
COACHING RELATIONSHIPS

THE RELATIONAL
COACHING FIELD BOOK

EDITED BY ERIK DE HAAN
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First published in 2012 by Libri Publishing

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ISBN 978 1 907471 28 5

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library

Design by Carnegie Publishing

Printed in the UK by Halstan Printing Ltd

Libri Publishing
Brunel House
Volunteer Way
Faringdon
Oxfordshire
SN7 7YR

Tel: +44 (0)845 873 3837

www.libripublishing.co.uk

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CHAPTER 13

THE COACHING RELATIONSHIP AND OTHER 'COMMON FACTORS' IN EXECUTIVE COACHING OUTCOME

ERIK DE HAAN AND ANNA DUCKWORTH

ABSTRACT

This is a quantitative study of executive coaching to determine the key factors or 'active ingredients' which contribute to its effectiveness.

Data collected from 156 client-coach pairs participating in formally contracted, external executive coaching was analysed to examine the impact on coaching outcome of the following: client self-efficacy, client personality and client-coach personality match (in terms of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator – MBTI), perceived coach interventions and the strength of the client-coach relationship (using the working alliance inventory).

Strong indications were found for the prediction of coaching outcome by: (1) the coaching relationship in terms of a working alliance, as experienced by the client; (2) the self-efficacy of the client; and (3) generalised coaching technique as experienced by the client. The client-coach relationship (working alliance) strongly mediated the impact of self-efficacy and technique on coaching outcomes, suggesting that the perception of working alliance by the client was the key factor in coaching outcome. Personality or personality matching did not correlate with coaching outcome.

From this research it seems that the so called 'common factors' of coaching conversations – i.e. those aspects which are not related to specific coaching technique, approach or philosophy – indeed play a role in influencing the outcome for the client. As a result, it appears most important at all times to attend to and develop the coaching relationship as seen by the client.

INTRODUCTION

It is our experience that coaches tend to be caring people who are passionate about their field. The chance to help others achieve their dreams is often seen by them as a vital opportunity to contribute to all that is good in this world and to find personal fulfilment. This is just one reason why most executive coaches constantly seek to learn and grow their coaching capability and increase its effectiveness and versatility so that they can deliver the best possible service to each of their unique clients.

This research study was carried out with this motive. We wanted to explore what different clients say about what actually works most effectively for each of them to achieve their various chosen outcomes. From our own earlier research (De Haan et al. 2011), our intuition and experience as practising executive coaches and our literature searches into both the relatively new field of coaching outcome research and the established field of psychotherapy outcome research (Duckworth et al. 2012), we concluded that our energy would be best spent exploring the impact of various ‘common factors’ (Wampold 2001) in order to deduce which of these contribute most significantly to successful outcomes for the client.

Based on findings from our literature survey (see Duckworth et al. 2012) and the prevailing idea (see the Introduction to this book) that common factors and in particular the coaching relationship are likely to have a differential, high impact on coaching outcome, we hypothesised the following:

- H1.** The strength of the coaching relationship (as measured by the Working Alliance Inventory) will predict coaching outcomes, both (a) as measured by clients of coaching and (b) as measured by their coaches.

This follows findings of Allen et al. (2004), Boyce, Jackson & Neal (2010) and De Haan et al. (2011), as described in Duckworth et al. (2012).

- H2.** Personality differences (as characterised by the MBTI profile) will predict coaching outcomes.

This follows the results of Scoular & Linley (2006), also summarised in Duckworth et al. (2012). We acknowledge that the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator has only ‘sufficient’ levels of reliability and validity and has been shown to be a poor predictor of, for example, managerial effectiveness, job performance and employee commitment (Gardner & Martinko 1996). On the other hand, the MBTI is still the instrument most frequently used by practitioners and has been used by previous researchers.

- H3.** General self-efficacy of the client will predict coaching outcomes.

THE COACHING RELATIONSHIP AND OTHER 'COMMON FACTORS'

Research by Anderson and Betz (2001) shows that the expectations individuals have about their self-efficacy – or in other words their beliefs that they are capable of performing in a certain manner to attain certain goals – directly influence their personal and career development. Personal self-efficacy expectations are often regarded as primary determinants of behavioural change (Sherer et al. 1982). Within the coaching outcome literature, Stewart et al. (2008) have shown that general self-efficacy predicts coaching outcome.

- H4.** All (perceived) coach techniques – all coaching behaviours as reported by clients – will predict coaching outcomes approximately equally.

This follows the results of De Haan et al. (2011).

- H5.** The strength of the coaching relationship mediates: (a) the impact of client–coach personality differences on coaching outcome, as stated by H2; (b) general self-efficacy of the client impact on coaching outcome, as stated by H3; and (c) perceived coach techniques impact on coaching outcome, as stated by H4.

This follows the results of Boyce, Jackson & Neal (2010), summarised in Duckworth et al. (2012).

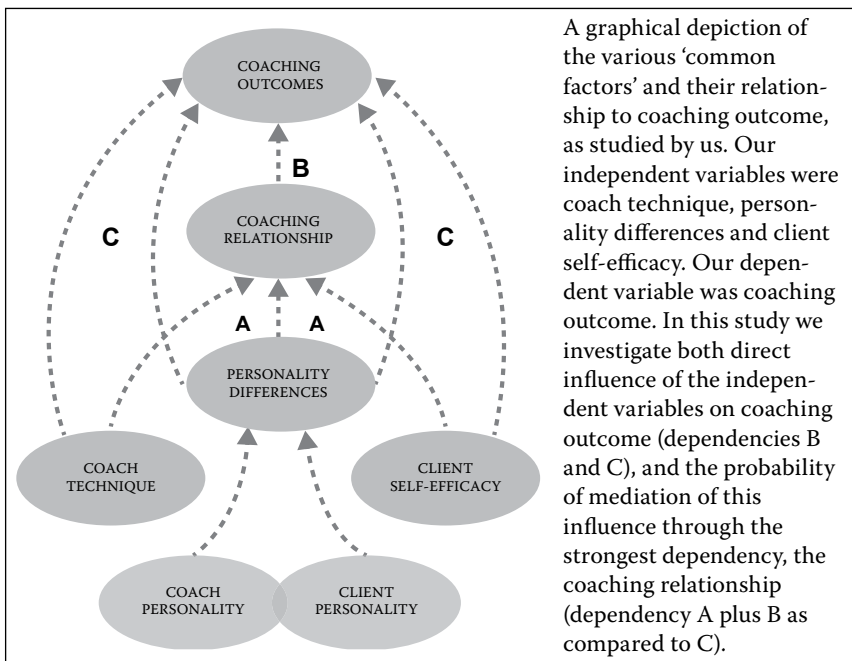


Figure 1

Figure 1 shows the various common factors (Wampold 2001) that we hypothesise to have a positive impact on the outcome of coaching conversations. The figure also shows how a mediation of the impact of these common factors through the relationship, as predicted by Hypothesis 5, may take place.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The coaches who participated in this study were experienced and qualified and were employed by different institutions, such as Ashridge Business School and the Oxford School of Coaching and Mentoring. About one-third of the sample of coaches was self-employed. Each coach completed an on-line 'coach survey' and then invited their clients to complete an on-line 'client survey'. It was made clear to both coaches and clients that "All responses to this questionnaire will be treated in strictest confidence and no individual respondent will be identified."

The response rate to the questionnaire for the coaches was 78.6% and for clients it was 58.4%. We attribute these high response rates to the personal approach used to select respondents. With 34 coaches and 156 clients participating in the survey, we were able to study a total of 156 coaching relationships. The average experience of the coach was 10.3 years, the minimum experience was 3 years and the maximum was 20 years. The SSRs of the coaching clients' MBTI scores were mostly similar to the large database of Ashridge clients' SSRs, i.e. they had a bias towards 'NT' of about 2–6 but when normalised against the database of all Ashridge clients, there was a bias of about 2–6 towards 'F'. Clients were mostly senior and middle managers in large organisations, with a very small minority being coaches or consultants themselves. The number of sessions that coach and client had undertaken at the point data was collected ranged from one to around a hundred with a mean of 8.6. Session lengths ranged from around 75 to 120 minutes. Data collection took place over a 12-month period from August 2008 to August 2009. Approximately 60% of clients and approximately 80% of coaches were UK based, whilst all coaches and clients were based in (wider) Europe. 60% of clients were male and 40% female. 49% of coaches were male, 51% were female.

QUESTIONNAIRES

The coach questionnaire could be completed in five minutes and the client questionnaire in no more than 20 minutes. After establishing the relevant background information on gender, MBTI type and coaching credentials, the coach questionnaire asked coaches to rate the quality of their relationships

with each of their different clients by scoring the statement "I have a very good relationship with this client" on a seven-point Likert scale. Using the same scale, they were asked several control questions to establish the extent to which they tend to adapt their style (either deliberately or subconsciously) to meet the needs of the client. This was done so that the data could be filtered to prevent distortion from those samples where the coach modifies their style away from their own natural type preferences. They were asked about their personal preferences for a range of coaching styles and techniques and finally we asked them for any comments regarding (1) whether they had noticed different responses to particular approaches from the differing client personality types and (2) whether they adapted their own coaching style to different personalities.

The client questionnaire asked for background information and was then split into four sections. The first section contained questions requiring answers on a seven-point Likert scale about perceived outcomes: "your overall coaching experience", "coaching adding value", "impact coaching on your performance at work" and "coaching helps to achieve what you want to achieve", with 'average effectiveness' being calculated as the averaged score from these four values. In this section we also asked respondents about their prior expectations of the likely benefit from coaching and the extent to which the organisational context supported the coaching objectives. The second section explored the extent to which clients perceived they get a range of different inputs from their coach and the extent to which they might value different inputs. This section was based upon the well-known Heron (1975) model comprising six categories of counselling intervention. The third section contained an adapted full version of the well-established Working Alliance Inventory (Horvath & Greenberg 1989). This instrument is used widely in therapy for measuring the quality of the relationship between therapist and patient and was adapted here to measure the coach–client relationship. In the fourth section, we used another well-founded instrument to establish the client's self-efficacy (Schwarzer, Mueller & Greenglass 1999). All sections included space for comments or clarification and there was a final text box asking for respondents' perceptions of the effectiveness of the coaching they were engaged in.

PROCEDURE

The main dependent variable was 'average effectiveness' (the average of four different outcome variables rated by the client), and the independent variables were the coaching relationship (as assessed by coach and client independently), the difference in Myers–Briggs 'type' of coach and client, the self-efficacy of the client, and six generalised coaching behaviours. Due to

the relatively small numbers of coaches, we were unable to use coach MBTI type as an independent variable.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Firstly, we looked at the mean values for our key variables. The dependent variable, 'average effectiveness', had a mean value of 5.97 with a standard deviation of 0.79 and a range of 2.5 to 7. The mean score for the coach's assessment of the relationship (scored by the coach) was 6.07, with a standard deviation of 0.92 and a range of 3 to 7, where 7 is the highest possible score. The mean value for the working alliance between coach and client was 71.6 out of a possible 84, with a standard deviation of 8.4 and a range of 37.3 to 84. The mean value for self-efficacy was 22.9 out of a possible 30, with a standard deviation of 3.9 and a range of 11 to 30.

We carried out reliability measurements on all of the scales. The Cronbach's Alpha for the four items in 'average effectiveness' was 0.90. Cronbach's Alpha for Total Working Alliance Inventory of 36 items was 0.94, with figures for the three subscales of working alliance (each containing 12 items); Task, Bond and Goal being 0.86, 0.83 and 0.88 respectively. The Cronbach's Alpha for Self Efficacy was 0.83. All of these reliability tests demonstrate good internal consistency as they are all above 0.8.

We looked at the influence of client gender on perceived outcome of coaching. A T-test comparing the male and female distributions of perceived outcome did not produce a significant difference ($t = -.63$, $df = 153$, $p = .53$). However, interestingly, a 2x2 ANOVA to look at the impact of coach-client gender pairings on Average Effectiveness reveals a slight but significant difference in perceived outcome by 'gender match' for female clients, i.e. female coaches coaching female clients are slightly more effective than male coaches coaching female clients (mean effectiveness scores of 6.2 and 5.7 respectively). This is only true for female clients and coaches; no other significant differences are found in comparing male/female coaches with male/female clients. The increased effectiveness for female coaches working with female clients chimes with what Ragins, Cotton & Miller (2000) found with regard to formal mentoring programmes.

Through inspecting all the background information, a correlation between reported number of sessions and average effectiveness found no significant linear correlation. There was, however, a small but highly significant correlation ($r = 0.28^{**}$) between perceived outcome and the extent to which the client believes their organisational context supports the coaching objectives. There was no significant correlation ($r = .10$) between clients' reported prior expectations of coaching and perceived outcome.

TESTING THE HYPOTHESES H1 – H5

H1: STRENGTH OF COACHING RELATIONSHIP PREDICTS COACHING OUTCOMES

We found strong and consistent correlations between working alliance as measured by the client and our client outcome measures, but no correlations between the coaches' measure of the relationship and outcome (see Table 1). Hypothesis 1, therefore, was confirmed with regard to the client's rating of the relationship, for all aspects of the standard Working Alliance Inventory. This supports the studies by Boyce, Jackson & Neal (2010) and Baron & Morin (2009), albeit that these studies also found some evidence of positive correlation between coaches' ratings of the relationship and coaching outcome. Our result is similar to what has been found in psychotherapy, see, for example, Horvath & Symonds (1991) where client ratings (and not therapist ratings!) of the alliance are the best predictor of outcome. It appears from our results that the correlation with outcome is slightly higher for the task-aspects of the relationship (clarity and mutual agreement on the tasks, strength of collaboration, etc.). Broadly, all the correlations with the working alliance in Table 1 count as a large effect size (r around 0.5) according to accepted definitions of effect size (Cohen 1988) and this is little affected when controlling for self-efficacy.

Table 1

Pearson product correlations between measures of the working alliance as perceived by coach and client and outcome measures as registered by clients. Please note that the client and coach measures of relationship strength: Working Alliance Inventory (WAI) and coach relationship assessment, do not correlate ($r = 0.12, p = 0.19$) and that client WAI correlates significantly with self-efficacy ($r = 0.38^{**}$) whilst the coach measure of relationship strength does not correlate with self-efficacy ($r = 0.12, p = 0.17$).

Working Alliance Measures	Outcome measures:				
	Overall coaching experience	Coaching adding value	Impact on performance	Achieving your objectives	Average effectiveness
Task	0.62**	0.55**	0.47**	0.54**	0.62**
Goal	0.55**	0.48**	0.44**	0.51**	0.57**
Bond	0.56**	0.44**	0.32**	0.38**	0.48**
Total WAI:	0.63**	0.54**	0.45**	0.52**	0.61**
Coaches' relationship assessment	0.09	0.15	0.09	0.13	0.13
Self-efficacy	0.20*	0.23**	0.25**	0.18*	0.25**

PART V

H2: PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES PREDICT COACHING OUTCOMES

To our surprise, Hypothesis 2 was not borne out in any way. Firstly, using t-tests, we looked for differences in the reported outcome of coaching for each of the Myers–Briggs client personality dichotomies, E/I, S/N, T/F and J/P (Myers 1998) and found none. We then used correlation to look for evidence of differences in outcome depending on degrees of separation between coach and client types on the Myers–Briggs type table (as a measure of personality mismatch) and found none. We also used a t-test to investigate the impact of matching and mismatching the coach and client MBTI ‘temperaments’ (Briggs Myers et al. 1998) and found no difference. We filtered out those coaching relationships where the coach reported that they consciously modify their style once they know the client’s type and repeated these tests, but again no differences were found. This discrepancy with the results found by Scoular and Linley (2006) may be due to differences in the design of the two studies: our data comes from longer-term coaching relationships whereas the data from Scoular and Linley (2006) came from one-off 30-minute sessions, where it is possible that the impact of matching might be more significant.

H3: SELF-EFFICACY OF THE CLIENT PREDICTS COACHING OUTCOMES

Hypothesis 3 was supported in that significant correlations between the clients’ self-efficacy measures and the client outcome measures were found (see Table 1). Again, this confirms well-established results in a related field: significant correlation between self-efficacy and perceived outcome in self-regulated learning (see, for example, Schunk 1990).

H4: ALL (PERCEIVED) COACHING TECHNIQUES PREDICT OUTCOMES APPROXIMATELY EQUALLY

Hypothesis 4 was partially supported in that the techniques and behaviours people perceive they get in their coaching affect the outcome similarly, for 4 out of 6 coach behaviours. These results are shown in Table 2 using correlations and the important feature to draw out here is not so much the values themselves (because if a client reports a positive experience overall, they are quite likely to give high scores on all aspects of it – see, for example, De Haan, Culpin & Curd 2011) but that there is considerable variation across the values.

Table 2

Pearson product correlations between the extent to which the client perceives that they get different things from the coach and average coaching effectiveness as registered by clients. The first six descriptors are based on Heron's six categories of counselling intervention (Heron 1975) and the other five are based on our own experience of what clients are looking for in executive coaching engagements.

What the client perceives they get	Correlation with Average Effectiveness
To be advised or told what to do by my coach	.06
For my coach to provide me with information	.22*
For my coach to challenge my thoughts or actions	.37**
For my coach to help me to make discoveries	.42**
For my coach to support me	.39**
For my coach to help me to release emotions	.28**
Significant progress on my issues through step-by-step change	.31**
Significant progress on my issues through critical moments of insight or realisation	.51**
Significant growth relating to outcomes/doing	.53**
Significant growth relating to behaviours/being	.48**
Explicit focus on my most important goals	.46**

H5: THE STRENGTH OF THE COACHING RELATIONSHIP MEDIATES THE OTHER VARIABLES

Hypothesis 5 stated that the strength of the coaching relationship mediates the influence of (a) personality differences, (b) client self-efficacy and (c) perceived coaching behaviours on coaching outcomes. Personality differences were shown not to predict outcome, so hypothesis 5(a) is not relevant and cannot be supported. When self-efficacy and working alliance were regressed on reaction, the working alliance was significantly related to coaching outcome and self-efficacy score became non-significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. The result of Sobel's test showed that the parameter estimate for the relationship between the self-efficacy and generalised outcome was significantly lower in the mediated condition than in the non-mediated condition $Z = 3.87, p < 0.0001$, indicating that relational processes fully mediated the relationship between client self-efficacy and coaching outcome

(Baron & Kenny 1986). This provides support for Hypothesis 5(b). Similarly, when perceived coach behaviours and working alliance were regressed on reaction, the working alliance was significantly related to coaching outcome and all coaching behaviours scores (except for two: perceived explicit focus on goals and perceived help with making discoveries) became non-significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. The result of Sobel's test showed that the parameter estimates for the relationship between coaching behaviours and generalised outcome was significantly lower in the mediated condition than in the non-mediated condition, $Z > 3.26$, $p < 0.01$ for all 6 coaching behaviours, indicating that relational processes significantly mediated the relationship between coach techniques and coaching outcome (for interest, perceived help with making discoveries remained significant after mediation at the $p < 0.05$ level). This provides support for Hypothesis 5(c). This result is similar to those of Baron & Morin (2009) and Boyce, Jackson & Neal (2010) who also found that the relationship mediates significantly the other independent variables that correlate with coaching outcome.

DISCUSSION

IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

The research confirms Hypothesis 1(a), Hypothesis 3, Hypothesis 4 and Hypothesis 5 (b and c) on the impact of common factors on coaching outcome. We have found strong indications that the coaching relationship (or to be more precise, the working alliance), as rated by the client, predicts coaching outcome to a considerable degree. We have also found indications that client self-efficacy and perceived coach behaviours predict coaching outcome. The findings here support the general principle of coaching; that asking questions and helping the client to gain new insights and make their own discoveries is reported to be more effective than providing instruction, advice and information.

We have found no evidence for a differential impact of either client personality or coach–client personality matching. This means our results confirm those of Boyce, Jackson & Neal (2010) and Baron & Morin (2009) regarding the coaching relationship and those of Stewart et al. (2008) in the area of self-efficacy, whilst we have not been able to confirm the findings in the area of personality matching by Scoular & Linley (2006).

We are now in a situation where we have strong indicators for the importance of certain common factors in executive coaching, in particular the coaching relationship as seen by the client, whilst the importance of *objective matching* between two personalities as it is usually done might be overstated. From a buyer's perspective, it might be more important to focus on coach selection – in terms of qualifications, accreditation and supervision records

– than on client matching, as Wycherley & Cox (2008) also suggest. The only form of matching between coach and client for which this research has found any support is *subjective matching*: where client and coach physically meet each other and have an interview or a trial session, after which the client determines whether to proceed with that coach, on the basis of his or her first impression of the strength of the coaching relationship.

In contrast to these findings related to personality characteristics, we have found no indications that the importance of the coaching relationship (as judged by the client) has been overstated in the coaching profession: the working-alliance scores by clients in this study predict an impressive 25% of total proportion of variance of coaching outcome (see Table 1). Whilst the quality of the experienced relationship seems to be crucial, the ability to self-motivate ('general self-efficacy') also seems to be significant (this amounts to around 4% of proportion of variance according to Table 1).

Although this has been found before in psychotherapy (see, for example, Horvath & Symonds 1991), we think it is fascinating that despite the high predictive value of the client's view of the strength of the coaching relationship, the coach's estimate of that same relationship bears no relationship with either the coaching outcomes or the strength of the relationship as estimated by the client. However much we emphasise the importance of the coaching relationship for effectiveness, we need to emphasise as well that clients and coaches have completely independent perspectives on that relationship, so coaches have no certain way of knowing how well they are doing in this regard. Finding out the client's view, by using the version of the Working Alliance Inventory and encouraging frankness, appears to be a way of resolving that dilemma (see Miller et al. 2005).

However, for a coach to inquire into the client's perspective on the relationship also has an impact on that relationships as coaches and clients are both not only observers but also key participants within the coaching relationship. Moreover, clients might be polite, defensive, avoidant or otherwise unfocused in their answers to their coaches. For convenience, the coaching literature speaks about 'the coaching relationship', an expression that suggests that there are relational aspects that client and coach hold in common. However, 'the' relationship between coach and client only exists in their respective minds (and in the minds of outside observers), where 'it' will be represented in a completely independent way and moreover be evaluated completely independently and according to highly personal criteria and expectations. Research into 'the' therapeutic relationship shows time and time again that there is no one thing called '*the* helping relationship' as it is perceived and evaluated independently by clients, therapists and indeed observers (see, for example, Horvath & Marx 1990; Horvath & Symonds 1991).

LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

Although our key findings seem fairly robust, there are certain limitations which lead to our recommendation of further research. One limitation affects practically all coaching research including ours. It is that in this emerging profession of executive coaching researchers have not been able to achieve the 'gold standard' of therapy outcome research, namely, randomised control trials (Wampold 2001). In this particular study this means that we have not been able to suggest objective criteria for outcome, such as the assessment by independent outsiders on a well-validated instrument. Another limitation of our design was that every coaching relationship studied was measured only once and at a random stage of its development. Finally, we employed different scales for the assessment of the working alliance for coaches and their clients.

We believe there is certainly more research needed into coaching outcome, in particular in the area of personality of coach and client, and personality matching. Next, it would be helpful to have more findings with greater statistical power on the impact of the relationship, so that we can look more closely into key aspects of the coaching relationship, such as 'task', 'goal' and 'bond' as seen by clients and coaches.

CONCLUSION

This is one of the first studies to explore systematically and compare the contribution of various factors which are deemed to contribute to coaching effectiveness, the so-called 'common factors'. It has found fresh evidence for the importance of the quality of the working relationship (the 'working alliance') as seen from the perspective of the client, and for the importance of general self-efficacy of the client who comes to the coaching relationship. Also, it shows 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 may guide both the development of the profession and the choices that are made in the recruitment, development, deployment and matching of executive coaches.