

Barriers to Coaching in Business Settings: A Study and a Categorization

Framework

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Demand from organizations for coaching to develop leaders is increasing every year (Sherman & Freas, 2004; Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006). Review articles on coaching in business settings have provided broadly favourable reviews on coaching outcomes and effectiveness (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Joo, 2005; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Passmore & Gibbs, 2007).

The literature tends to focus on “successful” coaching relationships but little is known about unsuccessful coaching relationships (Megginson, 2011) or barriers to the achievement of coaching outcomes and effectiveness. One possible explanation for a lack of focus on barriers in the peer-reviewed literature is that coaches may not see them as an issue that needs to be addressed. Much of the literature is based on coach perceptions or single cases of coachees (Passmore, 2010). Coaches may see “barriers” or “hindrances” as presenting issues that become part of the coaching dialogue and used as “enablers”. But this transition from barrier to enabler pre-supposes that barriers are articulated and understood. For organizations to support their employees and manage their coaching programs effectively, a greater understanding of hindrances is necessary. This paper focuses on the barriers, which arise during the period of coaching engagements, which coachees face them and whether facing specific barriers is predictive of coaching effectiveness.

Literature Review

Executive coaching is broadly defined in terms of a relationship between a client/coachee and a coach that facilitates the client/coachee becoming more effective in their role (Kilburg, 1996; Witherspoon & White, 1996). Positive outcomes identified for organizations include increased leadership effectiveness (Thach, 2002); increased productivity (Vidal-Salazar,

Ferron-Vilchez, & Cordon-Pozo, 2012); job retention and loyalty to employer (Olivero, bane & Kogelman, 1997); higher profits (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001); changing behaviours (Wasylyshyn, 2003); and ability to address workplace conflict (Gray, Ekinici, & Goregaokar, 2011).

Coaching in business settings can be conducted by either external coaches or line managers or specially trained internal coaches often HR specialists (Brandl, Madsen, & Madsen, 2009; Teague & Roche, 2011). Internal coaches are usually expected to carry out their coaching role in addition to or as part of their “everyday” job (Hamlin et al., 2009).

Aspects of coaching in organizations, including internal systems for support, are an under-researched area of the literature (Stern & Stout-Rostron, 2013). Studies have found the need for organizations to provide support to coachees (Rocereto, Mosca, Forquer Gupta, & Rosenberg, 2011); ensure commitment from senior management (Baron & Morin, 2010, Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas & Kucine, 2003); and share the responsibility for the coaching goals and outcomes (Wasylyshyn, Gronsky & Hass, 2006). Line-managers are a key stakeholder by providing feedback on progress (Stewart, Palmer, Wilkin & Kerrin, 2008) whilst manager support (Olivero et al., 1997) and line management behaviours (Ogilvy and Ellam-Dyson, 2012) have been found to influence transfer of learning.

There is a paucity of studies on executive coaching from the coachees’ perspective, apart from single coachee accounts (Passmore, 2010). Notable exceptions are Bush (2004) who suggested that coachee perceptions of a supportive organizational culture were important and Hall, Otazo & Hollenback (1999) who concluded that listening and questioning skills needed to be present alongside integrity, caring and the ability to challenge constructively. Other aspects critical to the client–coach relationship have been identified as rapport and mutual trust (Boyce, Jackson, & Neal, 2010).

Further research must examine whether barriers can be defined as an absence of these facilitators or whether they are something over and above this in their own right.

The Study

The present study aims to address the paucity of academic literature surrounding barriers faced by coachees during their coaching. A section about barriers was included in an international survey designed by the researchers to explore coachee perceptions of coaching effectiveness. The survey was publicized via national and international networks, employers and coaching associations and was available to respondents from March 2013 to May 2014. This survey was different from others previously conducted, as it was not limited to programs where all coaches use the same theoretical approach or by the boundaries of a single employing organization or country.

A pre-defined list of possible barriers to coaching effectiveness was developed from the literature. Respondents were asked to indicate if they had experienced any of these and to “select all that apply”. In addition there was a free text box so respondents could use their own words to determine what “other” barriers they felt they had faced during the period of their coaching.

Multiple response analysis and content analysis (Williamson, Karp, Dalphone & Gray, 1982) was used on the pre-defined responses and open text “other” responses respectively. Thematic analysis was used to code the results into higher order and sub themes. Based on the findings a categorization framework of barriers from the coachees’ perspectives was developed. We cross-tabulated both the higher order barriers and the sub-theme barriers with nine variables comprising coaching context, organization context and personal characteristics. Finally, a backward elimination stepwise aggression analysis (Field, 2009) identified barrier categories that were more likely to predict coachees reporting limited or ineffective coaching outcomes.

It is important to note that this is an atheoretical study. While no particular theory is utilized to explain barriers faced by coachees, the results are nevertheless important. Identifying categories of barriers faced should help provide a better starting point for further research and allow HR practitioners in the meantime to focus upon how they might prevent or minimize the barriers their employees and leaders face in their coaching programs.

Results

Six hundred and forty-four coachees responded to the survey although not all respondents fully completed. In terms of coaching context, the sample consisted of 83% with an external coach, 14% with an internal coach, and while 92% (N=365) came to coaching voluntarily, for 8% (N=30) it was mandatory. For 26% (N=34) it was their first coaching experience, with 74% (N= 98) having been coached before. In terms of work context, the sample consisted of 50% (N=149) employees and 50% (N=149) self-employed while 57% were managers and 43% non-managers. Size of organization respondents worked in was 61% (N=172) in SMEs and 39% (N=110) in large organizations.

Facing barriers that could adversely affect coaching effectiveness was very common with 84% of our respondents reporting barriers and 16% facing no barriers. “Unclear development goals and lack of agreement with my coach on my goals” was the biggest issue with 21% of coachees reporting this as a barrier. This would lend support to the view that the simplistic prescription of SMART goals is not always appropriate and can even be damaging in a complex and rapidly changing world (David, Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2013).

Based on the results, six categories of ‘barriers’ were identified which we will present in our session: Coachees’ own readiness and engagement; Coaching model used; Coach’s skills or manner; Organizational culture, External events; and Relationship between coach and coachee. The vast majority of coachees were able to overcome barriers faced with 89% reporting that their coaching was nevertheless effective and 11% reporting their coaching was

of limited effectiveness. We will present our results in the session indicating that two barrier categories were predictive of limited effectiveness: Coach's skills or manner; and relationship between coach and coachee. Women were almost twice as likely as men to report these barriers.

Implications

The present study has implications in three ways. Firstly in terms of areas where more research might be worthwhile. Further research is needed into the extent to which barriers might vary based on a wider range of variables. Research on goal-setting practices might usefully focus on whether the difficulties coachees reported are an organization issue (e.g., poor communication between employee and their boss or changing priorities) a coach issue (e.g., poor or rigid goal setting process) or a combination of both. In particular further research should explore the barriers faced by employees with internal coaches. The current study found no differences in the barriers faced by coachees or perceptions of coaching effectiveness according to whether coaches were internal or externally sourced. A bigger sample of respondents with internal coaches may reveal differences between these groups.

Secondly, the study has significant practice implications for the management of coaching programs in business settings to improve the coaching experience of employees. Organizations should review any requirement for all coachees to set goals at the outset while line managers should provide clarity and honesty about the reasons for nomination and what they hope the coaching outcomes will be. Offering employees a choice of coach and assessing the readiness of employees for coaching is also indicated.

Thirdly, the study has practice implications for coaches allowing them the possibility of greater impact from their individual coaching engagements. Coaches should encourage engagement by coachees' bosses and re-think any rigid reliance on setting SMART goals.

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