignments, and may have no relevance to moment-to-moment decisions.

This exposes our whole field to "wild coaching" and abuse of power, particularly as the field is still growing rapidly.¹

There is no point waiting for the creation of a proper research body because it may never happen. Large health insurance institutions allocate a substantial part of their spending to psychotherapy but coaching assignments are usually individually tailored and entered into by a multitude of clients and organisations. There is no great "purchasing power" in coaching, which is one of the reasons why this field is so much fun.

The next best option is to try to learn from psychotherapy research and assume it may also have something to say about coaching. Briefly, its main findings are:

- Psychotherapy has a large effect on various criteria for success.
- There is a negligible difference in effectiveness between approaches.²

The active ingredients of therapy are therefore common to all approaches. The strongest of these factors are the quality of the relationship, the therapist and the life circumstances of the client. The only one of these we can influence in a session is the relationship.

If we assume a dominance of common factors in executive coaching outcomes as well, we should place much less emphasis on our own coaching models. Instead, we must learn to put our relationships with our clients much more at the centre.

This is called relational coaching.³ With this approach, we can trust the client to make use of contributions by the coach. The only thing the coach can really influence is the coach-client relationship. Relational coaching is:

- understanding all subject

matter from the perspective of the relationship;

- making this relationship as strong and productive as possible;
- not limiting (other than adhering to professional ethics) specific interventions and conversational models. As long as they seem fit and appropriate, they should be fine. ■

- See also "Hidden depths", page 40.

“ Learn from psychotherapy and assume it may also have something to say about coaching ”

References

1. S Berglas, "The very real dangers of executive coaching", *Harvard Business Review*, June 2002.
2. B E Wampold, *The Great Psychotherapy Debate: Models, Methods and Findings*, Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001.
3. E de Haan, *Relational Coaching: Journeys Towards Mastering One-to-One Learning*, John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

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