

Executive Coaching Effectiveness

The use of executive coaching has become an increasingly popular trend in the corporate world, however despite the intense interest, research is still needed to build a theoretical foundation that defines the field of study and professionalises the practice of executive coaching as an evidence-based intervention. Dr Gil Bozer and Professor James C. Sarros of Monash University outline their research.

The purpose of this study was to develop a model of executive coaching effectiveness by identifying and examining the relationships among key factors that influence the effectiveness of executive coaching as reflected in enhanced individual outcomes. These factors were:

1. Coach characteristics (i.e., academic background in psychology, credibility).
2. Coach-coachee match (i.e., gender and perceived similarity).
3. Coachee characteristics (i.e., feedback receptivity, developmental self-efficacy, learning goal orientation, and pre-training motivation).
4. Proximal work-group climate for coaching transfer (i.e., job and subordinate support).

The individual outcomes measured were:

- Increased self-awareness;
- Increased career satisfaction;
- Increased job affective commitment;
- Improvement in self-reported job performance;
- Improvement in job performance as reported by the direct supervisor; and
- Improvement in supervisory-rated task performance.

Sample

The present study was conducted in Israel over a period of approximately nine months. The participants drew on the client base of four firms that offered executive coaching to executives in the commercial, government, and education sectors throughout Israel.

The experimental group comprised 68 executives who participated in executive coaching programs provided by the four executive coaching firms, their coaches (68), and their direct supervisors (28). The control group comprised 26 of their peers, namely executives from the same organisations from which the experimental group was obtained. The executives who volunteered to act as a control group did not receive executive coaching and completed the same measures as the experimental group.

Approach

The executive coaching design which underlies the current research represents a cognitive-behavioural approach where the coach and the coachee work through a process of behavioural change. The process implemented by all the coaches included 10-12 coaching sessions with weekly interventions. All coaching endeavours commenced with an

assessment and identification of a developmental issue, followed by a feedback session, goal setting, action planning, and follow-up coaching sessions, and concluded with an evaluation of outcomes by both the coach and coachees. Although the coaches followed the same process, each had the flexibility to tailor coaching content to meet the specific needs and circumstances of their coachees.

Summary of findings

This research has provided some support for the conclusion that executive coaching has a beneficial impact on executives. Specifically, the career satisfaction of coachee participants in this study was improved to a greater degree than their peers as a result of executive coaching.

Coach characteristics

In relation to coach professional characteristics, academic background in psychology was found to be positively related to executive coaching effectiveness as reflected in greater improvements in self awareness and job performance reported by the direct supervisor of the coachee. Further, examination of coach personal characteristics indicated coach credibility was positively related to executive coaching effectiveness as reflected in higher mean scores in coachee self reported job performance.

Coach-coachee match

As executive coaching is a one-to-one intervention, it is not surprising that the coach-coachee match was found to impact executive coaching effectiveness. First, gender similarity was positively related to executive coaching effectiveness as reflected in improvement in coachee self awareness, and supervisory-rated task performance. Second, coach-coachee interpersonal comfort reported by the coach moderated the relationship between gender similarity and executive coaching effectiveness. Lastly, perceived similarity reported by the coach was positively related to job performance as reported by direct supervisor and supervisory-rated task performance.

Coachee characteristics

In relation to coachee characteristics, coachee feedback receptivity was positively related to



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coachee job performance both self reported, and as reported by the direct supervisor. In addition, feedback receptivity moderated the relationship between coachee learning goal orientation and executive coaching effectiveness as reflected in an improvement in coachee job affective commitment. Coachee pre-training motivation was also positively related to executive coaching effectiveness as evidenced in greater improvement in coachee self-reported job performance. Finally, coachee developmental self-efficacy was positively related to executive coaching effectiveness as expressed in improvement in coachee self-reported job performance.

Proximal work-group climate for coaching transfer

Although executive coaching is a person-centered individualised approach, it appears that the organisation plays a key role in achieving successful coaching outcomes. Subordinate and job support were positively related to coachee feedback receptivity and pre-training motivation. These findings are important as both coachee feedback receptivity and pre-training motivation were found to be positively related to executive coaching effectiveness.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for all the constituents of a corporate executive coaching initiative: the coachee, the coach, and the organisation itself.

Implications for Coachees

Executives (coachees) can use the study's findings to be more informed consumers of executive coaching services. This will assist executives in developing clearer expectations regarding their role in the executive coaching process and its outcomes. Given the ubiquity of executive coaching in large organisations and the ongoing debate about the role of psychology in coaching, there is a practical utility in understanding the differences between coaches with, and without, a background in psychology. As the findings of the study provided some, but not conclusive, confirmation that one type of coach was superior to another, there remains a need for more research in this area. According to the study's findings, coachee characteristics were found to

play a key role in executive coaching effectiveness. More specifically, coachee feedback receptivity, developmental self-efficacy, learning goal orientation, and pre-training motivation were found to be positively related to executive coaching effectiveness. Based on these findings, it is anticipated that organizations would consider their executives' personal characteristics when selecting candidates into future executive coaching programs.

Implications for Coaches

The present research provides important empirical evidence of the relationship between the academic background of executive coaches and executive coaching effectiveness. For a significant proportion of coaches, experience in psychology is not linked with formal training in coaching. It appears that the majority of coaches may have little knowledge, experience, or guidance for dealing with personal issues that may arise during the course of an executive coaching engagement.

The findings of the current study provided some, but not conclusive, confirmation that coaches with an academic background in psychology were superior to coaches without such a background in achieving improvement in coachee self-awareness and job performance as reported by the direct supervisor.

In addition, the findings of this research emphasise the importance of a strong coach-coachee alliance for producing positive outcomes, namely improvement in self-awareness and in job performance. Specifically, the study highlights gender and perceived similarity as key contributors to a coach-coachee "fit". These findings can help guide organizations in making suitable matches between executives and coaches.

The study's findings highlighted another key component of an effective executive coaching intervention: coach credibility. Coach credibility was found to be positively related to improvement in self-reported job performance. It appears that coach credibility encourages the coachee to positively accept and respond to executive coaching interventions, and better leverages his/her coaching experience by exploring and taking risks in applying new behaviours or adopting different perspectives.

The findings in relation to the coach characteristics have implications for coaching training organizations that prepare people to coach.

Programs could build upon their students' ability to accelerate the building of credibility. Students in coaching programs would also benefit from advice on how to engage, leverage, and invest the coachee's stakeholders (e.g., supervisor, peers) in the executive coaching process in order to maximise its impact.

Implications for Organisations

The lack of a strong and well-defined theoretical foundation for executive coaching as a profession and field of study has created some confusion and disquiet about what organisations should be looking for when appointing executive coaches. As a result of this situation, and possibly even as a contributing factor, very few organisations articulate clear behavioural objectives of executive coaching up front, nor do they adequately measure their executive coaching results.

For organisations, the study findings highlight the importance of establishing stringent quality criteria in the selection of their executive coaches. Additionally, buyers of executive coaching services need to ensure that they have a shared understanding of what coach credibility means in the eyes of the executives within the organisation. Accordingly, this study helps organisations to design, deliver, and evaluate their executive coaching initiatives in a strategic and systematic fashion. Providing an empirical and verifiable model of executive coaching effectiveness should assist organizations in determining the dollar value of the service based on its impact on individual and organizational outcomes. ■

** For more information about this study contact Gil Bozer below.*

Dr Gil Bozer a lecturer at the Human Resources Department, Sapir Academic College has recently completed his PhD at Monash University, Australia focusing on the key determinants of executive coaching effectiveness and their relationships with coaching outcomes. Gil can be contacted at gilbotzer@gmail.com

Prof. James C. Sarros is Professor of Management, Monash University, Australia. His key research areas are executive leadership, succession planning, corporate culture and character, and strategic planning.



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