

## The preventative impact of management coaching on psychological strain (Dr Ashley Weinberg, University of Salford, UK, a.weinberg@salford.ac.uk)

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### Aim of study (from Abstract)

The positive impact of coaching on a range of outcomes, including the well-being of those in receipt of it, has been highlighted by a number of published reviews (e.g. de Haan & Duckworth, 2013) and meta-analyses (e.g. Jones, Woods & Guillaume, 2015). The objective of this study was to assess the potential for coaching to act as a primary level intervention preventing deterioration in psychological health during organisational change.

### Background

Despite the growing popularity of coaching in the last 20 years, we still know relatively little about the mechanisms that positively impact the individuals who receive it. In the workplace, coaching has proved beneficial for managers as a stress management intervention. Psychological strain manifested in signs such as loss of sleep through worrying, struggling with decision making and feelings of unhappiness has the potential to put an end to the individual's well-being. However there has been no research on how coaching can be effectively used in preventing it.

### Coaching as COR facilitation and potential stress prevention

According to Hobföll's **Conservation of Resources (COR)** theory (Hobföll, 1989), humans are motivated to conserve their *resources* (objects, personal characteristics, conditions, energies) as these facilitate the development of other resources. Being in possession of *resources* may reinforce status, economic stability, personal relations, beliefs and self-esteem. Adversely, loss or even threat of loss of *resources* can cause *stress*, intended not only as a test of resistance, such as in a physical condition, but more likely as a response to certain situations that can affect mental health and well-being.

On this basis, in an organisational context, coaching is seen as an investment to enhance the individual's resources and as a preventative intervention to tackle stress when negative changes such as job insecurity, cutbacks and financial uncertainty may particularly affect managers in their role.

### Hypothesis

Psychological strain will be prevented among managers who receive coaching, while non-coached managers will report an increase in psychological strain.

### Case Study

Previous research found that coaching is an important factor in determining positive psychological health among managers (van Horn et al., 2004; Warr, 2007) and has the capability to maintain or even boost pre-existing levels of well-being (Boyatzis, Smith & Beveridge, 2013). However a number of other studies (Grant et al., 2009; Gyllensten and Palmer, 2005; Duijts, Kant, van der Brandt and Swaen, 2008; Grant, Green and Rynsaardt, 2010; Theeboom et al., 2013) have shown mixed results that indicated a rather diminished coaching effectiveness.

In the attempt to avoid a limitation that might have affected previous research by reflecting differences in relation to the willingness to participate, this study wanted to create an "optimal" experimental condition by recruiting a mixed sample of volunteers and non-volunteers managers. Three groups were formed: one that received no coaching; one that volunteered to be coached and one that received coaching, but didn't volunteer. There were no significant differences among the groups in terms of time

worked in the current job role, gender, marital/parental status and demographic profile. They received qualified coaching within the same organisation, a UK university, in separate subsequent stages over a three-year period using the same model of intervention.

Managers participated in a 360-degree appraisal in two sequential stages and were assessed on a total of 12 competencies. Further coaching sessions were based on the **GROW** (Goal-Reality-Options-Way) model (Greene & Grant, 2003; Whitmore, 1992). They were then given the standardised questionnaires **General Health Questionnaire** (GHQ-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1988) to measure psychological strain (vs. well-being) and **Objective Measure of Workplace Environment** (OMWE; Weinberg & Creed, 2000, 2002) to measure frequency of difficulties in the workplace. To ensure compatibility of the three groups, data were analysed through the one-way **ANOVA** (Analysis Of Variance) tests (Fisher, 1918).

### Key Findings

Comparisons between the three groups revealed:

- in terms of psychological strain, the volunteer coached group showed a decrease; the non-volunteer group a modest increase, while the non-coached group showed a significant increase in strain
- in reference to workplace environment, substantial differences were reported only in the coached non-volunteer group with more frequent difficulties in relation to their senior management, job promotion and fair treatment

### Conclusions

- Coaching works in preventing and lowering psychological strain, but only for those who *want* to be coached
- Coaching offers an advantage for challenges faced at the workplace, while lack of coaching or being obliged to receive it could possibly have a reverse effect
- Coaching facilitates the maintenance of well-being by decreasing psychological strain

### Limitations

- As it appears that this is the first research adopting certain mixed sample criteria, it would be useful to see the same approach applied to other organisations
- In spite of the mixed nature of the sample, the difference between volunteer and non-volunteer groups might still have induced the participants to respond to the questionnaires with a certain preconceived mental attitude

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