



WHAT WORKS IN COACHING?

New research into coaching shows what really produces results – **Erik de Haan** explains →

The more research carried out in the area of coaching, the more we are discovering about the effectiveness of these helping conversations. We are also starting to learn more about the nature of their effects, in other words, about their ‘active ingredients’.

From 2011 to 2013, Ashridge worked with VU University Amsterdam and the University of Sydney to organise a large-scale study into the effectiveness of coaching using the largest sample size to date. The results of the 3,892 questionnaires have now been analysed in detail and it is time to transpose the findings back into practice.¹

Background to the research

In November 2011 data was collected for this very large coaching study from various coaching networks and professional associations. The data collection was completed May 2013 with over 4,000 completed questionnaires. In the majority of cases a link match could be made between coach and coachee questionnaires, and in some cases with sponsor questionnaires as well. In total 1,895 coachee questionnaires were paired with 1,895 questionnaires completed independently by their coaches, and 92 questionnaires completed by the ‘sponsor’ of the coaching relationship, usually a manager or



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HR director. The questionnaires came from 34 countries and were completed within the context of existing contracted coaching relationships.

The research focused on finding active ingredients of coaching; factors within a series of coaching sessions which correlate significantly with its effects. This was done by comparing various series of coaching sessions in the sample. This enabled us to study the following active ingredients:

- ▶ Female versus male, internal versus external and experienced versus inexperienced coaches.
 - ▶ Types of coach (e.g. leadership/organisation/career development coaches)
 - ▶ Different MBTI personality profiles for coaches and coachees.
 - ▶ Matching between MBTI personality profiles of coach-coachee combinations.
 - ▶ The strength of the relationship
- (‘working alliance’) between coaches and coachees.
 - ▶ The relative strength of three aspects of that relationship – agreement on the goals of coaching, agreement on the tasks of coaching, and effective bond or ‘click’ between coach and coachee.
 - ▶ Self-efficacy or self-motivation of coaches.
 - ▶ Self-efficacy or self-motivation of coachees.



The results showed that although the coaching relationship was the key active ingredient that, within the relationship, the 'click' between coach and coachee was not so important as thought.

Less active ingredients

Analysis revealed that the type of coaching, the coach's degree of experience, internal versus external coaching, the form of coaching, and its integration into organisations' development or leadership programmes, were not important. Sometimes they *were* important in the eyes of the coach (for example, external coaches give themselves higher scores), but not in the eyes of the client or sponsor. Another important factor that made no, or very little, difference was the personality profile of the coach or coachee. Despite the recognition of typical leader and manager profiles in the coachee MBTI profiles,² as well as typical coach and counsellor profiles in the coach MBTI profiles,³ neither personality nor personality match (at least, measured by the MBTI) appeared to make any difference to the effectiveness of coaching.

The strongest active ingredients

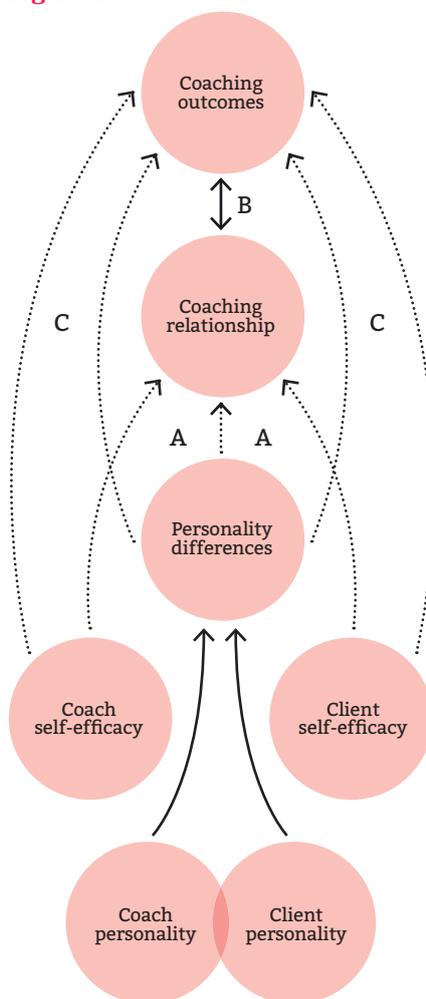
The main predictor of an effective series of coaching sessions was found to be the coaching relationship. Due to the large number of coaching relationships in the sample, this finding was considered in detail. For example, not only was there a strong link between the strength of the coaching relationship ('Working Alliance Inventory') and the effectiveness of coaching, but also that this link is maintained (albeit to a lesser extent) when the other party in the relationship assesses its effectiveness, see Table 1.

The predictive value of the coaching relationship is so strong that it *mediates* all other dependencies in our study to a significant degree. In other words, the other active ingredients are effective only if the coaching relationship is strong. The coaching relationship

therefore appears to be conditional for the effects of other active ingredients. In other words, in Figure 1 we can show that route 'A' to 'B' is much more important than route 'C' (where relevant; the middle arrow in 'A' from personality matching is in any case fairly weak).

These results were also checked for the sponsor's assessment of the effectiveness of the coaching relationship but, although the sponsor effectiveness score correlated positively with the coachee effectiveness score and even (to a lesser extent) with the coach effectiveness score, these correlations were not significant due to the small number of linked sponsor questionnaires.

Figure 1



Within the relationship it is less about the 'click'

The most remarkable finding in this research was that the three components of the coaching relationship or working alliance (agreement on tasks, agreement on goals, and affective bond between coach and coachee) did not correlate in the same way with effectiveness (as rated by coach, coachee and sponsor). The first two relationship aspects correlated significantly more strongly with coach effectiveness than the third. So the 'click' or 'rapport' in the coaching relationship appears to be much less important than proper agreement on the tasks and goals of coaching. The significantly lower correlation between this 'click' and effectiveness was found for both coachees and coaches, and also occurs in the third (weak but significant) finding concerning the MBTI personality match.

Here is perhaps a helpful illustration of this finding, taken from a telephone conversation I had with one of the participants in the research; a coach who scored moderately on effectiveness (slightly below average) but whose scores for relationship and effective bond were well below average (nearly 50 per cent lower). On further investigation, it was found that this coach mainly did 'turn around' work with senior managers who were being given a final chance to keep their jobs by attending a number of sessions with him and showing that they could improve as a result. This coach's approach and the tone in which he gave direct feedback to his clients on their performance sounded harsh and it seemed almost inconceivable that the scores he had obtained for effectiveness could still be so high. The best explanation was that many of his clients did indeed manage to keep their jobs by working loyally with this coach. Moreover, the coach had made clear contracts with his coachees (in other words, high 'agreement on tasks' in the WAI); moreover, the goals had been set by the organisation so were known to all parties involved (in other words, high 'agreement on goals' in the WAI).

Another active ingredient – self-efficacy

A weaker but nevertheless significant connection turned out to be

Table 1 (figures are correlation coefficient)

Correlation coefficients	Effectiveness according to coachee	Effectiveness according to coach
WAI according to coachee	.56	.23
WAI according to coach	.19	.56

All correlations are significant ($p < 0.01$)

the correlation between the coachee's self-efficacy and the effectiveness of coaching, see Table 2.⁴

A higher coachee self-efficacy rating therefore makes a real difference even for the effectiveness of coaching as rated by the coach. However, as mentioned earlier, the bulk of this effect is mediated by the coaching relationship. In other words, it appears that higher self-efficacy on the part of coachees leads to them achieving better agreement on tasks and goals and *thereby* achieving a greater coaching effect.

Finally, one more component was found that may be important in coaching effectiveness, namely the gender of the coach. The study revealed that female coaches performed better than male coaches, with both male and female coachees (the effect was very small yet significant: correlation 0.05, and $p < 0.05$). This is something that merits further investigation. After all, coaching has often been described as a 'female profession', with the 'midwife' as its metaphor and the Goddess Athena as its 'patron saint'.

What do these results mean for coaching practice?

We can provisionally – provided no other studies yield contradictory results – state the following conclusions regarding the effectiveness of coaching.

- ▶ Coaching is the only organisation consultancy intervention known to have proven efficacy.⁵
- ▶ The strongest active ingredient is the coaching relationship and specifically, within it, the agreement that coach and coachee are able to reach on goals and tasks.
- ▶ Self-efficacy of the coachee is also important and appears to contribute to the reaching of agreement on goals and tasks between coach and coachee.
- ▶ Personality factors and the match between personality factors of coach and coachee appear to be much less

▶ RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COACHES AND ORGANISATIONAL SPONSORS

Avoid external matching of coaching assignments

All of these results argue against 'external matching' in which, for example, an HR director or manager decides based on CVs which coach is assigned to which coachee. Not only do we find no significant effects of personality factors, but Boyce et al. show compellingly that demographic characteristics of coaches are also not significantly related to effectiveness, so for the time being there is no evidence for matching.⁶ A better way to start a coaching relationship is to allow coachees to meet one or more coaches and to assess the relationship themselves, and then to allow them an opportunity to make proper arrangements within that relationship concerning the goals to be achieved and the tasks of coaching.

Optimise the coaching relationship

From the early 1990s, the working relationship has been described as the 'best predictor' of helping conversations. That finding is clearly confirmed in this research into coaching. Coaches and sponsors would therefore do well to optimise

this relationship, especially the aspects concerning agreement on tasks and goals. They should pay attention to contracting; provide clarity about intended goals and methods, and negotiate on them; and work in a relational way, which means discussing the emerging quality of the coaching relationship.

Optimise the self-efficacy of the coachee

The coachee's self-efficacy has been repeatedly recognised as a key active ingredient in the effectiveness of coaching, and coaches and sponsors can make use of this. It is always good to discuss motivation and ambivalence at the contracting stage. Motivation can be increased, for example by placing more of a focus on the coachee's own goals or by providing as much clarity as possible about intended goals and methods. It may also be useful to have coachees complete a questionnaire on self-efficacy at the start of coaching. If low self-efficacy is identified, this could be discussed, and developing self-efficacy could be proposed as a goal for coaching.

important, with little effect on the quality of the working relationship between the participants or the general effectiveness of coaching.

It seems that after some 20 years of quantitative coaching research we are beginning to see tangible results that may inform our everyday practice of helping conversations and help to identify factors which determine the effectiveness of coaching. **TJ**

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Table 2 (figures are correlation coefficient)

Correlation coefficients	Effectiveness according to coachee	Effectiveness according to coach
Self-efficacy of coachee	.24	.09
Self-efficacy of coach	(not significant)	.12

The three correlations are significant ($p < 0.01$)

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