The holy grail of executive coaching: discovering what really works

What we know about effectiveness of coaching conversations

Often the most valuable questions in life are both very easy to ask whilst amazingly hard to answer. "Why did I do that?", "What did I mean by that?" or "What am I achieving here?" are some examples. Such questions are oh so easy to ask, as our children demonstrate, whilst almost impossible to answer. In executive coaching examples of these most obvious, essential and at the same time largely unanswerable questions are:

• Does our coaching work? Does it satisfy buyers? Does it help clients with their vital aims?

• What aspects of coaching work? What are coaching's 'effective ingredients'?

• Under what circumstances do these aspects of coaching work best?

• Etc.

Thousands of coaches have asked these questions, which are about effectiveness or outcome. They pop up in many places across the coaching literature. In very few places though do we find serious attempts at answering the same questions with anything more than a coach's opinion or a few carefully selected case studies. We reckon that there are probably less than 10 robust quantitative outcome studies in the whole coaching literature. The reasons for this state of affairs are straightforward: a rigorous outcome study is is very cumbersome and costly to design and work through. Moreover, studying their own effectiveness with detachment is not the first priority of coaches, who tend to have their hands full trying to win client work and satisfying the demands of their practice.

On the other hand, as long as we don't address these very questions and as long as we don't have clear answers, it seems hard to justify our substantial fees, to unambiguously maintain that coaching conversations are indeed beneficial for the busy executive, or to ward off the very real dangers of executive coaching, such as misjudging the situation, aggravating the status quo or abuse of their influence by coaches (Berglas, 2002).

We know very little about coaching effectiveness

We have found only a small number of quantitative studies into coaching effectiveness. Consequently, they are worth reading through with care and summarising, as we attempt here.

Most empirical research into executive coaching is concerned with the value of coaching from the perspective of the client, with the research taking the form of an extensive evaluation including, on occasion, clients being asked to estimate how much their coaching has contributed to the bottom line of their organisation in financial terms (e.g., McGovern et al., 2001). We know of only six studies that explore

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the effectiveness of coaching by looking at effects other than client satisfaction. Two of those studies failed to employ a control group (Olivero et al., 1997, and Thach, 2002). Olivero et al. (1997) studied managers who had taken part in a three day training course, followed by eight weeks of coaching. They found that both the training and the coaching increased productivity considerably, with the bulk of the increase attributable to the coaching. In the case of Thach (2002) the managers underwent a 360° feedback process before and after their coaching. They found an average increase in 'leadership effectiveness', both from others' perspectives and in their own eyes.

Peterson (1993) and by Ragins et al. (2000) have also found significant effects as a result of executive coaching. The latter study involved a group of 1162 professionals from many organisations and looked at the effect of formal or informal mentoring relationships on a range of work and career attitudes. Forty-four percent of the respondents had an informal mentor, 9% a formal mentor as part of a mentoring programme and 47% no mentor (the control group). Their results show that the crucial factor in effectiveness is the client's satisfaction with the mentoring *relationship.* In the absence of that satisfaction, there were no demonstrable differences between professionals who were mentored and those who were not. If satisfaction is present, however, professionals clearly demonstrate more positive attitudes towards themselves (self-confidence), their work, promotion prospects, their organisation and their career, with no significant differences between formal and informal mentoring[1]. Finally, Evers et al. (2006) measured self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectancies, on each of three dimensions. Their study compared a pre-intervention and post-intervention measurement and also involved a control group. Whilst their sample was not very large (30 managers in both the experimental

and the control group) they did find some objective evidence for a positive outcome of the coaching intervention with a significant increment for the coached group over the control group for one of the three dimensions in both self-efficacy beliefs ("setting one's own goals") and outcome expectancies ("acting in a balanced way").

One of the most thorough studies into the effects of executive coaching was undertaken by Smither et al. (2003) who worked with a control group and based their conclusions on a more objective criterion than evaluations by the clients (the criterion adopted by Peterson, 1993, and Ragins et al., 2000), namely evaluations by independent researchers and by the clients' superiors, colleagues and staff (360° feedback). The research was conducted among 1202 senior managers of the same multinational organisation and involved 360° feedback results from two consecutive years. The researchers found that managers who work with an executive coach are significantly more likely than other managers to (1) set specific goals; (2) solicit ideas for improvements from their superiors; and (3) obtain higher ratings from direct-reports and superiors.

In the small but growing body of outcome-research literature on coaching we have found only two articles exploring the question of *what sort* of coaching is effective; in other words, which coaching models, qualities of coaches or coaching behaviours make a difference to clients? Scoular & Linley (2006) have looked at both (1) how a 'goal-setting' intervention at the beginning of the conversation impacts perceived helpfulness; and (2) personality (dis-) similarities between coach and client and their impact on perceived effectiveness. Outcome measurements at 2 and 8 weeks after the session showed no difference between 'goal-setting' and 'no goal-setting'; but

they did demonstrate that when the coach and client differed more on the personality instruments the outcome scores were significantly higher. De Haan et al. (2011) examine how various executive coaching interventions make a difference to clients. 71 coaching clients from as many organisations reported on the various interventions of their coaches and all strengths of interventions were compared with their evaluations. We found no distinction among specific coach interventions of coaches, leading to the conclusion that helpfulness is much less predicted by technique or approach as it is by factors common to all coaching, such as the relationship, empathic understanding, positive expectations etc.

In summary, we note that outcome research in coaching is still in its infancy and that the holy grail of executive coaching is still elusive. There is no agreed standard like the randomised control trials used in in psychotherapy outcome research (Wampold, 2001). What is also striking is that the first four research papers above (Peterson, 1993; Olivero et al., 1997; McGovern et al, 2001; and Thach, 2002), which do not make use of a control group, find very large effects (generally larger than those found in psychotherapy), whilst the three more rigorous articles discussed next (Ragins et al., 2000; Smither et al., 2003; and Evers et al., 2006) find only small effects, generally smaller than those found in psychotherapy (Wampold, 2001). It seems that if the client alone is the focus

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[1] As the authors themselves concede, they cannot rule out the possibility that the professionals with a more positive mentoring relationship are more satisfied in general, and so more satisfied with themselves, their organisation and their career. As regards the differences between formal and informal mentoring programmes (as between assigned and chosen mentor relationships), it is interesting that Ragins et al. (2001) can demonstrate slightly negative effects for formal mentoring programmes – where the clients are not able to choose their mentor – when (1) the mentor works in the same department as the client and (2) female clients are assigned to a male mentor.

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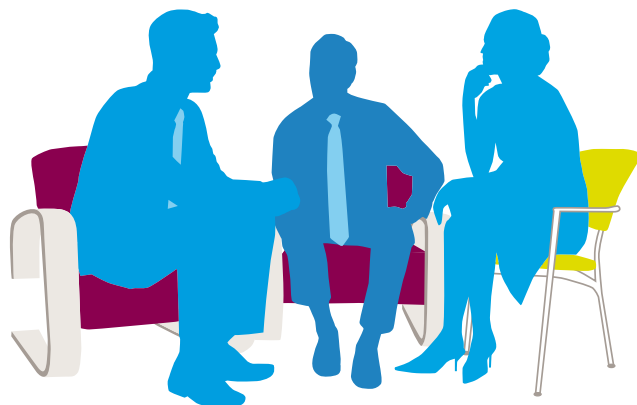
of the study, the outcome tends to be very positive, whereas if one controls for perceptual and research artefacts this effect is much smaller though still positive.

We do have some very firm conclusions in an adjacent field

In the older and larger profession of psychotherapy these same questions of effectiveness have been around since at least the 1930s (Rosenzweig, 1936) and the debates have been very lively indeed. Also, the funding for research in that profession has been more generous as some very large institutions pay for the bulk of psychotherapy. As a result of this, research findings which seemed initially unclear and contradictory have begun to yield convincing results which are now almost universally shared in the profession (Smith & Glass, 1977).

To put very briefly, the answers to the questions above are as follows:

- Does psychotherapy work? Yes, in fact, it has been demonstrated that the average psychotherapy client is better off than 80% of the people in the control group. (Wampold, 2001).

- What aspects of psychotherapy work? Different interventions, approaches, models and protocols don't make any difference in effectiveness. The aspects that work are *common* to all approaches, e.g. client context, therapist personality, and the relationship between client and therapist during the session. (Cooper, 2008).

- Under what circumstances do we find differential effects? Not a lot is known yet but there are strong indications that the therapist's *allegiance* to their approach and the client's *expectations* are more important than was previously thought. (Wampold, 2001).

One can always argue that these intriguing and convincing findings from psychotherapy are not relevant for coaches, e.g., because these were all done with professional therapists working with 'identified' patients that have 'presenting conditions' – so quite different people participating in the one-to-one conversations.

However, such crisp findings are hard to come by in our own profession, and judging from the present output there is little chance that we will generate anything of the same sort of statistical power, whilst such power is clearly needed in view of the complexity of the intervention.

A way forward: measuring up the common factors

In our view it is not the best way forward to sit around, wait and wonder until we finally

have scores of rigorous quantitative outcome studies in executive coaching, employing control groups and hard outcome criteria. Rather it seems the best approach now is to trust that coaching outcome research, when it happens, will yield similar patterns if not the very same findings as in psychotherapy: large effectiveness and substantial evidence for the importance of the so-called common factors. The De Haan et al. (2011) article is a first indication that this is probably the case.

If we can trust this, what better approach is there than to see if we can get more of a grip on the relative effectiveness and importance of the various common factors? This is the approach we have undertaken in our in-depth study with 152 professional business clients and 31 experienced coaches. Our main hypothesis was that if we can learn more about the way we are and the things we do in each of our different coaching relationships, we should be able to improve the effectiveness of the outcome for each of our unique and wonderful clients.

Conclusion: some preliminary findings

The results from our quantitative research (Duckworth et al., forthcoming), confirmed that the quality of the coach / client *relationship* is indeed the most important factor in a successful coaching outcome. However, this was only the case if the client's assessment of the relationship is used, since this amazingly bore no resemblance to the coach's rating (again, a similar finding as in psychotherapy: Horvath & Symonds, 1991). Other findings showed that coaching outcomes were significantly more positive for clients who believed that they were being helped to make discoveries, having their thoughts and actions challenged and being supported. In contrast, outcomes were less positive for those who felt they were being provided with information or helped to release emotions and there was no link with positive outcome for

those who believed they were being advised or told what to do. Perhaps surprisingly (i.e., in contrast to the findings of Scoular & Linley, 2006), all personality types (characterised using MBTI) seem to benefit equally highly from coaching. Although different personality types value different aspects of coaching, the match of coach and client personalities seems to be unimportant.

Our full findings using the final sample are due to be reported in the Spring (Duckworth et al., 2010) and with the volume of data that we have generated, there may be more illuminating findings in store.

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