

Features of a Coach: Perspectives from Coachees

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Little critical, systematic, empirical research has been published on the effectiveness of coaching for either the individual or the organizations they work for despite the many articles written about coaching or how to coach (Joo, 2005; Leedham, 2005). “The literature on coaching has mushroomed over the past five years, reflecting the growth in coaching practice” (Passmore, 2010, p. 48). This emerging empirical literature offers an opportunity to begin to assess the many claims made for and about coaching.

Much of the literature is based on coach perceptions or single cases of coachees (Passmore, 2010). This *Coaching for Effectiveness* survey was developed based on variables identified in a literature review and to test the extensive number of claims made by coaches. The survey was different from others previously conducted as it only gathered responses from a range of coaches. This study contributes to the literature and provides evidence for coaches, organizations paying for coaching and coachees seeking information on using coaching. Specifically, this paper focuses on what to look for in a coach as this was a gap identified in the literature as needing further attention.

Literature Review

The core aim of business coaching is to “provide help to businesses, owner/managers and employees to achieve personal and business related goals” through effective relationships (Beattie, Kim, Hagen, Egan, Ellinger & Hamlin, 2014, p.186). Effective coaching relationships benefit the coachee, the organisation and the coach (Audet & Couteret, 2012; De Haan, Duckworth, Birch, & Jones, 2013). A business coach is said to be someone who establishes options, introduces challenges and initiates alternative behaviours (Witherspoon & White, 1996). According to Evers, Browers and Tomic (2006) a business coach prompts the coachee (the person being coached) with questions so that they are able to discover the

answers themselves. The role of a coach is to provide feedback about the executive's behaviour and the impact that behaviour is having on others inside and outside the organisation so as to gain an increase in their performance and that of their team (Gregory & Levy, 2011). In turn, this should lead to lower turnover (Karsten, 2010), increased morale, productivity (Vidal-Salazar, Ferron-Vilchez, & Cordon-Pozo, 2012) and higher profits (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001).

Eggers and Clark (2000) also argue that a business coach requires skills and expertise in being a coach but not necessarily expertise in the coachee's particular domain or field. It is the job of the coach to assist the coachee in defining their goals (Longnecker, 2010), helping them to realise the possibilities and to commit to a plan of action (Eggers & Clark, 2000).

Methodology

The survey, designed by the researchers sought responses about the coach, the coachee and the coaching process/experience. Questions in the survey listed features from the literature and coaching descriptions as being important for a coach to have.

Personality variables that continuously came up in the coaching literature as being important to the coaching process were tested. These variables were: Displays self confidence (Ajzen, 1992); Has experience with coaching (Eggers & Clark, 2000; van Oorsouw, Embregts, & Bosman, 2013); Has experience within my industry (Ajzen, 1992; Beutler, Machado & Neufeldt, 1994); Has similar values to me (Beutler et al., 1994); Displays empathy (Gregory & Levy, 2011); Displays acceptance of me (Bendersky Sacks, 2004); Is organized (Berg & Karlsen, 2012); Is calm (Maier, 1955); Has similar personality to me (Garman, Whiston & Zlatoper, 2000); Communicates clearly (Jowett, Kanakoglou, & Passmore, 2012); Is honest (Hall, Otazo, & Hollenback, 1999) and Maintains confidentiality (Wasylyshyn, 2003).

The open-ended questions were analyzed through a content analysis (Willimanson, Karp, Dalphin, & Gray, 1982) where the research team coded themes from responses. The themes were then categorized and a frequency analysis of the categories was carried out. Multiple response analysis was used for closed questions to determine certain themes amongst the answers.

Findings and Results

The survey was distributed online to national and international professional coaching organizations, associations and networks and was online from March 2013 until May 2014. Six hundred and forty-four participants responded to the survey although not all completed the questionnaire. The sample consisted of 56% (N=159) females and 44% (N=124) males. The mean age of participants was 48 years. Nearly 26% were employed by an organisation, 18.1% were self-employed, while 30% were managers and 26.1% were non-managers. The business/organizations were grouped into small/medium (N=171 or 61.3%) and large (N=108 or 38.7%). Country of residence was grouped into Australia (N=66, 23.7%), UK & Ireland (N=89, 32%), Rest of Europe (N=37, 13.3%), North and South America (N=69, 24.8%) and Rest of the World (N=17, 6.2%).

Characteristics of Good Coaches; The top five most important characteristics for a coach to have were experience with coaching (58.9%), ability to listen (45.9%) and that the coach possessed emotional intelligence (41.8%). Participants also wanted their coach to be challenging in a supportive way (35.4%) and be empathetic (33.2%).

Coaching Effectiveness; When rating 10 factors, (derived from the literature) that contribute to a coach's effectiveness, a Means analysis (N=644) reported that the coach "maintaining confidentiality" (M=5.06; SD=0.743) and being "honest" (M=5.02; SD=0.722) were important for effectiveness. The next three most important features that contribute to

effectiveness are: “communicates clearly” (M=4.87; SD=0.680), “displays acceptance of me” (M=4.81; SD=.839) and “displays empathy” (M=4.69; SD=0.781).

Of lesser importance are “has experience with coaching” (M=4.65; SD=0.763); “is calm” (M=4.47; SD=0.829); “displays self-confidence” (M=4.47; SD=0.804) and “is organized” (M=4.29; SD=0.832). The final most effective factor was “has experience in my industry” (M=3.13, SD=1.125) reiterating previous citations about the role industry experience plays (Wasylyshyn, 2003). These factors also add to commonality, where the client and the coach share common characteristics or experiences (Boyce, Jackson & Neal, 2010). If commonality is high, the belief is that rapport and trust will develop quicker, leading to more effective coaching.

When asked to rank the three most important factors that contributed to coaches’ effectiveness the respondents selected “maintains confidentiality” (52.2%), “is honest” (45.8%) and “displays empathy” (38.5%) as the most important.

Coach/Coachee Compatibility. In contrast to authors who imply that compatibility may not be important (Boyce et al. 2010), this survey’s participants responded that the coach having “similar values” to them (M=3.67, SD=1.190) and “having a similar personality” (M=2.62, SD= .997) were central to successful coach/coachee relationships. This finding is similar to others (Brodie Gregory & Levy, 2012; Gregory & Levy, 2011). The coach being a “similar age to the coachee” (M=2.51, SD=1.022) was not seen as important as the other features. Coachees responded that “is the same gender to me” (M=2.27, SD=1.020) as the least important factor supporting coach/coachee relationships.

A repeated measures, non-parametric ANOVA showed that the top three variables “maintains confidentiality”, “is honest” and “communicates clearly” were significantly more important than the other variables. The bottom ranked three variables, “is the same gender as

me”, “is a similar age to me” and “has similar personality to me”, were rated as less important factors for a coach to have.

Conclusion

This study has provided evidence of what features are important for a coach to have. The survey results showed that the top three variables “maintains confidentiality”, “is honest” and “communicates clearly” were significantly more important in the coaching relationship than other variables.

The survey also gave evidence for what is important for the coachee: respect for the coach’s ability, comfort from the coach’s capacity to demonstrate experience in dealing with similar situations and the coach’s skill in establishing and maintaining a relationship, findings supported by Gregory & Levy (2012). Specifically, the survey revealed the importance of closeness in terms of mutual trust and respect in a safe environment, commitment in terms of developing a partnership that is thought to be close and lasting, as well as willing and motivating, and complementarity in terms of working well together while understanding the specific roles each has to take. Moreover, the analysis highlighted that open channels of communication forged a degree of feeling and being harmonized in terms of viewing the relationship and the broader issues associated with it (Jowett et al., 2012). There is consensus that in the case of coaches, integrity, support for the coachee and good communication skills are critical characteristics (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011).

The results highlight these features as important to building relationships, an essential process of coaching which may lead to effective and successful outcomes in business coaching (Baron & Morin, 2009) and therefore, an important consideration of a contribution to effective business coaching outcomes.

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