

A Large-Scale Study of Executive and Workplace Coaching: The Relative Contributions of Relationship, Personality Match, and Self-Efficacy. E. de Hann, A. Grant, Y. Burger, and P-O. Eriksson

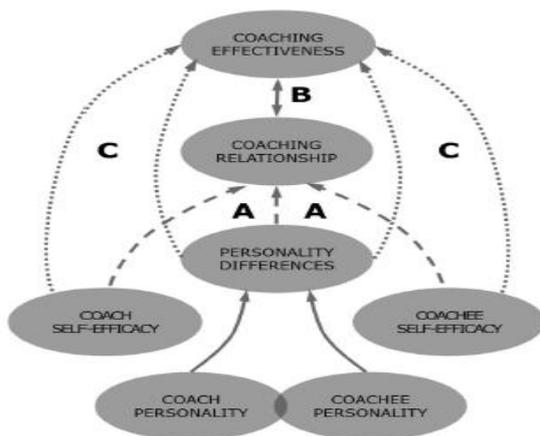
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Aim of study (from Abstract)

This large-scale study of executive coaching explores the perceived effectiveness of coaching from the perspectives of coach, coachee, and sponsor, and potential active ingredients including the coach– coachee working alliance, coachee self-efficacy, personality, and “personality match” between coach and coachee. Using a retrospective design, data was collected from 1,895 client– coach pairs (366 different coaches) from 34 countries, and 92 sponsors, for a total of 3,882 matching surveys. Results indicate that coachee perceptions of coaching effectiveness (CE) were significantly related to both coach- and coachee-rated strength of the working alliance and to coachee self-efficacy but unrelated to coachee or coach personality and to personality matching. The coachee– coach working alliance mediated the impact of self-efficacy on CE, suggesting that the strength of this working alliance—particularly as seen through the eyes of the coachee—is a key ingredient in CE. In addition, a strong emphasis on goals in the working alliance can partially compensate for low coachee self-efficacy. The task and goal aspects of the working alliance were stronger predictors of positive CE than the bond aspects, highlighting the importance of a task and goal focus in the coach–coachee relationship.

Background

This is the largest coaching study ever conducted. de Hann and his co-authors invited coaching researchers from around the world to participate and if they could contribute 50 coach-coachee records they would be co-authors. This paper provides a very good review of the literature on three important factors thought to contribute to the efficacy of Executive Coaching: (1) the relationship established between coach and coachee; (2) the self-efficacy (“belief in one’s competence to cope with a broad range of stressful or challenging demands” (pg. 193)) of the coachee and the coach; and, (3) the coach or coachee personality or the match or mismatch between the two. This research builds on the recommendations made by McKenna and Davis (2009) that coaching research should stop trying to prove that coaching works and instead should identify the factors that make it work. The researchers hypothesized that the coaching relationship has both a direct impact on coaching effectiveness and also acts as a mediating variable between the other variables and coaching effectiveness as perceived by the coachee and/or the coach. The figure below represents the relationships between these various factors.



Methodology

This study used a survey approach to collecting questionnaire data from 1,895 coach-coachee pairs and 92 sponsors invited by the coachee. The main dependent variable was **Coaching Effectiveness** and was measured by 4 questions using a 7-point response scale (see below for the specific questions asked).

The independent variables were:

- (a) **Coach-coachee relationship** was measured using a well established tool called the **Working Alliance Inventory (WAI)**. The WAI consists of three subscales measuring: Task, Goal, and Bond. Task includes things like “I am clear as to what my coach wants me to do in these sessions”. Goal includes things like “The goals of these sessions are important to me”. Bond includes things like “I believe my coach is genuinely concerned for my welfare”.

- (b) Coach and coachee **general self-efficacy** was measured using a 10 item instrument developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995) (example: “I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough”).
- (c) **The MBTI** (Meyer Briggs Type Indicator) was used to measure personality. It is the most frequently used psychometric tool to measure personality based on four dimensions (Extravert vs Introvert; Sensing vs Intuition; Thinking vs Feeling; and Judging vs Perceiving). Coaches and coachees were asked to report their MBTI types from memory.

Data collection took place over an 18-month period from November 2011 to May 2013.

Key Findings and Conclusions

Coaching Effectiveness(CE) was measured based on the perceived outcomes as reported by the coach and separately by the coachee, using the averaged score to these four questions: (a) “successful in creating reflective space”; (b) “successful in creating new insights”; (c) “successfully engaged in new action or behavior”; and (d) “overall coaching outcome”.

1. The longer the coaching relationship the greater the coaching effectiveness, the stronger the working alliance (especially the Bond), and the stronger the self-efficacy of the coachee.
2. Female coaches have higher rates of coaching effectiveness and higher WAI scores for Task and Bond. (Female coaches better than male coaches?).
3. There are personality differences between coaches and coachees: 83% of the coaches are Intuitive (N) vs. 64% of the coachees; 66% of the coaches are Feeling (F) vs. only 34% of the coachees; and 59% of the coaches are Perceiving (P) vs. only 37% of the coachees. 44% of the coaches are _NFP’s vs. only 15% of the coachees. Coaches are 4 times more likely to be _NFP’s than the population as a whole. However these personality differences do not seem to have a significant impact on Coaching Effectiveness, except that when both coaches and coachees are Feeling types (F’s) they tend to report the highest bond but the lowest coaching effectiveness scores.
4. As expected, the Working Alliance scores, measuring the coaching relationship, correlate with positive coaching effectiveness. But the coachee’s perception of the relationship is much more important than the coaches perception! The authors warn that coaches should be more mindful that how the coachees are perceiving their relationship. As it is not always similar to how they perceive it! And that “a strong coach-coachee relationship and appropriate goal-setting seem to be fundamental aspects of effective coaching” (pg. 203).
5. The three elements of the coaching relationship as measured by the WAI are: Goals, Task, and Bond. Goals and Tasks are more important in predicting outcomes than is Bond. This says that a strong relationship between coach and coachee is more about focusing on goals and tasks to achieve those goals than on having a strong ‘we-feeling’.

Limitations

- This was a correlation study in one point of time. Therefore causal relationships cannot be determined.
- The personality measure (the MBTI) was based on coach and coachee memories of their type, introducing an obvious source of error. The authors also suggest that the Five Factor Model of personality would be more appropriate in future research as it is a normative and not a ipsative instrument like the MBTI. Ipsative instruments are used to measure what is more or less important for an individual but should not be used to compare across individuals and are not appropriate for parametric statistical analysis used to do correlation studies among a number of variables.
- While the authors did make an attempt to include inputs from the sponsors of the coaching, only 92 could be identified. While this would be considered an adequate size for some smaller scale studies, it was inadequate in comparison to the large number of coach and coachee records and therefore was omitted in much of the analysis. There are still very few studies that simultaneously look at the coaching experience from the coach, coachee, and sponsors perspective. The few that exist always seem to show that the sponsors are less positive about the coaching outcomes. Why? More research needs to be done that focuses on what sponsors have to say about coaching outcomes.

Why was this article chosen for review?

There are a number of reasons for choosing this article for review. First, there has never been such a large scale global study of coaching. Studying 1,895 coaching pairs has never been done. Given the size of this data set I suspect we will see more articles coming out looking at other aspects of the data. Secondly, two of the authors, Erik de Haan and Tony Grant are ‘must read’ coaching researchers. Whenever you see them as authors, read the article as it is likely to be ground-breaking work in coaching. Grant is the single most prolific author of coaching articles. Finally, since the focus has shifted from proving that coaching works to finding out what makes it work (McKenna and Davis, 2009) there has been greater interest in understanding the ‘coaching relationship’ and how it relates to outcomes and perhaps moderates other important factors such as coachee readiness or self-efficacy.

Reviewer: Hermann Ditzig

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