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EXPLORING THE COACHING EXPERIENCE: ANALYSING COACHEE PERSPECTIVES ON FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO COACHING EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract: *This study was designed to explore participant perspectives on coaching effectiveness across a range of different coaching experiences and was guided by a preliminary model of coaching developed from the literature. The primary data were collected from a survey of 114 coachees with a variety of coaching experiences. Results suggested that the main factors contributing to perceived coaching effectiveness were the degree to which the coach was similar to the coachee and the amount of effort and commitment the coachee invested in the coaching process. The results also highlighted the importance of a supportive organisation.*

Originality/value of the research: *There is a need for research that moves beyond simply assessing if coaching is effective to examining the factors that contribute to coaching effectiveness. This paper seeks to contribute to development of both theory and practice in coaching by examining coachee perspectives on the factors that contribute to overall coaching effectiveness across a range of different coaching programs.*

Keywords: coaching, effectiveness, persuasive communication, counselling psychology

INTRODUCTION

The use of coaching as a human resource development tool in business is well established. In 2003 Hyatt claimed there were more than 50,000 business coaches operating around the world and in 2006 Fillery and Travis (2006) estimated that business coaching was a \$2 billion activity. Just as the practice of coaching has grown, so has research into its features and effectiveness. O'Donovan and Megginson (2011) provide evidence that the number of academic publications about coaching increased nearly fourfold between 2000 and 2010. Despite this increase in research attention there continue to be a number of areas that have not been given much academic attention including more detailed analyses of coaching effectiveness across a range of coaching programs. This paper seeks to contribute to development of both theory and practice in coaching by examining coachee perspectives on the factors that contribute to overall coaching effectiveness across a range of different coaching programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper will use Kinlaw's (2000) definition as cited by Tovey (Tovey, 2001:296) of business coaching as "a natural conversation that follows a predictable

process and leads to superior performance, commitment to sustained improvement, and positive relationships". This definition has four parts that are consistent with many other definitions. First, it is a process and in order to achieve results, it must be applied in an organized, efficient and systematic way (Belf, 1996, Grant, 2005, Haber, 1996). Second, the aim is for performance to be improved to an agreed level (Grant, 2005, Belf, 1996). Third, on top of existing performance, coaching endeavours to secure long-term continuous performance improvement from the individual being coached (Haber, 1996). Fourth, coaching focuses on relationships between people and the positive and ongoing development of these relationships (Grant, 2005).

Although the number of papers and books on coaching may be increasing at a considerable rate, more detailed reviews of the available literature still report only a limited number of empirical studies being reported. In (2001) Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson provided an extensive review of the coaching literature but found only seven papers based on empirical research studies. In (2005) Joo identified 11 out of 78 academic papers as empirical and Feldman and Lankau (also in 2005) found 20 empirical studies. In 2007 Passmore and Gibbes reviewed 23 empirical papers and in 2010 Ely, Boyce, Nelson, Zaccaro, Hernandez-Broome and Whyman found 49 empirical studies focussed on coaching for leadership. These reviews show a slow increase in the presentation of data relevant to understanding the process and effectiveness of coaching and uniformly conclude that there is a need for considerably more research into business coaching.

Four of the most recent review articles (Ely et al., 2010, Passmore and Gibbes, 2007, Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011, Feldman and Lankau, 2005) provide an overview of the prevailing methodological approaches taken in coaching research, consistent findings, issues to be addressed in research approaches and gaps in existing knowledge. Despite spanning a six year time period their conclusions are very consistent and include:-

- A need to move away from seeking to establish that coaching is effective to understanding the processes and factors that contribute to this effectiveness;
- A call for research that examines these processes and factors across a range of different coaching interventions allowing for analysis of the effects of features such as frequency of contact, duration of the coaching program and methods used;
- The identification of an over-reliance on case studies and post-hoc evaluations of specific coaching programs and the need to include other methodological approaches in coaching research;
- A tendency to analyse a limited range of variables related to coaches because of interest in establishing professional standards rather than to understand coaching effectiveness; and
- A need to analyse in more detail how different aspects of the coaching process influence its effectiveness including features of the
 - client or coachee, including self-efficacy, motivation and effort;
 - coach-client relationship, including similarity and congruity;
 - coaching process, including methods and activities; and
 - organizational context and support.

In summary it appears there is a need for research that moves beyond simply assessing if coaching is effective to examining the factors that contribute to coaching effectiveness. These factors include features of the coach including similarity and matching to the coachee, features of the coachee including motivation and effort, features of the coaching intervention such as frequency of contact and methods used. One way to address these gaps is to conduct research that includes data from a wide range of coaching programs.

Research Aims and Questions

This study was designed to explore participant perspectives on coaching effectiveness and was guided by a preliminary model of coaching (Figure 1) developed from the literature and adapted from Kilburg's 2001 discussion of the main areas needed to understand the coaching process and coaching effectiveness.

Figure 1 about here

The broad goal of the study was to explore coachee perspectives on coaching effectiveness across a range of different coaching programs and experiences. The specific aims of the study were to:

- Examine possible relationships between features of the coaching program and coachee's perceptions of coaching effectiveness
- Analyse coachee perspectives on the importance of a variety of features for overall coaching effectiveness
- To assess the relative importance of these features to coaching perceptions of coaching effectiveness.

While there has been considerable discussion about how to measure the effectiveness of coaching and calls to include objective measures such as return on investment, productivity and behavioural changes (see De Meuse et al., 2009 for a more detailed discussion of this topic), this study focussed on coachee perceptions of effectiveness. This study did not seek to determine the effectiveness of any one coaching program or even of coaching in general, but rather to examine the influence of different variables on perceived coaching effectiveness across a range of coaching programs. Given the wide range of programs and sectors that were included in this study it was not possible to use other measures of effectiveness.

METHODOLOGY

The primary data were collected from a survey of 114 coachees using a self-completion questionnaire. A web url was designed by an IT company to host the questionnaire. The researchers were able to send the web link to potential respondents via email allowing them to fill out the questionnaire in their own time. In addition potential respondents could request a hard copy of the survey to complete. The researchers used contacts with a range of organisations known to have used coaching as a staff development tool in the previous two years, with coaching consultants, networks and companies and with participants at human resource and training conferences in Australia to seek participants. Information about the study and the invitation to participate were sent out by the contacts in newsletters and

mailing lists. This method was chosen for ease of use and cost-effectiveness (Neuman, 2003).

Instrument

The questionnaire was divided into six sections matching the elements in the descriptive model of coaching (See Figure 1). The first section, Section 1 – Setting the Context, included questions about the coaching program that respondents had experience of, including whether or not they were currently being coached, the length of time spent with the coach, frequency of contact with the coach and who initiated the coaching. Sections 2 – 5 corresponded to each of the components from Figure 1, namely (Features of the Coach, Features of the Coaching Process, Questions about the Organisation and Questions about the Coachee). Specific items in each of these sections were chosen because they were the most common variables discussed in the existing literature and they are listed in the relevant tables in the results section. The last section of the questionnaire dealt with demographic variables including gender, age, marital status and whether they had children.

Sample

The sample consisted of 61 females and 52 males with a mean age of 40 years. The majority of the respondents (59.6%) were married, 27.2% were single, 7% were widowed, divorced or separated and 5.3% were in a defacto relationship. Sixty seven respondents said that they had children and the majority of these had two children. The most common sector of employment was education (24.1%), followed by insurance and general business with 9.8% in each of these, and manufacturing and health with 7.1% in each. The majority of respondents 34.5% had a postgraduate degree, 30.1% had an undergraduate degree, 15% had completed high school and 12.4% had gone on to a technical or further education college.

A number of questions were asked of respondents about their coaching experiences. The sample was evenly split between those who had completed a coaching program and were not currently being coached (50.9%) and those going through a coaching process at the time the survey was administered. Details about the length of time of the coaching experience were also recorded and 39.6% had reported a coaching experience that went for longer than 12 months, 18.9% for 6-12 months, 13.2% for 3-6 months, 18.9% for 1-3 months and 9.4% for less than one month. Respondents were also asked who initiated coaching sessions with an almost even split between those who stated the organisation initiated the coaching and those who initiated the coaching themselves, with four respondents stating that the coach initiated the coaching. Twenty-one of the respondents reported that their coaching sessions usually lasted 1-2 hours, 15 stated less than one hour, nine responded with 2-3 hours and four stated that their coaching sessions went for longer than 3 hours. Finally, respondents were asked about frequency of contact with the coach and the most common response was 'as required'. The sampling procedure was successful at generating a sample with varied coaching experiences from a variety of sectors.

RESULTS

The first step in the analysis was the creation of an index of overall coaching effectiveness to act as the dependent variable for later analyses. Three questions were asked to determine coachee's perceptions of the effectiveness of their coaching program. They were 'Would you participate in coaching again?' to which 108 (95%) respondents stated 'yes' and 'Would you recommend coaching to your colleagues?' to which 110 (97%) respondents stated 'yes'. Respondents were asked 'How effective do you think the coaching you participated in/are participating in was/is?' and given a scale from 0 'not effective at all' to 5 'very effective'. An Overall Coaching Index was created by summing responses to these three questions. Respondents who stated yes to the questions 'Would you participate in coaching again?' and 'Would you recommend coaching to your colleagues' were given the rating of 1. The responses to the question 'How effective do you think the coaching you participated in was?' were rated on a scale from 1 – 5, therefore giving those respondents who stated yes to both questions and rated it a 5 on the effectiveness scale an overall rating of 7. The majority of respondents were positive about their coaching experience with a mean score of 5.97.

Understanding the Coaching Context

The first aim of the study was to examine possible relationships between features of the coaching program and coachee's perceptions of coaching effectiveness. A series of t-tests and oneway ANOVAs with a significance level of $p < 0.05$ were conducted to address this goal using the overall index of coaching effectiveness as the dependent variable and the features of the coaching experience previously described in the sample profile. Only one variable, whether or not the respondent had completed their coaching program, was found to be significantly related to the overall index ($t = -3.307$) with those still in a coaching program more positive (mean of 4.28, $sd = 0.74$) than those who had completed their coaching experience (mean of 3.76, $sd = 0.92$).

Coachee Perspectives on the Importance of Features for Coaching Effectiveness

The third stage of the analysis addressed the second aim of understanding coachee perceptions of the importance of different features of their coaching experience to its overall effectiveness. These were organised around the main section Figure 1 – the coach, the coaching process, the organisation, and the coachee. In each section the analyses at this stage also sought to reduce the number of variables for later multivariate analyses.

The Coach

Respondents were asked to rate 18 features of their coach on a five point scale from not at all important to very important with options for 'don't know' and 'not sure'. Table 1 provides the mean ratings for each of the 18 features and it can be seen that the five most important features of a coach were maintaining confidentiality, honesty, clear communication, organisation and self-confidence.

Table 1 also reports on the results of a principal components factor analysis conducted for data reduction purposes. This analysis reduced the 18 features to five variables – calm and organised, confidence and acceptance, similarity to the coachee, shares the same values and congruence.

Insert Table 1 about here

The coaching process

Table 2 presents the mean importance ratings for the seven items related to the coaching process. A principal components factor analysis resulted in a one factor solution so it was decided to create a single variable labelled 'Processes' based on the factor scores. The most important features of the coaching process were 'is able to identify my blind spots', 'encourages me to take appropriate action' and 'helps me to constructively view difficult issues'.

Insert Table 2 about here

The organisation

Most respondents reported that their organisation was supportive with 41.2% stating that their organisation was very supportive and 32.5% stating that their organisation was generally supportive. Seventy-seven (67.5%) reported that their organisation paid for the coaching program.

The coachee

Analyses related to the coachee were grouped into three types – tests of significant differences amongst different demographic variables and the overall coaching effectiveness; ratings of agreement with items about goals and the effort and motivation of the coachee; and perceptions of barriers to participation in the coaching program. In the first set of analyses no significant differences were found for overall coaching effectiveness for gender, sector of employment, marital status, whether or not the coachee had children, or length of time in their current position. The only significant relationship was for age ($f=2.476$) with the highest effectiveness scores for those aged over 50 (mean=4.25), and between 30 and 39 years (mean=4.15) and lower scores for those aged less than 30 (mean=3.75) and between 40 and 49 (mean=3.71).

The second group of analyses examined agreement with a set of statements about the coachee and their involvement in the coaching process. Table 3 provides the mean scores for each of these items. Overall respondents felt that they were confident they could achieve their goals, that they were committed to the coaching process and that the time they invested was worth it. The majority were also positive

that coaching was the best option to achieve their goals. As with the coaching process variables, a single variable labelled Outcomes was created for later multivariate analyses by summing responses across these items. In addition in this section of the questionnaire respondents were also asked to rate on a five point scale from none at all to a great deal, the overall effort they had expended on the coaching program. The majority of the sample rated their effort as a four (33.3%) or a five (46.5%) on this scale.

Insert Table 3 about here

Finally, a list of possible barriers to the success of the coaching process was given to respondents and they were asked to rate on a scale whether they agreed or disagreed that these were barriers in their coaching process. Two-thirds (66.7%) of respondents felt that their preoccupation with other work matters was a barrier to their coaching process. When asked whether preoccupation with other personal matters was a barrier, the responses were more evenly distributed with 11.4% strongly agreeing, 36.8% agreeing, 19.3% neither agreed nor disagreed, 16.7% disagreeing, and 12.3% strongly disagreeing. Lack of time was the final barrier examined with 21.9% strongly agreeing, 28.1% agreeing, 15.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, 13.2% disagreeing, and 14.9% strongly disagreeing.

Examining the relative Importance of the Features to Overall Effectiveness

The final section of the analyses addressed the third aim of the study and explored the relative contributions of the different factors previously described to the overall index of coaching effectiveness using a multiple regression analysis. In this analysis the dependent variable was the index of overall coaching effectiveness and the independent variables were whether or not the respondent had completed their coaching, the five factors related to the coach, how supportive the organisation was, the combined coaching Processes variable, age, the ratings of the barriers, the combined items on the coachee goals and efforts labelled Outcomes and a single scale where respondents rated the amount of effort they had put into the coaching process. A correlation matrix was developed for these independent variables to test for any problems with multi-collinearity. Only two of the independent variables were significantly correlated with each other - the Outcomes and Processes variables. As a result two multiple regression analyses were conducted, one with the 'Outcomes' variable and one with the 'Process' variable. The result for the analysis for the Process variable was not significant and so this was not examined further.

Insert Table 4 about here

The adjusted R Square for the analysis that included the 'Outcomes' variable was .288 which was significant ($F=4.27$) but not strong. The full set of results is shown in Table 4. Only two variables made a significant contribution to explaining the Overall Index of Coaching Effectiveness – the Similarity factor from the features

of the coach and the Outcomes variable. These results suggest that coachees were more likely to rate the coaching as effective if their coach was the same gender and similar in age to them, and if they rated their coaching goals as important, and agreed that coaching was the best way to achieve their goals, that they were very committed to the coaching process and they felt confident they could achieve their goals.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to explore participants' perceptions of coaching effectiveness across a range of different coaching programs. The first aim of the study was to examine possible relationships between features of the coaching program and coachees' perceptions of coaching effectiveness. The basic features of coaching did not have a significant influence on respondent perceptions in this study. Only one variable, whether or not the respondent had completed their coaching program, was found to be significantly related to the overall index ($t=3.307$) with those still in a coaching program more positive than those who had completed their coaching experience and were now reflecting on their experience. Generally, time for reflection moderates responses across all the variables and being in the process right now heightens awareness and leads to stronger responses.

The second aim of the study was to analyse coachee perspectives on the importance of a variety of features for overall coaching effectiveness. Figure 2 provides a detailed list of key factors under each variable in order of importance in accordance with the results from this study. It can be seen that with features of the coach the three most significantly important features were 'is honest', 'communicates clearly' and 'maintains confidentiality'. These findings are consistent with those identified by Passmore and Fillery-Travis in their 2011 review. With features of the coaching process the three most significant features in terms of importance were 'is able to identify my blind spots', 'encourages me to take appropriate action' and 'helps me to constructively view difficult issues'. The most important features that were related to the coachee included 'effort' which is related to self efficacy theory and the motivation theories and 'pre-occupation with other matters' which is also related to 'lack of time' as these were both barriers for the coachee.

Insert Figure 2 about here

The final aim for this study was to assess the relative importance of these features to perceptions of coaching effectiveness. The final section of the analyses addressed this third aim and explored the relative contributions of the different factors previously described to the overall index of coaching effectiveness using multiple regression analyses. Only two variables made a significant contribution to explaining the Overall Index of Coaching Effectiveness – the 'Similarity' factor from the features of the coach and the 'Outcomes' variable. While the factor 'Similarity' has been proven to be important in the counselling psychology and persuasive communication literature this variable was not rated highly in importance in the frequency analysis (Ajzen, 2012, Horvath and Luborsky, 1993, Beutler et al., 1994, Krupnick et al., 1996). Respondents also felt that the coaching they participated in was effective, that they would participate in it again and that they would recommend it to their colleagues, which seems to justify the claims made by many coaching companies.

The findings from this study have highlighted how important counselling psychology theories are to coaching. This is evident in the two significant factors 'Similarity' which has been previously proven to be important in psychological therapy literature in achieving 'Outcomes'. The therapist is seen more favourably and therefore more likeable if they are similar to the patient or have similar beliefs, values or interests (Beutler et al., 1994, Rogers et al., 1967, Lafferty et al., 1989, Lambert, 1992). It is this similarity with the coachee and the coach's ability to display empathy towards the coachee that make the coaching process more effective resulting in the achievement of goal oriented outcomes.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Three main types of limitation can be identified – the size and representativeness of the sample; the items chosen for inclusion in the survey instrument; and the lack of detail and systematic analysis of the methods used within the coaching programs studied. In the case of sample size, the original intention was to collect data from 500 respondents but a problem with the web url meant that data from the first few months of the survey period was not stored properly. Given this constraint it was decided to continue with the study but to recognise and emphasise the exploratory nature of the research. Given the gaps identified in the literature review it seemed that even an exploratory study would be of value in this area. The final sample did include respondents from a range of sectors with varied demographic profiles and different coaching experiences which does support the overall representativeness of the sample. The sample was, however, all from within one country and it is possible that this restricts the applicability of the results to other settings. The researchers were aware that the selection of items for inclusion in the survey questionnaire could limit the explanatory power of the study if key variables were omitted. Open-ended questions were included in each section asking the respondents to list any other features that they thought were important to their coaching experiences. Content analyses of these responses found that the majority of responses repeated items already included. Finally the survey did include detailed questions on the activities and methods used within the coaching programs. It was decided that this would make the questionnaire too long and that the variety of experiences would limit the ability to analyse the data. Rather the study aimed to examine how the other variables measured influenced perceived effectiveness across a range of coaching interventions.

This study has helped to confirm the importance of the three main parts of coaching; the coach, the coachee and what the coach does (the coaching process). It has also provided empirical evidence to suggest that coaching is effective and that the respondents felt that coaching was helpful and effective in them achieving their goals. Another key finding was that the level of support given to the coachee by their organisation can affect their overall coaching experience. While a number of areas of interest for future research were identified, three themes consistently emerged from the results:

- The importance of coach experience and technical expertise
- The idea that key processes change in significance in different phases of coaching

- The need for greater attention to coachee goals

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