

THE ACTIVE INGREDIENTS OF COACHING: INSIGHT FROM RESEARCH

Erik de Haan, Director of Ashridge Centre for Coaching, reports on two recent trials which suggest that we have to radically alter our understanding of the impact of the coaching relationship on coaching effectiveness.

The big question that still remains in coaching research is: *what makes coaching so effective?* What are its ‘active ingredients’? If we knew more about such factors of effectiveness, we could adapt training, education and selection of coaches, and model our coaching approaches, interventions and contracts around those ingredients that will have been demonstrated to contribute most to outcome. However, a clear consensus on ‘active ingredients’ has so far eluded us. New research seems to indicate why this may be the case.

SUMMARY OF THE TWO EXPERIMENTS

Our first experiment was the largest randomised controlled trial (RCT) undertaken to date in coaching. The setting was a global healthcare company, with approximately 100,000 employees based in over 120 countries.¹ We engaged with two consecutive groups in a leadership-development programme, which was exclusively based on coaching and was designed to increase the ratio of female leaders at all leadership levels. The first group started in April and the second in September, providing ideal conditions for a ‘waiting-list control group’ design; there were 89 female leaders in the target group (the April intake) and 72

female leaders in the control group (the September intake). We derived additional information from the participants’ coaches and line managers through questionnaires.

This RCT found strong evidence that executive coaching was a highly effective intervention, not only in the eyes of the coachees but also in the eyes of their line managers; coachees were better off than at least 85% of those in the control group. This result confirmed meta-analysis studies such as Jones et al.² By using a randomly selected control group, we know that the effectiveness can be attributed to the intervention itself. Moreover, thanks to measuring effectiveness through the eyes of coaches, coachees and line managers, we know that the finding is robust against ‘same-source bias’. We also found support for factors contributing to this effectiveness, in particular coachee-related factors such as Resilience, Self-efficacy, Perceived Social Support and Mental Wellbeing, and also for the Working Alliance between coach and coachee. Although the study was undertaken within the healthcare industry, we believe that these findings are applicable over many industries because the coachees were globally mobile senior and general managers, rather than technical healthcare experts.

In the second RCT study,³ an even larger group of 105 business school students at a London university (average age 23) were coached by an equal number of qualified coaches, whilst another group of 105 students who received no coaching formed the control group. We collected data over eight data points for coachees and coaches, enabling us to model the expected ‘dose-effect’ curve over the course of the coaching sessions (see Figure 1). In this study we witnessed significant change on a range of parameters: Coaching Effectiveness, Resilience, (lower) Stress and Goal Attainment scores. Again, we found evidence for similar factors contributing to this effectiveness, namely Hope, Outcome Expectations, Self-efficacy, Perceived Social Support, and also for the Working Alliance between coach and coachee.

COACHING EFFECTIVENESS

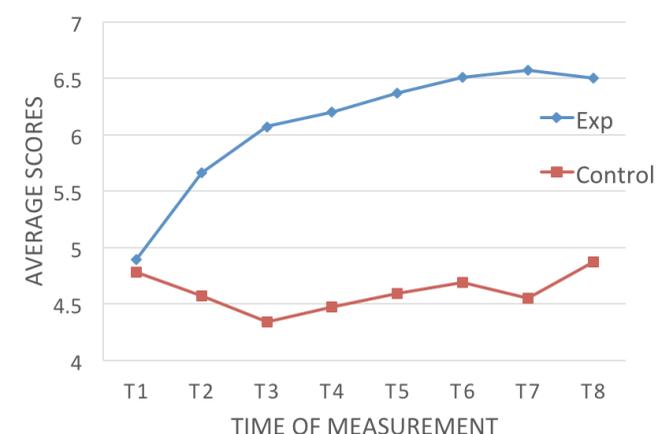


Figure 1. The first dose-effect curve in executive coaching, confirming clear benefits throughout the six coaching sessions and a diminishing return per session. Time T1 is before the first session, time T7 is shortly after the sixth session, and time T8 is a three-month follow up, which explains why the curve bends back.

It was reassuring to see two RCTs find the same effect sizes in very different contexts: namely, senior manager coachees vs. student coachees; global business setting vs. local business school setting; leadership development programme vs. paid subjects in student context; and with two different groups of qualified coaches. Both trials find significant results on the subject of Coaching Effectiveness, whilst the first study also measures the impact on Leadership Personality (according to the Hogan psychometric) and the second study measures effects on other variables such as Goal Achievement, Resilience and Mental Wellbeing improvement, as well as Stress reduction.

1. hoganassessments.com/

However, there was also an important surprise when comparing the two studies. In the second study we could only detect significant effects of Hope, Perceived Social Support and Working Alliance ratings on *the overall levels* of effectiveness, not on the *change* in effectiveness during the course of coaching. This means it is now harder than before to associate these variables with the change through coaching per se. We now think that this means that we will have to revise our thinking about coaching effectiveness profoundly.

Older studies on the impact of the coaching relationship (illustrated in a recent meta-analysis⁴) show consistently that Working Alliance (in short, the capacity to work well together – as measured by the Working Alliance Inventory, WAI) is linked to outcome. We have now found that rather than being linked to the outcomes through coaching, WAI can in fact be linked only to the ‘starting position’ – to the suitability of the coachee for coaching – but not to improvement during coaching. In other words, WAI does not correlate with any increase in coaching outcome from the moment it is measured. This can only be explained as WAI being important in terms of a general ‘readiness’ for coaching but not for the effectiveness of the coaching intervention itself. In still other words, we cannot demonstrate any causality of higher WAI (i.e., a better coaching relationship) leading to better outcomes. Until this study there has only been correlational research into the impact of the alliance, involving only a single measurement of WAI⁴, so this is the first time that a study has looked into causality – and it hasn’t demonstrated it.

It is interesting to note that coachee and coach scores of the WAI only show a very limited correlation⁵, and both are barely related to observer scores of the same relationship.⁶ I believe, therefore, that the WAI has been misconstrued and misnamed as a relational variable, one that tells us about the strength of the relationship in the coaching room. Instead, it is perhaps better to see it as a measure of a coachee’s propensity to relate; in short, not a relational variable but a client-related variable. Client-rated WAI scores may tell us mostly about how disposed the coachee is, generally, towards a good working relationship, and how easily the coachee thinks they engage in a relationship which they rate positively.

All earlier findings⁶ can now be understood to show that coachees who say they ‘relate’ better also achieve better results in coaching, at least according to their own estimates. We think WAI measures a relatively stable coachee personality ‘trait’. However, some of WAI may also be measuring a more changing aspect of personality: a changeable ‘state’. The fact that WAI levels did increase on average during the coaching journey confirms that there are state-like aspects present in WAI scores.

However, what is important for coaching outcome research is that the coachee’s relationship scores do not seem to drive outcomes: the sense of relating well with your coach gives coachees a higher outcome overall but is hardly influenced by the sessions themselves. In fact, in the second study we found

the coachee's Resilience scores to be a much better predictor of outcome, to such an extent that most of the predictive power of other coachee variables were picked up and carried by Resilience alone.

This helps to explain why so little evidence has been found for additional effectiveness to be had from particular 'matching' between coachee and coach⁷: there are certain traits that give coachees an overall increase in effectiveness (such as WAI, Hope, Self-efficacy) but they are hardly further improved by the sessions themselves or the coach match.

It appears that coachees rate their experience in coaching with a 'halo effect': the coachee will rate all aspects of the experience as better or worse in accordance with: (1) how useful the general experience was for them; and (2) their own optimism about helping relationships, significantly influenced by coachee-based factors such as Hope, Expectancy, Self-efficacy, Resilience, Mental Wellbeing and even Working Alliance, and will then score all outcome aspects accordingly.

It is worth reporting that each of the studies has also demonstrated a particular reason why coaching is so very helpful for senior leaders:

1. The second study shows that Resilience is an important driver of outcome, while we know that nowadays mental toughness and resilience are pervasive qualities of our executive coaching clients. So, statistically, tough top leaders are expected to do well in coaching.
2. The first study, on the other hand, showed that coaching has a significant beneficial effect on 'personality derailers' in leadership – the kind of personality overdrives that get leaders into trouble with their staff and their mission. Specifically, coaching seems to have a small but significant calming, balancing and responsibility-enhancing effect on personality. So, again, executive coaching seems highly relevant at top levels of organisational leadership.⁸

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