A good coaching relationship has a positive impact for everyone involved, say Erik de Haan and Nadine Page.

The strength of the coaching relationship was the most powerful predictor of coaching outcomes as perceived by both coach and client.

Making it count

Here has never been a more pertinent time to understand the ingredients of effective coaching. With L&D budgets tightened, and more variability, visibility and scrutiny in the coaching profession as a whole, it is critical to consider the active ingredients of effective relationships and their impact on outcomes. Needless to say, there have been too few serious attempts to explore the outcomes of coaching practices in a reliable and validated way.

In this article, we report on our 'greatest coaching research ever' and explore the connection between coaching relationship and coaching outcome, using what we think is a rigorous and reliable approach. We show that the right coaching relationships can have a significant return on investment for all parties committed to the coaching journey – coach, client and sponsor – and can help to guide future coaching conversations to be more effective.

True reflections on coaching

Coaches have long sought to improve their coaching conversations and they have frequently questioned their work and the impact this has on helping clients to meet their objectives. However, this has often been driven by personal curiosity.

We estimate that there are probably fewer than 20 robust quantitative outcome studies in the executive-coaching literature, none of which satisfy the gold standard of the large randomised control-group trials that are used in medicine or psychotherapy. By this we mean evidence that suggests coaching is an effective intervention from a controlled study with multiple behavioural and performance outcomes: a rather overwhelming task for a relatively small industry.

There are several reasons for the lack of robust evidence around coaching practices and these include prohibiting costs and the formal requirements of a rigorous outcome study, let alone a decision on what ‘outcomes’ to include or how they should be measured. It is a big commitment to conduct an inquiry of this type, and it is right that coaches prefer to prioritise their coaching commitments instead. But it is also important and necessary for the practice to develop a better understanding of overall coaching outcome based on...
true scientific evidence rather than assumption. We believe this is essential to upholding the credibility of the profession both now and in the future.

**Moving forward: our inquiry**

We see it as a useful resource to know what factors make for more effective coaching and how these might contribute to coaching relationships moving forward. We also think that everybody invested in the coaching journey should be studied and that this includes not just client and coach, but also the sponsor. After all, executive coaching is an organisational intervention and should therefore have a measurable and positive effect beyond the primary coaching client. Such an effect could be measured by clients’ direct reports, superiors and peers. We have been working with this ambition for several years now and we are committed to finding some answers because we can see that it will have a really positive impact on coaching conversations for coaches and clients alike.

Our most recent endeavours have been happening over the past 18 months. During this time we have been reaching out to coaches, clients and sponsors internationally to find out the factors that make for successful coaching relationships and good coaching outcomes. We believe that the best way to develop an understanding of effective coaching is to engage with those who are presently involved in the process: those who have first-hand experiences. So we asked these individuals in the first instance. We invited experienced coaches who had ‘live’ coaching assignments to join forces and gathered high-volume data collectively with them. And we were overwhelmed by the response. It seems that other coaches are as committed to this cause as we are!

With the help of more than ten professional coaching bodies in various countries, such as Intercoach, LVSC, ZKM in the Netherlands, The OCM, the European Mentoring and Coaching Council, Nederlandse Orde van Beroeps Coaches, the Dutch Association for Career Professionals, ACPI and SCP Italy, we have been able to collect completed data questionnaires from a staggering 2,020 coaching clients, 1,880 coaches and 130 organisational sponsors. This dataset is more than double the size of the largest sample we have identified in the literature, which involved 1,202 clients, two thirds of which did not receive coaching.

Many of the executive coaches that have contributed to the research are going to join us in the eventual peer-reviewed research article. Those that have managed to contribute with more than 50 coach and client questionnaires are invited to become authors of that article with us.

The data we collected come from 34 different countries all over the world and from career counsellors, executive coaches, life coaches and supervisors, with a variety of professional backgrounds.
The ‘active’ ingredients of successful coaching

Even though we have only completed a rigorous analysis of about three quarters of this dataset, we already want to share what we have found as the results are very significant. And we are thrilled that our findings break new and important ground for executive coaching.

For all you coaches out there, here is a précis of our findings and some pointers on how to integrate these into your own practice:

• relate well to produce real results

Spending time to build a strong relationship with your client is critical for successful coaching. We found that the strength of the coaching relationship was the most powerful predictor of coaching outcomes as perceived by both coach and client. Building a rapport that is task-focused with clear and achievable goals leads to successful outcomes more than just focusing on developing a close relationship or bond does.

In other words, the best way to develop a strong relationship with your client is to work in tandem with him in a task- or goal-focused manner. This gives the coaching conversation a clear direction and facilitates the strengthening of the relationship between coach and client.

• boost that ego strength!

Another finding of our work is that the degree to which the client can motivate himself, his self-efficacy or, if you like, ego strength or self-confidence, is also a good predictor of the outcome of coaching. This finding was significant through the eyes of both clients and coaches. We have thus demonstrated that clients’ self-motivation to engage in the coaching journey can have a fruitful impact on successful outcomes.

Taken together with the previous findings, we suggest that a well-functioning coaching relationship might help to ignite and maintain self-motivation over time. Successfully achieving set goals could certainly boost ego strength and support momentum in the long term. Self-efficacy also has a direct bearing on personal and career development.

• let your character flourish

On the other hand, the factors stemming from the client’s or coach’s personality structure (based on MBTI classification) are much weaker, and matching on the basis of personality preferences appears to produce no clear improvement in the effectiveness of coaching. In fact, we found that a coach–client personality mismatch on the sensing–intuiting (S/N) dimension was slightly more effective, perhaps because the difference brings a distinct and contrasting perspective to the conversation, and this might facilitate progress in creating new insight. The most effective client-coach combination was N/S and an S/S match was the least effective.

In contrast, personality similarity has some impact on developing a strong client relationship. We found that only a personality match on the judging–perceiving (J/P) dimension was significantly related to the coaching relationship. A P/P match was the most effective and a P/J mismatch for client-coach was the least effective for the goal aspects of the relationship.

References

2 Anderson S L, Betz N E “Sources of social self-efficacy expectations: Their measurement and relation to career development” Journal of Vocational Behavior 58 (2011)


4 De Haan E, Duckworth A “Signaling a new trend in coaching outcome research” International Coaching Psychology Review 8.1 (2013)
These results indicate that different perspectives can be more effective for coaching outcomes whilst profile similarity may be important for establishing a quality coaching relationship (this confirms some of the results produced by Scoular and Linley).

**Real, observable impact**

We were thrilled to find real consistency between coaching outcomes as reported by client, coach and sponsor. It is great to see that all parties invested in the coaching journey are statistically aligned so that they see similar, real benefits from the process.

This again emphasises that executive coaching really works and has a noticeable impact in the workplace. It suggests that coaching interventions are a highly effective development intervention. In fact, as far as we can judge, executive coaching seems to carry more evidence from quantitative research than other organisational development interventions.

**What can executive coaches and their clients learn from these results?**

During the data collection we talked to many coaches who participated in the research, because those who had completed more than ten questionnaires also received a personal profile showing the average scores for their own clients in comparison with the total averages for the study.

One of these telephone conversations was remarkable. Erik talked to a coach who had reasonably good (slightly below average) effectiveness scores but relationship scores that were more than 30 per cent below the average. In fact, this coach’s scores for the strength of the bond in the relationship were nearly 50 per cent below the average score on this aspect for all participating 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 fairly high. 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 his side and is only trying to help him learn and grow, even under difficult circumstances.

This is precisely what this study (and previous studies) 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 a good predictor of the coaching outcome.

In a nutshell: it pays off in coaching to make the relationship as strong as we can, by understanding each other sincerely; by reaching agreement on the way in which we work and the objectives we are seeking to achieve; and by making the chemistry, the ‘click’ or bond between coach and client, as strong as possible.

**Conclusion**

What we have reported here offers some insight into how to create more effective coaching conversations. We are excited by how such findings as these might change coaching in practice, by helping coaches to be even more effective and have more lasting relationships with clients. Essentially, based on our research, we suggest that developing a strong relationship with your client that includes agreement on the goals and tasks of the collaboration will create an effective coaching intervention that has observable benefits in the workplace too.

We are excited by what we have found so far and the prospect of further findings in this huge dataset. We hope that this overview has given you the impetus to reflect on your own coaching practice and consider how your own helping conversations might improve still further.

**Acknowledgement**

We want to deeply thank the hundreds of coaches and thousands of clients who have taken time to complete our questionnaires – in some cases completing more than 50 of them. Without this support our research would be a distant dream, rather than a reality.

**Erik de Haan and Nadine Page**

are director of the Centre for Coaching and a member of the research team respectively at Ashridge Business School. They can be contacted via www.ashridge.org.uk