



Critical moments

Erik de Haan and **Christiane Nieß** compare clients', coaches' and sponsors' perceptions of change

In the first-ever study comparing perceptions of coaching by clients, coaches and sponsors, we have generated and analysed a dataset of 177 critical-moment descriptions by 177 different stakeholders of executive coaching, which reveals substantial differences in how coaching is perceived by these three core groups. While clients and coaches emphasise substantial intrapersonal changes that occur within the coaching relationship, such as new insights and increased self-awareness, sponsors refer mainly to more visible behavioural changes that clients display as a result of coaching, such as better communication and interpersonal skills.


Our results therefore suggest that, although the different stakeholders of coaching all experience critical moments of change, they differ in their perceptions of what exactly the difference is that coaching makes.

Executive coaching is an increasingly popular intervention in organisations. According to a survey conducted by the American Management Association, coaching is not only used in more than half of all interviewed companies already, but a majority of the ones who do not yet have coaching in place are planning to do so in the near future¹.

Respondents to the Ridler report² expect internal and team coaching interventions to grow in the near future, while executives spend

References

- 1 American Management Association *Coaching: A global study of successful practices* (2008)
- 2 Mann C "Ridler Report 2013: Executive coaching rides recession" *Coaching at Work* 8(5) (2013)
- 3 Sherman S, Freas A "The wild west of executive coaching" *Harvard Business Review* (2004)
- 4 International Coach Federation *ICF Organizational Coaching Study* (2013)
- 5 Grant A M, Passmore J, Cavanagh M J, Parker H "The state of play in coaching today: A comprehensive review of the field" *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 25, 125 (2010)



more than \$1bn on external coaching every year in the United States alone³. Managers and executives from organisations that make use of coaching report particularly high levels of effectiveness of these conversations, although, according to the International Coaching Federation's *Organizational Coaching Study* of 2013, only very few organisations rely on formal evaluation processes to measure the effectiveness of coaching⁴. Despite the positive assessment of coaching in practice, scientific research on the impact of coaching on an organisational level has been scarce. A number of empirical studies have indeed suggested that executive coaching is beneficial to the client⁵, but its effectiveness in terms of benefits for the organisation remains largely unclear.

The goal of the present research is to investigate which changes through coaching become visible to sponsors of coaching, and how their perceptions of coaching differ from those of clients and coaches themselves.

Previous research has already investigated clients' and coaches' perceptions of change in response to coaching. In several studies, inexperienced coaches⁶, experienced coaches⁷, and clients of coaching⁸ were presented with the following task: *"Describe briefly one critical moment (an exciting, tense, or significant moment) with your coach/client. Think about what was critical in the coaching journey, or a moment when you did not quite know what to do."* Clients

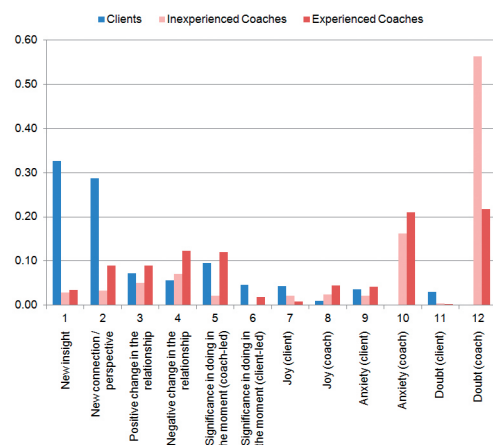
and coaches were thus asked to reflect upon significant moments in their coaching assignments, which can be regarded as changes that occurred during or in response to coaching conversations they had⁹.

Thematic analyses were conducted on the critical moment descriptions to identify whether there were recurrent themes that emerged for clients and coaches. Based on those qualitative analyses, a coding scheme was developed, capturing the most common critical moments of coaching (see Figure 1 right). In each of the studies, several independent coders classified the critical moment descriptions using that coding scheme.

An overview of the results of that coding on a dataset with 102, 80, and 127 critical

moment descriptions from clients, inexperienced coaches and experienced coaches respectively can be found in Figure 1. The results of those studies revealed that clients referred mainly to moments of learning and insight as critical (codes 1 and 2). However, coaches had a radically different perception of what was critical. While inexperienced coaches regarded mainly doubts as critical moments (code 12), more experienced coaches had a similar tendency in seeing emotional moments as critical (codes 10 and 12) while experiencing less doubt than their inexperienced colleagues.

Figure 1 Previous findings on critical moments of coaching



The present research is aimed at extending those previous findings on clients' and coaches' critical moments of coaching by adding the perspective of sponsors of coaching (ie supervisors, colleagues, subordinates or customers of the client). Since we were especially interested in comparing the critical moment perceptions for all three groups, we made use of a large-scale online survey that allowed us to collect data from clients, coaches and sponsors who were involved in, and referring to, *the same coaching assignment*¹⁰.

We again asked participants the same question about critical moments of coaching as reported above and we collected 49 moments from each party (client, coach and sponsor). We also made use of a dataset collected earlier that contained another 30 critical moment descriptions from sponsors only¹¹, so we investigated a full dataset of 177 critical-moment descriptions, containing 79 descriptions by organisational sponsors.

The clients', coaches' and sponsors' critical-moment descriptions were then coded in three different ways:

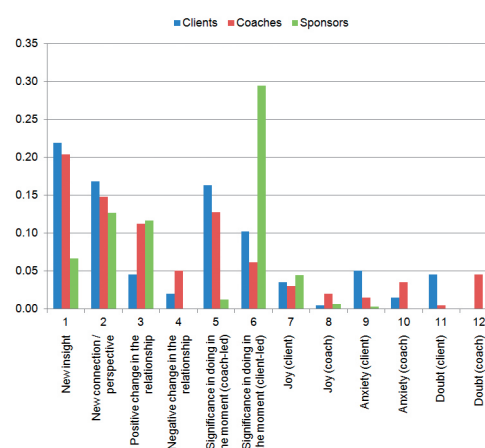
- coding based on earlier codes of our previous research into critical moments in coaching (summarised above)
- coding based on Schein's 'onion-model' of organisational culture and change¹²
- coding of correspondence between clients, coaches, and sponsors.

All coding was done by at least three coders, independently of each other. The main findings that have emerged from those coding processes are described below.

Coding based on earlier codes of critical moments

The first coding was based on the earlier research on critical moments of coaching described above. We asked four coders to classify the clients', coaches' and sponsors' critical-moment descriptions on the basis of that coding scheme. We then compared which codes were used most frequently to classify clients', coaches' and sponsors' descriptions of change. The results of those analyses can be found in Figure 2 below, which shows that clients and coaches are a lot more aligned in their critical moment descriptions when comparing them to sponsors of coaching. Those differences in the proportions of codes assigned to the critical moment descriptions were further tested in terms of statistical significance with independent t-tests. Our results indicate that sponsors of coaching saw significantly fewer moments of new insights (code 1) and coach-led significance in doing in the moment (code 5) than clients and coaches did. They, however, referred to significantly more moments that were coded as client-led significance in doing in the moment (code 6).

Figure 2 Coding of the new dataset based on the 12 codes used for previous datasets



6 De Haan E "I doubt therefore I coach: Critical moments in coaching practice" *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research* 60(1) (2008)

7 De Haan E "I struggle and emerge: Critical moments of experienced coaches" *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research* 60(1) (2008); Day A, De Haan E, Sills C, Bertie C, Blass E "Coaches' experience of critical moments in the coaching" *International Coaching Psychology Review* 3, 3 (2008)

8 De Haan E, Bertie C, Day A, Sills C "Critical moments of clients of coaching: towards a 'client model' of executive coaching" *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 5, 2 (2010)

9 ibid

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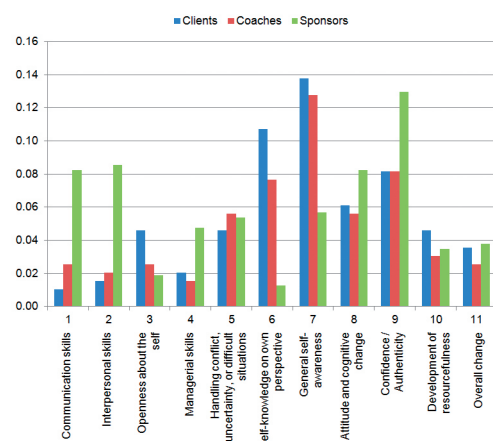
12 Schein E H *Organizational Culture and Leadership* Jossey-Bass (1984)

Coding based on the 'onion-model' of change

During the coding based on earlier codes of critical moments, the coders found it difficult to code particularly the sponsors' descriptions of change making use of that coding scheme. We therefore used a second based on Schein's model of organisational cultures, the 'onion model' of change, which we had developed and also used in an earlier research project¹³. This coding scheme resembles an 'onion model' since the first few codes (on the left side in Figure 3) refer to more visible changes on the outer layer of a metaphorical onion, while the last few codes (on the right side of Figure 3) refer to deeper, more personal changes.

Three coders used this scheme to code the same critical-moment descriptions of clients, coaches, and sponsors. As can be seen in Figure 3 below, we again find more agreement between clients and coaches, while sponsors seem to have different perceptions of changes that occur as a result of coaching. More particularly, sponsors recognise more changes that appear on the outer layer of the 'onion model', thus changes in the clients' communication skills (code 1) and interpersonal skills (code 2). Clients and coaches, however, refer significantly more to changes that occur on the more inner layers, such as self-knowledge (code 6) and self-awareness (code 7).

Figure 3 Coding of the new dataset based on the onion model of change



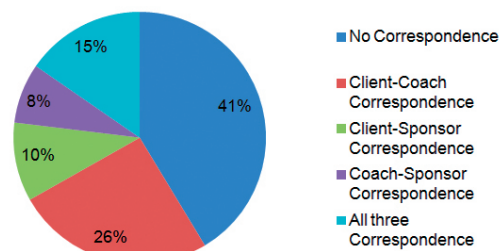
Coding of correspondence between clients, coaches, and sponsors

As this was the last coding, we were interested in finding out how often triplets of clients, coaches, and sponsors actually referred to the same change that they noticed as a result of coaching. We therefore

asked four coders to look at the critical-moment descriptions from the same assignment and indicate whether they thought there was no correspondence at all, a correspondence between the client and the coach, between the client and the sponsor, between the coach and the sponsor, or between all three (see Table 1 for an example of each case).

As can be seen in Figure 4, below our coders saw no correspondence at all in more than 40 per cent of the cases. If there was a correspondence, it was mostly between clients and coaches (26 per cent). Correspondences between clients and sponsors (10 per cent) and between coaches and sponsors (8 per cent) occurred considerably less frequently. In 15 per cent of all cases, all three stakeholders referred to the same moment as being critical in the coaching assignment.

Figure 4 Coding of correspondence between clients, coaches and sponsors



Overall, the findings of the present study suggest that sponsors of coaching seem to view the outcomes of coaching differently than clients and coaches do, even when all three refer to the same coaching assignment. This, however, does not imply that they do not see the benefits of coaching – in fact, they are consistently aligned in their estimates of effectiveness of the coaching assignment¹⁴ – but that they have a different perception of the types of changes that coaching induces.

Our results indicate that, although coaching may have very profound effects on its clients, those changes do not necessarily become visible to outsiders or third parties that are not directly involved in the coaching relationship.

Clients and coaches seem to be very aligned in what they regard as critical, focusing on new insights that the client gains (see coding 1), interventions that the coach initiates that have an impact during the session (see coding 1), or an increased self-awareness (see coding 2). Sponsors, on the other hand, notice those changes in

	Client's critical moment	Coach's critical moment	Sponsor's critical moment
No correspondence	Significant moment when I realised, through input from my coach, how a helping conviction can improve your confidence and behaviour	Challenging was the fact that I didn't know if I was the right coach for her. I didn't feel comfortable [...]	In general during interaction with other team members and the client, where my counselee was much more open and engaged in the discussions
Client-coach correspondence	The moment I recognised, through my coaching, that I was the one of all my brothers and sisters who organised [...]	I experienced a significant moment when this client realised that his behaviour as an adult was still influenced by limiting beliefs from his youth [...]	[...] Before the coaching my colleague usually had a big problem in dealing with difficult situations and put all his energy in defending the approach of his people. It was remarkable that he took his time to listen, ask and analyse [...]
Client-sponsor correspondence	Realising that my anxiety in groups was created by me most of the time by negative thought patterns and hence I also had the capacity to change that thinking (and hence the feelings)	When she tackled a long-standing area of concern with her partner and had a positive outcome [...]	Increased confidence in conversing at multi-professional meetings where there are strong dominating personalities
Coach-sponsor correspondence	There was a session when the coach let me talk to myself in a role-playing game	My client told me about a clash between her and a colleague of hers about her sub-assertive behaviour. She got emotional about being unable to gather the courage to stand up to her [...]	She has made advances especially in situations with a colleague that can be quite snappy. Before coaching, she was swiped off her feet or intimidated, after coaching she stands by her opinion [...]
All three correspondence	In one of the sessions I realised that I had the know-how in dealing with a confrontational situation, I just had to remain calm and deal with it in a calm manner [...]	At the end of the second session I felt a marked shift in her attitude and confidence in moving forward effectively. She suddenly appeared in control and not just reacting emotionally	My colleague appears to be more patient with those she manages and appears to be more approachable. There appears to be less conflict situations in the office [...]

clients of coaching that affect them in their daily interactions with them. They may notice changes in behaviours in which the client engages (see coding 1), improved communication (see coding 2) and greater interpersonal skills (see coding 2).

Overall, coaching seems to initiate changes through critical moments that are very profound for clients of coaching and their coaches, but which only become visible to other stakeholders through more easily noticeable changes in the clients' behaviours. **TJ**

Acknowledgements

We thank our Ashridge colleagues Andy Copeland, Myrna Jelman, Charlotte Sills, Stefan Cousquer, Niraj Saraf, Tsheli Lujabe and Dorothee Stoffels for their careful coding of the critical-moments descriptions.

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