

Signalling a new trend in executive coaching outcome research

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Purpose: *This contribution argues for a new way of studying executive-coaching outcome. The argument accepts that we are not likely to get rigorous data on coaching outcome from well-designed clinical trials in the near future, and assumes a degree of effectiveness that is based upon the first indications and the more rigorous studies that have been undertaken in psychotherapy. Assuming a moderate degree of effectiveness has afforded a concerted effort amongst researchers to identify the ‘active ingredients’ which predict the effectiveness of executive coaching.*

Design/Methodology: *This article contains a detailed overview of the quantitative studies of executive coaching undertaken to date. It covers both the body of evidence which we believe substantiates our key assumption of general effectiveness and some early research findings resulting from using that assumption. It also gives a brief overview of the findings of the more rigorous randomised control trials in psychotherapy outcome. Altogether we believe we have demonstrated that there are sufficient parallels between the new path of coaching outcome research and the well-trodden path of psychotherapy research to enable the exploration of ‘active ingredients’ research in executive coaching.*

Results: *By combining the early results in coaching research described in this paper and the overview of meta-analysis studies in the parallel field of psychotherapy, we have been able: (1) to show that – although the effect sizes in coaching are generally found to be smaller than in psychotherapy – it is safe to assume that executive coaching is generally an effective intervention, and: (2) to use that assumption as a basis for further coaching research. We have used this assumption ourselves to carry out research into the ‘active ingredients’ of effective coaching and to design a new research programme on a scale that has not previously been possible.*

Conclusions: *It is time now to be creative and pull together the limited resources for research we have in coaching psychology. As a profession we should make the most of this opportunity to discover how we might improve our service to our clients.*

Keywords: *Executive coaching; outcome research; leadership development; client-coach relationship; self-efficacy; coaching interventions; common factors; active ingredients.*

Introduction: Boundary conditions for coaching outcome research

AS PROFESSIONAL COACHES, we are faced with a challenge: on the one hand, we would like to know how much value we bring to our diverse clients and whether there are any particularly effective ‘ingredients’ that we can introduce to our sessions, and on the other hand we have little access to time and resources for carrying out the research necessary to address these uncertainties with anything like the statistical rigour typically required in psychology. This paper attempts to address

this dichotomy with a new proposal for future coaching research.

Executive coaches and their clients are naturally very interested in the answers to the following questions:

- Does our coaching work? Does it help clients with their critical objectives?
- What aspects of coaching work? What are the ‘active ingredients’? Under what circumstances do they work best?
- What intervention would work best here and now, with this client at this moment?

These questions about effectiveness and outcome occur frequently in the coaching

literature; however, it is rare to encounter serious attempts at answering them with anything more than a coach's opinion or a few carefully selected case studies. On the basis of our literature search¹ we estimate that there are probably fewer than 20 robust quantitative outcome studies throughout the coaching literature. One reason for this is the costly and cumbersome requirements of a rigorous outcome study. Another is that rather than studying, with detachment, their own effectiveness, a coach's priority is usually to satisfy their clients and meet their coaching commitments. However, if we do not address these questions we may find it difficult to justify our fees; difficult to assert unequivocally that coaching conversations are indeed beneficial and difficult to avoid the potential risks of executive coaching, such as misjudging the situation, aggravating the status quo or abusing our influence (Berglas, 2002). It is for these reasons that in this article we want to give a brief overview of the existing coaching outcome literature, including the three articles that approximate a proper research design with effectiveness ratings not influenced by the client or coach themselves, a control group as part of randomised controlled trials, and *N* large enough to ensure convincing statistical power (Smither et al., 2003; Sue-Chan & Latham, 2004; Evers et al., 2006). We also want to briefly summarise the more extensive and convincing outcome research findings in another area of one-to-one conversations: psychotherapy, where research budgets have traditionally been much higher. The overview of studies in this parallel field will give indicators of what is needed to enable coaching research to continue into the future.

We define executive coaching as a form of leadership development that takes place

through a series of contracted one-to-one conversations with a qualified 'coach'. Executive coaching aspires to be a form of organisation and leadership development that results in a high occurrence of relevant, actionable and timely outcomes for clients. Coaching is tailored to individuals so that they learn and develop through a reflective conversation within an exclusive relationship that is trusting, safe and supportive. Coaching is, therefore, much more psychological in nature than the more conventional training and development that is characterised by the imparting of actionable information, instruction and advice. A 2004 survey conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in the UK reported that 64 per cent of organisations surveyed use external coaches, with 92 per cent of survey participants judging coaching to be 'effective' or 'very effective' and 96 per cent saying that coaching is an effective way to promote learning in organisations (Jarvis, 2004). In the same year (November 2004), the *Harvard Business Review* reported that business coaching – including mentoring – was a \$1bn industry in the US and \$2bn worldwide. The recent 2012 ICF Global Coaching Study (ICF, 2012) reported that the profession still appears to be growing with numbers of professional coaches currently estimated to be 47,500 worldwide.

If we take a step back and look at the nature of this industry there are a few features that are striking. Firstly, the coaching profession is in high flux and is only beginning to be regulated more rigorously, with professionals entering from very diverse backgrounds, such as senior management, organisation development, sports coaching, psychology and counselling. This wide range of backgrounds and the plethora

¹ In our search for original studies into coaching effectiveness we studied all the papers quoted in review articles such as Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson (2001), Feldman and Lankau (2005), Greif (2007), Ely et al. (2010), Peterson (2010), and Grant et al. (2010). We also perused the latest (2009) version of Anthony Grant's annotated bibliography of coaching articles (Grant, 2006). Criteria for selection into the summary in this article were: (1) original quantitative research; (2) into effectiveness; (3) within executive or managerial coaching; and (4) that was peer-reviewed. We also checked all references within the outcome studies to cover the coaching outcome literature as completely as we could. Finally, several of our MSc students who were researching the coaching outcome literature came up with helpful references.

of models and approaches mean that individual professionals are practicing in vastly different ways. Not only is the executive-coaching intervention tailored to the individual client, it is likely to be tailored to the individual coach as well and to that individual's particular background, education and experiences. Overviews of the field have shown a wide range of practitioners, some psychologically or psychotherapeutically trained, some with a sports coaching background (Peltier, 2001) and others with influences as wide apart as the GROW-model, solution-focused brief therapy, psychoanalysis and person-centred counselling (De Haan & Burger, 2005).

Not only are assignments mostly tailored around the needs of the individual client or 'coachee', assignments are also frequently individually commissioned by an organisation or as part of a leadership-development or organisational-change programme. Contrary to other helping professions such as counselling and psychotherapy, executive coaching is commissioned and paid for by a wide range of individual contractors, sometimes at board level, sometimes from within the HR function, and oftentimes also more locally within large corporate organisations. In terms of Porter's well-known 5-forces analysis (Porter, 2008), the bargaining power of customers is, therefore, extremely weak and the bargaining power of suppliers correspondingly strong. This adds to the freedom of executive coaches to approach the coaching sessions as they see fit.

These features of the industry have clear repercussions for research. Whilst in psychotherapy most of the services are centrally commissioned by very large health insurance companies or national health services, this is entirely different in executive coaching. As executive coaches we are finding ourselves in a situation where there is very little pressure on rigorous outcome research and a dearth of funding for this type of research. At the same time we know from psychotherapy outcome research (see the historical overview in Wampold, 2001)

that we are likely to need very high N , possibly well above 10,000, and a rigorous design with randomised control trials, to demonstrate beyond doubt that executive coaching is effective – with even greater statistical power needed to differentially explore active ingredients in effectiveness. For the same reasons as outlined here – little pressure from customers and little funding for research – there are as yet no rigorous randomised-control-trial studies available in the coaching literature.

In other words, presently *all* coaching outcome studies are weak by the standards of psychology and general medicine and there are good, understandable reasons for this state of affairs. This is a young profession and there is simply no funding for major research programmes. Moreover, there is no likelihood of funding by large and centrally coordinated bodies in the foreseeable future. It is, therefore, to be expected that the present situation will continue and that we will keep seeing interesting individual studies of effectiveness, but no firm conclusions.

In our view, the way forward for quantitative researchers in this field is now to assume what in our experience and from early research indications we sense to be true, that the general effectiveness of helping conversations as convincingly demonstrated in psychotherapy (see, for example, Roth & Fonagy, 1996, or Cooper, 2008) will also be true in executive coaching. If we then also assume that client's perceptions of outcome are indeed a meaningful measure of effectiveness (which is supported by research as well – see, for example, Stiles et al., 2008), we can proceed by studying the active ingredients in coaching. Interestingly and significantly for our field, within the much more advanced and rigorous psychotherapy outcome literature there is also a separate place for measuring active ingredients, and this research is done in similar ways (see chapters 4 and 5 of Wampold's 2001 authoritative overview). We are thus following a parallel path to that of our well-funded neighbouring field and using those parallels and that understanding of

method to enable the coaching profession to embark on meaningful studies into coaching's active ingredients with some confidence.

Brief overview of psychotherapy outcome research to date

As also argued by McKenna and Davis (2009), executive coaches can learn from the fact that in the older and more established profession of psychotherapy these same questions of effectiveness have been studied since at least the 1930s (Rosenzweig, 1936). In this tradition, rigorous research findings which seemed initially unclear and contradictory have begun to yield convincing results (starting with Smith & Glass, 1977), so that the demonstration of generally high effectiveness of psychotherapy is now near universally accepted among professional practitioners.

In summary the answers to our initial questions, when applied to psychotherapy, are as follows:

- **Does psychotherapy work?** Yes, in fact, it has been demonstrated that the average psychotherapy client achieves a higher effect on the relevant scales than 80 per cent of the people in the control group (Smith & Glass, 1977; Wampold, 2001). This is considered a large effect size in both psychology and medicine.
- **What aspects of psychotherapy work?** Different interventions, approaches, models and protocols don't appear to make any difference in effectiveness. The aspects that dominate are *common* to all approaches, for example, client context (what happens outside the therapeutic relationship); therapist characteristics (including empathy, understanding, respect, warmth and authenticity; being attractive; inspiring confidence and appearing confident; the therapist's own mental health and the ability to tailor the

therapy to the patient), and the relationship between client and therapist during the session (Cooper, 2008; Norcross, 2011). Common factors² are, therefore, central to effectiveness in psychotherapy.

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

For a more detailed appreciation of psychotherapy outcome research and its relevance in the executive-coaching profession, see De Haan (2008) and McKenna and Davis (2009).

One can always argue that these intriguing and convincing findings from psychotherapy are not relevant for coaching, because the investigations were conducted with professional therapists working clinically with clients suffering from mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, which is markedly different from the needs and issues typically addressed in executive coaching. On the other hand, these are convincing results based on meta-analysis of multiple rigorous studies.

Overview of executive-coaching outcome research I: Evaluation studies

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 of 'customer satisfaction'. On some occasions clients are asked to estimate how much their coaching has contributed financially to the bottom line of their organisation (e.g. McGovern et al.,

² The idea of *common factors* was already introduced by Rosenzweig (1936). He argues that if all professional therapies are equally effective, there is a good chance that the ingredients they have in common will determine the effectiveness of therapy – and not the specific interventions of an individual school of therapy. The active ingredients of therapy must, therefore, be common to all approaches. Examples are the relationship, the setting, the expectations, the personalities of coach and client, the presence of an ideology or approach, etc.

2001). Levenson (2009) provides detailed information demonstrating the positive business impact of coaching in 12 case studies. Wasylyshyn et al. (2006) and Kombarakaran et al. (2008) both show high outcome ratings for in-company coaching programmes. Wasylyshyn et al (2006) provides ratings for $N=28$ clients and $N=17$ 'others' (direct colleagues of clients) in a pharmaceutical company. Kombarakaran et al (2008) provides ratings for $N=104$ clients and $N=29$ coaches. In both of these studies the majority of those surveyed report high value or 'sustainability of learning' from coaching. Schlosser et al. (2006) measured the outcome of executive coaching across a range of variables and industries and from the perspectives of manager/sponsor ($N=14$), client ($N=56$), and coach ($N=70$). Whilst a significant positive outcome was reported for all subjects, a significantly lower rating for the managers, in terms of return on investment, was reported.

In a different approach, taken by Grant and Cavanagh (2007), the results of a self-report measure of coaching skill (scored by $N=218$ coaches) was correlated with $N=38$ clients' assessment regarding outcome. This correlation was significantly positive ($r=0.58$; $p<0.001$) thus providing a good indication that coaching skill can be inter-subjectively established.

Overview of executive-coaching outcome research II: Incorporating independent outcome variables

The following studies explore the effectiveness of coaching by looking at independent variables over and above client, coach or manager satisfaction, but with no control group. Peterson (1993) studied $N=370$ leaders from various organisations at three points in time (pre-coaching, post-coaching and follow-up) with outcome defined by their own coaching objectives and five standard 'control' items, rated by at least themselves, their manager and their coach (multi-source ratings). The coaching programme was intensive and long-term,

with typically 50+ hours of individual coaching with a professional coach over at least a year. Peterson found that clients, on average, achieved significant improvement on all measures of outcome related to coaching objectives (effect sizes $d>1.5$). Olivero et al. (1997) studied managers who had taken part in a three-day educational training course followed by eight weeks of coaching. They found that both the training and the coaching increased productivity considerably, with most of the increase attributable to the coaching (increase of 22.4 per cent with training alone and of 88.0 per cent with training and coaching, that is, almost fourfold; a difference which was significant at the $p<0.05$ level). In another study by Thach (2002), $N=281$ managers participated in four one-hour sessions of coaching over five months with a 360° (multisource) feedback process before and after the coaching. They found an average increase in 'leadership effectiveness' both as rated by the coaches and their co-workers (average increase 60 per cent but no significance reported). Bowles et al. (2007) looked at effectiveness in terms of increased productivity in army recruitment managers ($N=30$) and executives ($N=29$) who received coaching as compared to productivity changes in a non-random group of experienced recruitment managers over a similar, but not contemporaneous, time interval. The individuals who were coached showed greater productivity gains ($d=0.43$ with $p<0.05$ for the middle managers and $d=0.75$ with $p<0.01$ for the executives). Finally, Perkins (2009) studied the effectiveness of executive coaching on improving leadership behaviours in meetings, as rated by the coach. Using quantitative and qualitative methods with a small sample ($N=21$), pre- and post-measurement of meeting behaviours were scored by the coach and author, with a clear improvement of behaviours reported (effect sizes $d>0.95$ for nine out of 11 behaviours measured, and $p<0.01$). There may, of course, have been researcher bias in these scores as coaches

might understandably want their clients to do well.

There is also substantial work that has been done in the area of 'leadership coaching', that is, coaching as an aspect of management practice. This is coaching within a direct-report relationship, done by untrained managers. Two studies are worth mentioning because they have a rigorous, large-*N* design. Ellinger et al. (2003) have measured employee perceptions of the coaching skills of their supervisors in an industrial setting (on the shop floors of US warehouses). When these perceptions were correlated with their performance ratings as marked by their supervisors, a significant small effect was found (11 per cent of variance or $d \approx 0.2$; $N=458$). Similarly, Gregory and Levy (2011) looked at employee or leadership coaching at front-line management level in Fortune-500 companies, and found that supervisors' self-scored 'individual consideration for their employees' actually correlates with employees' ratings of the coaching relationship (50 per cent of variance or $d \approx 0.5$; $N=702$).

Overview of executive-coaching outcome research III: Employing control groups

A significant impact of executive coaching when compared with a control group has been found by Smither et al. (2003), Sue-Chan and Latham (2004), and Evers et al. (2006). Sue-Chan and Latham (2004) compared the impact of internal and external coaches with a wide difference in reputation in terms of (perceived) expertise and credibility. This outcome study involved MBA students in two countries (total $N=53$) and compared the performance in terms of team playing and exam grades and found small but statistically significant differences at $p < 0.05$, between faculty, peer and self-coaching with the first the most impactful. As in Perkins (2009) above, this study may suffer from researcher-bias as the external coaches/tutors did the scoring of performance.

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 (non-randomised) control group. The intervention was short with an average of only four coaching sessions. Although the 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. There was 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') [$d \approx 0.5$ with $p < 0.05$].

One of the most thorough studies on the impact of executive coaching was undertaken by Smither et al. (2003). This study worked with a (non-randomised) control group and conclusions were based on more objective criteria than evaluations by the clients. Smither et al. (2003) included evaluations by independent researchers together with clients' superiors, colleagues and staff (multisource feedback). This research involved 1202 senior managers in one multinational organisation with two consecutive years of 360° feedback. However, there were no more than 'two or three' coaching sessions per client (Smither et al., 2003; p.29). The researchers found that managers who worked with an executive coach were significantly more likely than other managers to: (1) set specific goals ($d=0.16$; $p < 0.01$); (2) solicit ideas for improvements from their superiors ($d=0.36$; $p < 0.01$); and (3) obtain higher ratings from direct-reports and superiors in the second year ($d=0.17$; $p < 0.05$).

Brief overview of mentoring outcome research

The above findings are further supported in the more extensive *mentoring* outcome literature reviewed by Allen et al. (2004), through

a meta-analysis comprising 43 outcome studies of mentoring in the organisational/workplace domain. Taking only the studies with control groups they found generally small, but significant effect sizes (e.g. 10 per cent explained proportion of variance for the mentoring effect on number of promotions and four per cent explained proportion of variance for the mentoring effect on career satisfaction; that is, $d < 0.2$). They also found the criterion measuring the mentoring relationship ('satisfaction with mentor') to be the best predictor of career outcomes (14 per cent explained proportion of variance or $d \approx 0.2$ for career mentoring and 38 per cent explained proportion of variance or $d \approx 0.4$ for supportive or 'psychosocial' mentoring).

One thorough study of mentoring outcomes included by Allen et al. (2004), is Ragins et al. (2000) who studied a group of 1162 professionals from a wide variety of organisations and looked at the effect of formal/informal mentoring relationships on a range of work and career attitudes. Forty-four per cent of the respondents had an informal mentor, nine per cent a formal mentor as part of a mentoring programme and 47 per cent had no mentor. This last group was used as the control, which was, therefore, not randomised. Their results show that the crucial factor in effectiveness is the client's satisfaction with the mentoring relationship. In the absence of that factor, there were no demonstrable differences between professionals who were mentored and those who were not. If client satisfaction with the relationship is present, however, professionals clearly demonstrate more positive attitudes towards themselves (self-confidence), their work, promotion prospects, their organisation and their career. The authors of Allen et al. (2004) later confirmed the results summarised above in a much larger meta-analysis, with $N > 10,000$ and including workplace, youth and academic domains (Eby et al., 2008).

Conclusions from coaching and mentoring outcome research

In summary, we note that outcome research in coaching is still in its infancy and that the holy grail of executive coaching – 'Is executive coaching an effective intervention?' – is still there to be sought. In fact, no clear and agreed sense of what 'outcomes' should be or how outcome should be measured has yet emerged. There is no agreed research standard like the randomised controlled trials used in psychotherapy outcome research (Norcross, 2011). Also, the studies include a variety of processes which might themselves affect outcomes, such as explicit goal-setting, written development objectives, 360° feedback and other assessment tools, manager involvement, and even training programmes and a presentation to senior executives to summarise achievements (e.g. Olivero et al., 1997). Treating this body of research as equivalent is too simplistic. That said, what is striking is that the first five research papers above (Peterson, 1993; Olivero et al., 1997; Thach, 2002; Bowles et al., 2007; Perkins, 2009), which did not make use of a contemporary control group, found large effects ($d > 0.75$), generally larger than those found in psychotherapy. On the other hand, the more rigorous studies involving control groups (such as Allen et al., 2004; Smither et al., 2003; and Evers et al., 2006) only found small effects, generally smaller than those found in psychotherapy ($d < 0.5$; compare with average $d \approx 0.8$ in psychotherapy – see Wampold, 2001). However, these are studies with mentors and internal coaches whilst many of the studies without control groups involve more significant coaching programmes with qualified professional coaches, and this is also a possible factor in the higher effects. It appears that if the client alone is the focus of the study, the outcome tends to be very positive. However, when such common-methods bias is controlled for, the effect is much smaller, although still positive.

Overview of executive-coaching outcome research which compares conditions

The overview of effectiveness studies in coaching above has shown that there are some indications that executive coaching is an effective intervention. However, there is also another body of coaching research, to which our own most recent research study (De Haan et al., 2013) belongs. This newer body of research in coaching outcome assumes general effectiveness of coaching and then compares conditions to determine the degree to which various aspects of coaching, coach or client impact on outcome. If one accepts the assumption of general effectiveness (e.g. as demonstrated by the studies quoted above) the experimental conditions of this type of research can be a lot less stringent. In particular, client, coach or sponsor satisfaction can be used as the outcome variable, and one does not need to employ randomised controlled groups, because the various conditions create proper comparison samples within the study.

We have found the following eight studies which explore the question of what sort of coaching is effective; in other words, *which* coaching models, personality matches, or coaching behaviours make a significant difference to clients?

Scoular and Linley (2006) looked at how both: (1) a 'goal-setting' intervention at the beginning of the conversation; and (2) personality (dis-)similarities between coach and client as measured by MBTI, impact on perceived effectiveness. The sample size was $N=117$ clients and $N=14$ coaches. No statistically significant difference resulted for outcome measurements at two and eight weeks after the session between 'goal-setting' and 'no goal-setting'; but when the coach and client differed on particular aspects of

the personality instrument (the MBTI 'temperaments') the outcome scores were significantly higher.

Stewart et al. (2008) looked at how both client personality and client self-efficacy correlate with coaching outcome. They measured so-called 'big-five' personality factors (Digman, 1990) and general self-efficacy (see Schwarzer et al., 1999) for 110 clients and correlated these with coaching outcome. They found moderate positive effects for conscientiousness, openness, emotional stability and general self-efficacy, but warned that other factors are likely to play a role as well.

Boyce et al. (2010) studied 74 coach-client relationships in a US military academy where clients were cadets and coaches were senior military leaders who had had some training in executive coaching. The study analysed the impact of relational aspects (rapport, trust and commitment) and matching criteria (demographic commonality, behavioural compatibility, and coach credibility), on coaching outcome. Their main findings were that matching had no significant impact on outcome, whilst relationship, as assessed by both client (explained proportion of variance around 50 per cent) and coach (explained proportion of variance around 25 per cent), affected outcomes significantly.

With a sample of internal coaches working alongside a leadership development programme within a manufacturing company involving 30 coach-client pairs, Baron and Morin (2009 and 2012) were able to show that coaching clients' rating of the *working alliance*³ as a measure of the coaching relationship correlated with coaching outcomes (measured in terms of changes in client self-efficacy, explained proportion of variance around 25 per cent) whilst coaches' ratings of the working

³ Working alliance, as originally defined by Greenson (1965), is a measure for the strength of the coaching relationship. Bordin (1979) suggested that the working alliance can be thought of as a combination of agreement on tasks, agreement on goals and strength of bonds. Based on Bordin's (1979) model, Horvath and Greenberg (1986) designed the Working Alliance Inventory with three sub-variables: tasks, goals and bonds; which is now the most widely used of many well-validated tools to measure working alliance.

alliance did not correlate with outcomes significantly.

De Haan et al. (2011) examine how various executive coaching interventions make a difference to clients. Seventy-one coaching clients, from as many organisations, reported on the various interventions of their coaches and these ratings were compared with their evaluations. In that work, De Haan et al. found no distinction among specific coach interventions, leading to the conclusion that effectiveness is much less correlated with technique or intervention than by factors common to all coaching, such as the relationship, empathic understanding, positive expectations, etc.

De Haan et al. (2013) build on the previous study to research the relative impact and importance of various common factors for 156 new executive coaching clients and 34 experienced coaches. The purpose of this research was to look at various elements common to all coaching approaches (the 'common factors') and to measure which of these are likely to have the highest positive impact on clients. The study showed that client perceptions of the outcome of coaching were significantly related to their perceptions of the working alliance, client self-efficacy and perceptions of coaching interventions ('generalised techniques') of the coach. The client-coach relationship strongly mediated the impact of self-efficacy and the majority of techniques on coaching outcomes (except for perceived explicit focus on goals and helping the client to make discoveries), suggesting that the relationship is the key factor in coaching outcome.

One final article stands out in particular as it is the only quantitative study we have found analysing executive coaching outcome on the basis of genuine interaction data from videotaping initial coaching sessions (Ianiro et al., 2012). Ianiro et al. analysed the full interchange within 33 first coaching sessions with trainee psychologists as coaches and young professionals as clients, in terms of both the client's and the coach's interpersonal behaviour, over two

basic dimensions: affiliation and dominance. Findings suggest that both: (1) the coach's dominance behaviour; and (2) similarity of dominance and affiliation behaviour between coach and client predict positive client ratings of goal-attainment after five sessions; whilst (2) also predicts positive client ratings of the relationship quality after five sessions.

The above studies constitute an emerging trend pointing at the importance of common factors as manifested through the coaching relationship. There are various helpful taxonomies of 'common factors' (e.g. Grencavage & Norcross, 1990; De Haan, 2008), focusing on relationship-, client-, coach-, change- and structure-related factors. The factors that have been studied so far include coach personality, client personality, generalised technique, relationship and self-efficacy. There are others of relevance, such as coach allegiance, client expectancy ('hope' or placebo-related factors) and 'client's life circumstances' that could be relevant as well.

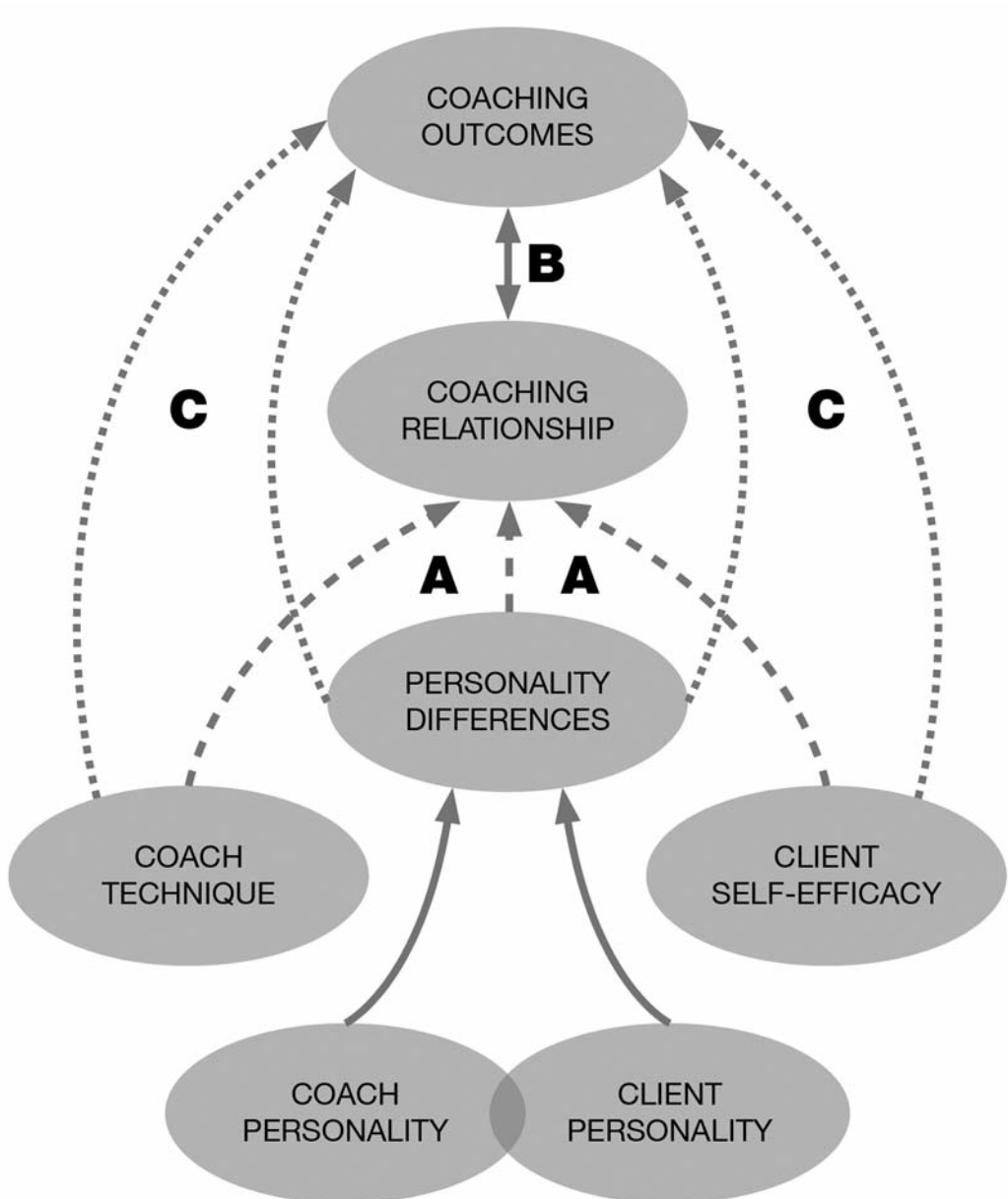
Figure 1 shows the various common factors hypothesised to have a positive impact on the outcome of coaching conversations. This figure also demonstrates how the impact of these common factors maybe mediated through the relationship, as some of the studies (Boyce et al., 2010; and De Haan et al., 2013) have indicated.

Discussion

All indications we have from quantitative coaching outcome research described above support the conjecture that coaching is generally an effective intervention even if some effect sizes are small. Also, some first indications have been found as to some of the active ingredients in executive coaching: client self-efficacy, the generalised techniques of the coach, client personality factors characterised by looking at the 'big five', and the quality of the coaching relationship.

The gold standard in outcome research is still beyond our reach as a profession and we argue that at this stage we will have to be

Figure 1: A graphical depiction of the various common factors that have been studied as independent variables: Coach technique, Personality differences and Client self-efficacy. With additional analysis one can investigate both direct influence of the independent variables on coaching outcomes (dependencies B and C), and the probability of mediation of this influence through the strongest dependency, which in the literature so far has been the coaching relationship (dependency A plus B as compared to C).



pragmatic with the resources we have until such a time that coaching psychology and centralised regulation have grown such that we can aspire to proper randomised control trials of a sufficient scale. It is important to note that there is now valid justification for continuing with research into active ingredients by examining and drawing on methods from a parallel field of helping conversations, psychotherapy. In this field the argument for effectiveness was demonstrated rigorously over many years and tens of thousands of participants. Rather than give up on proper coaching research because we don't have the funding, we argue that the early indications from research into effectiveness combined with the rigorous results from the closely related field of psychotherapy are sufficient to allow us to continue with research into active ingredients by comparing conditions as in the studies of Scoular and Linley, 2006; Stewart et al., 2008; Boyce et al., 2010; Baron and Morin, 2009 and 2012; and De Haan et al., 2011 and 2013, cited above.

Moreover, as Stiles et al. (2008) argue, effectiveness research comparing conditions within real-life coaching assignments balances the risks of standard randomised controlled trials (such as control-groups selection biases associated with lack of randomisation and the lack of assurance that coaching assignments were delivered in a standard way), by a greater realism and external validity of the research.

Having said this, we still need to pull together resources if we want to achieve statistical significance and make the research results meaningful. In De Haan et al. (2013) which looked at what makes coaching most effective for the client, the diversity of personality types and number of variables being examined meant that in many areas the sample size of $N=156$ was too small for results to be conclusive. We need much higher N , probably an order of magnitude larger than we have seen in previous studies. In our current work spanning 2012 which is based on an open-source approach where

executive coaches around the world can become co-authors (www.ashridge.org.uk/centreforcoaching), it looks likely that such a target will be reached.

Active ingredients, and in particular the so-called common factors, seem a promising avenue to a better understanding of coaching. There are clear findings, clear controversies to be resolved (e.g. the influence of personality matching where Scoular & Linley, 2006, and De Haan, 2013, have found contradictory results), and clear indications of mediation by the strongest common factors. It would be helpful to have more findings to achieve greater statistical power on the impact of the relationship or working alliance, so that we can look more closely into key aspects of that coaching relationship, such as 'agreement on task', 'agreement on goals' and 'bond', as seen by clients and coaches.

We believe that we can now assume a degree of overall effectiveness, however, we also need to be wary of accepting only client satisfaction as an outcome variable (Mabe & West, 1982). Client perspectives need to be completed with the perspectives of coaches, peers, bosses and sponsors, or with the findings of validated psychometric instruments, as much as possible.

There is still a huge amount of work to be done in terms of investigating the 'real' client of executive coaching: the organisation of the client. We need to become more creative in understanding, mapping and exploring (potential) organisational impact of executive coaching interventions, and also, for that matter, study the more general organisational consulting interventions in quantitative ways. But above all, we need to pull all the available resources together to create more global studies, with larger N , and with agreement on how to define and measure coaching outcome. We hope that this overview can help to set the general direction for quantitative research in executive coaching.

In summary, executive coaching outcome research has now arrived at a critical and

exciting juncture where two decades of empirical studies have created some consensus that executive coaching may well be an effective intervention. First indications are that executive coaching may turn out to be less effective than psychotherapy which would be understandable as it is a less intensive intervention as well (with generally lower frequency and number of sessions). At this juncture we can safely assume that more of the same empirical studies will scarcely tell us more about effectiveness of coaching. More similar studies will only yield more of the same indications, whilst to move beyond the present level of understanding much more rigour would be needed in terms of control groups, randomisation and statistical power. We have argued here that there are ways to move beyond this juncture into new and uncharted territory, ways to achieve more confidence in terms of the factors that impact on coaching effectiveness. These new ways can only be found in our view by means of:

1. Broad agreement amongst professional coaches and researchers in terms of research design and choice of independent variables across studies, such as has already been achieved for, for example, self-efficacy, personality and working-alliance instruments, which have all been used by several research teams.
2. A pooling together of resources in order to increase the *N* or statistical power. This is what we have done in our own global coaching effectiveness study that has recently been launched through the Ashridge Centre for Coaching, the Coaching Psychology Unit of the University of Sydney and the Department of Management & Organisation of the VU University in Amsterdam. By 'going global' with effectiveness research we will have a much better chance to pick up relatively small and yet important correlations.

We are looking forward to what appears to be a very bright coaching outcome research future beyond this juncture.

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