



Key influencer

We need more good supervisors, argues Erik de Haan. Why? Because it's special work that it's a privilege to be involved in. It throws a light on deep-set, often confidential, problems and helps bring solutions to the fore.

The more I do this 'executive coaching' work, the more I realise how precious and effective it is.

My gratitude for the opportunity to work with highly personal change is ever increasing. Nearly every one of my coaching sessions has at least one moment where my client makes an important link that helps to shine a completely different light on a problem, and on its solution too.

Clients share highly confidential facts and feelings, such as of shame, or guilt or remorse. The simple voicing of such feelings already provides important relief and a new opportunity to think and make a different sense of what has happened, eg:

- To recognise you're replaying something from decades ago, or worse, that you've taken up a similar role to what caused you difficulty years back when you were more vulnerable.
- To see you're responding to a colleague or a boss in a way that's not ➔

just informed by them and their actions, but also by other key influencers in your life.

- To realise, only through coaching, what reactions some of your intended actions may trigger and to have an opportunity to change them before you bring forth such unwanted consequences.

Every single one of these can be a profound learning experience that will stay with my clients for a long time.

I've also been very privileged that I could read so many outcome-research articles and myself participate on research programmes that show us that indeed, coaching works:

1. With Andrew Day, Charlotte Sills and others we showed that even if sometimes contrary to their coaches, clients will overwhelmingly refer to new insight and new realisations as being critical to their conversations (De Haan et al, 2010).

2. With Tony Grant, Yvonne Burger and others we undertook a large-scale study in realistic settings that gave us information about how active ingredients play a role in the effectiveness of the coaching (De Haan et al, 2016).

3. More recently, with Sally Bonneywell and David Gray in a longitudinal, randomised controlled trial, we not only confirmed what had been found earlier about active ingredients, but we also showed that the coaching sessions were very effective (De Haan et al, 2018). This randomised controlled trial was done in a realistic setting in a large global corporation, so we're trusting that the positive results as reported by clients, coaches and their sponsors, are making a real difference in the workplace of the clients.

Finally, this exciting project gave us the first hints that coaching has a measurable impact on so-called 'derailment factors' in the personality, ie, those more intimate aspects of our

leadership contribution that may get us into serious trouble as a leader (such as our grandiosity/narcissism, our issues with emotions and 'anger management', aloofness or cynicism).

This research seems to provide some first significant indications that coaching may help with those derailment patterns in particular, in that coaching is demonstrated to have a small but significant calming, balancing and responsibility enhancing effect on personality.

In other words, this was the first research that shows coaching may mitigate the risks of leaders derailing in large organisations (De Haan et al, 2018).

4. Even more recently – summer 2018 – with Joanna Molyn, Chris Stride and David Gray we completed the first truly longitudinal randomised controlled trial with eight measurement points in time encompassing all six coaching sessions of a large group of coaches.

The results are truly inspirational and show that we can map a dose/effect curve as is customary in therapy and medicine, showing that on average each new coaching session improves

the chances of our target group compared to the control group, which is not receiving coaching (see Figure 1).

Moreover, the research shows that aspects like 'wellbeing' and 'resilience' are positively boosted by coaching sessions, again on a session-by-session basis. These excellent results have been achieved with the help of more than 100 professional coaches, all Ashridge accredited, who've facilitated the six sessions for each participant in the target group.

Figure 1 shows the first 'dose-effect curve' in executive coaching research (with many thanks to my colleagues Viktor Nilsson, Joanna Molyn, David Gray and Chris Stride). The coaching stops between T6 and T7 – the relapse at T8 would be expected and conforms with similar curves found in therapy.

With such phenomenal results for professional coaches and such a clear

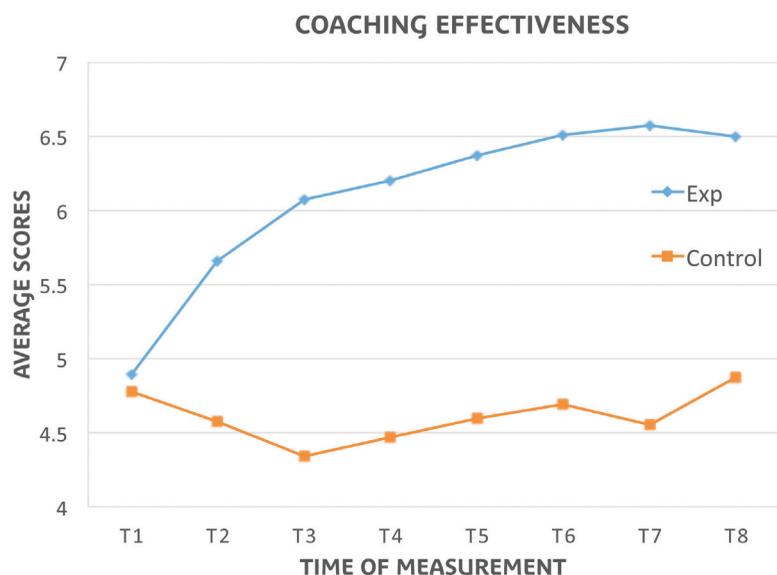


Figure 1: The 'dose-effect curve'



sense that something precious and meaningful goes on in our coaching sessions, I believe professional coaches do need important support themselves. Coaching can be very isolated work, where often you need to come up with a response all by yourself and without the time to check in with other experts.

Moreover coaching is often confidential and emotional, where you regularly work on the cusp of ethical dilemmas and the boundary with psychotherapy. It's well known that both clients and coaches see those personal and emotional aspects of their work-related sessions as the most critical to success (see, eg, Machin, 2010). In short, coaches need to handle a lot of emotions and boundaries, and they need to do this largely on their own.

For that reason, I believe we need to work harder to ensure all professional coaches are professionally supervised, and that coaching supervisors are accredited and safe. Supervision is precisely the kind of quality assurance and personal support that coaches need to sustain their practice, to debrief and

review decisions made and to prepare for new issues and dilemmas in their work.

Professional supervision means being able to support and develop your supervisee, but also to evaluate and assess, ie, to provide what is called 'normative' questions and guidance.

This goes well beyond just being an experienced coach, and does require special training, such as we undertake on the Ashridge Postgraduate Diploma

in Organizational Supervision (<http://bit.ly/2Nqx40U>).

As they become supervisors, experienced coaches need to understand what makes supervision different from coaching, and they need training to help others formulate and reflect on their ethical and professional dilemmas. 

● **Erik de Haan** is the director of Ashridge Centre for Coaching

References

- E de Haan, C Bertie, A Day & C Sills, 'Clients' critical moments of coaching: towards a 'client model' of executive coaching', in *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 5, 2, 109-128, 2010
- E de Haan, A Grant, Y Burger, & P-O Eriksson, 'A large-scale study of executive and workplace coaching: the relative contributions of relationship, personality match, and self-efficacy', in *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 68, 3, 189-207, 2016
- E de Haan, D E Gray, & S Bonneywell, 'Executive coaching outcome research in a field setting: A near-randomized controlled trial study in a global healthcare corporation', in *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 2018 (submitted)
- S Machin, 'The nature of the internal coaching relationship', in *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, Special Issue 4, 37-52, 2010