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Executive Coaching: A Review and Agenda for Future Research[†]

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The use of executive coaching as a developmental intervention for managers has increased dramatically during the past decade. Consequently, there has been a burgeoning practitioner literature on the topic of executive coaching. Empirical research on executive coaching, however, has lagged far behind, and theoretical work on the processes underlying effective coaching has been limited. In this review, we investigate the construct of executive coaching and examine how coaches' professional training, client characteristics, and types of coaching impact the effectiveness of this intervention. The article concludes with an agenda for future research on this emerging form of management development.

Keywords: *executive coaching; executives; coaching; developmental relationships*

Although executive coaching has been defined in a variety of ways by different authors, researchers typically define it as a short- to medium-term relationship between an executive and a consultant with the purpose of improving an executive's work effectiveness (Douglas & McCauley, 1999; Feldman, 2001). In the past decade, the prevalence of executive coaching in corporations has risen dramatically as an alternative to conventional executive training (Filipczak, 1998; Kilburg, 1996; Quick & Macik-Frey, 2004). Hall, Otazo, and Hollenbeck (1999) estimated that there are currently tens of thousands of professionals offering coaching

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services. For instance, the International Coaching Federation, a Washington, D.C.–based association of personal and business coaches, has seen its membership double to 7,000 members in 33 countries within a 2-year period (Johnson, 2004). Companies like Motorola, IBM, and Bristol-Myers Squibb routinely offer coaching as part of their executive development programs (Elder & Skinner, 2002; MacRae, 2002).

A growing body of literature has emerged on executive coaching from the fields of management consulting, training and development, and consulting psychology (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). This literature, largely taking a practitioner perspective, has differentiated executive coaching from other types of helping relationships, illustrated various types of executive coaching relationships, outlined steps of coaching interventions, and proposed potential outcomes associated with successful executive coaching.

Academic research on executive coaching, though, has lagged far behind the practitioner literature. There have been fewer than 20 studies that have investigated executive coaching with systematic qualitative and/or quantitative methods. These studies establish the possibility and plausibility of the potential positive benefits of executive coaching. However, there is very little theoretical research that examines how or why executive coaching should work, when it will be most (or least) successful in changing executives' behaviors, and under which conditions executive coaching will translate into greater organizational effectiveness.

The purpose of this article is to provide directions for future research and theory development in the area of executive coaching. Specifically, the major goals for this review are to: (a) define and differentiate executive coaching from other constructs; (b) identify potential outcomes from executive coaching; (c) integrate multiple theoretical perspectives on how and why the coaching process might work; and (d) identify individual, situational, and organizational variables that may determine the effectiveness of executive coaching. In doing so, we hope to provide a useful agenda for future theoretical and empirical research on coaching relationships.

The Construct of Executive Coaching

Definition

At its broadest level, coaching is generally defined as a “process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective” (Peterson & Hicks, 1995: 41). The notion of coaching as a developmental activity in the management literature is not a new phenomenon. In early studies on managerial roles (Mace & Mahler, 1958; Mintzberg, 1973, 1990, 1994; Yukl, 1994), coaching was primarily viewed as a technique that managers could use to correct *deficiencies* in employees' task performance. More recently, coaching has also come to be viewed as a means of *facilitating learning* and moving executives from excellent performance to *peak performance* (Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999; Evered & Selman, 1989; Feldman, 2001).

Executive coaching per se emerged in the 1990s as an intervention geared specifically to changing the behavior of middle- and senior-level managers. The failure rate among senior executives in corporate America at this time was estimated at 50% (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan,

1994), and many attributed the failures of senior executives to their poor leadership skills rather than to their technical skills (Charan & Colvin, 1999; Dotlich & Cairo, 2003). To help executives develop new leadership competencies, prepare for advancement, or cope with organizational change, companies (and even some executives themselves) began contracting with outside consultants to receive coaching (Greco, 2001; Niemes, 2002).

In the management literature, Feldman (2001) identified the three key elements of executive coaching relationships as follows: (a) It consists of one-on-one counseling about work-related issues; (b) it involves the use of 360-degree feedback on executives' strengths and weaknesses as its starting point; and (c) its purpose is to improve managers' effectiveness in their current positions. Hall et al. (1999) similarly emphasized the importance of providing feedback to executives and noted how infrequently executives receive critical feedback about their personal and professional development. These elements are similar to those identified in the consulting psychology literature (Kilburg, 1996).

We should note that, in several organizations, managers have been encouraged to coach their subordinates as part of their job responsibilities. Although we recognize coaching may be a legitimate *part* of a manager's job, here we will focus on consultants whose *exclusive* responsibility is client coaching and who have *no formal authority* over clients.

The Distinctiveness of Executive Coaching

The literature on executive coaching has differentiated this dyadic relationship from several other forms of helping relationships. Below, we consider its conceptual distinctiveness and overlap with advising, career counseling, mentoring, and therapy.

An *adviser* is an individual who shares his or her business acumen or functional expertise with executives to assist them in planning or executing specific organizational actions. Advising relationships typically focus on strategic or operational issues in the organization, such as how to take a company public (Sperry, 1993). In contrast, executive coaches do not assume the role of technical expert, are not contracted for traditional business consulting, and do not provide recommendations on specific business initiatives (Miller & Hart, 2001).

Career counseling is used to help individuals assess their strengths and weaknesses in order to find the right job for them in the *external* labor market. Executive coaching, on the other hand, focuses on helping executives improve their performance on their *current* jobs (Feldman, 2001; Greco, 2001). Also, career counseling involves a more comprehensive examination of executives' job preferences, values, interests, and personal life concerns, while coaching focuses exclusively on executives' work-related skills and abilities (Feldman, 2001). Thus, career counseling typically involves the evaluation of job opportunities both within and outside the current organization, while the primary purpose of executive coaching is to enhance the individual's effectiveness in the current organization (Kilburg, 2000).

A *mentor* typically refers to a senior, more experienced employee who helps a younger, less experienced employee become proficient in his or her role in the organization (Kram, 1985). Mentoring relationships tend to be initiated informally through mutual attraction and can last up to 5 years; often these relationships get redefined into collegial relationships after the protégé has become successful in his or her position (Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003).

Effective mentoring relationships, then, are characterized by high levels of career development, social support, and effective role modeling and are typically most intense at the earliest stages of one's career (Donaldson, Ensher, & Grant-Vallone, 2000). In contrast, executive coaching relationships are usually shorter in duration (typically 6-18 months) and are formally contracted rather than informally developed. Moreover, while mentors are often members of the same organization, executive coaches are usually outsiders (Feldman, 2001; Hall et al., 1999; Hay Group Inc., 2001). Executive coaching does not require the development of close, personal bonds; interactions between coaches and executives tend to be more formal and structured in nature (Sperry, 1993). In addition, executive coaching is more likely to occur at midcareer rather than in early career.

Therapy is conducted by licensed psychologists who clinically treat executives for their emotional and behavioral problems (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). Its major focus is to identify the root causes of emotional distress and help individuals develop more effective ways of dealing with that distress (Williams, 2003). On the other hand, the goal of executive coaching is to change behaviors in the short run, not emotions in the long run (Feldman, 2001; Palmer, 2003). In addition, therapy is geared most often to those with some diagnosable pathology, while coaching is geared to individuals who are primarily healthy (Williams, 2003). Also, the duration of a therapeutic relationship is dependent on the client's progress in working through issues, while time limits and goals are explicitly specified in executive coaching relationships (Sperry, 1993).

Coaches and Their Backgrounds

The distinctiveness of executive coaching from other types of developmental or helping relationships raises an important issue: Who is best qualified to be an executive coach? Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson (2001) highlighted two perspectives in the psychology literature regarding the type of coaching expertise considered critical for effectiveness with executives.

Some scholars and practitioners argue that psychologists are the most qualified to conduct executive coaching because of their particular training in psychological dynamics and adult development, their understanding of personality and performance assessment, and their skills in building and maintaining confidential and trusting relationships with clients (Brotman, Liberi, & Wasylshyn, 1998; Kilburg, 1996; Sperry, 1996). However, other authors have emphasized the importance of coaches being knowledgeable about the business context in which executives operate (Diedrich & Kilburg, 2001). This perspective views an understanding of leadership, business disciplines, management principles, and organizational politics as the critical core competency of executive coaches (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Levinson, 1996; Saporito, 1996; Tobias, 1996).

Concerns have been raised by the International Coaching Federation (ICF) regarding the qualifications of executive coaches. Executive coaching is currently an unregulated field, and anyone can label himself or herself an executive coach (Judge & Cowell, 1997). Because of the increased demand for coaching by organizations and managers, professionals from a wide array of functional backgrounds (e.g., management consulting, training, law, sports, teaching,

and psychology) have added executive coaching to their repertoire of services (Brotman et al., 1998). At the 4th International Executive Coaching Summit in 2002, 71 experienced executive coaches met to discuss the status of the profession of executive coaching and issued a white paper on the important issues facing the profession (cf. Sanson, Arond-Thomas, & Guilday, 2003). One critical issue was the credentialing of executive coaches and developing certification requirements that would distinguish executive coaches from personal/life coaches. Currently, there are certificate programs available in the United States and Europe for people who want to train to become executive coaches. However, executive coaching still remains an unregulated profession with no licensing or required designation for coaches to achieve or maintain (Brotman et al., 1998).

Only two studies have directly explored demographic backgrounds of executive coaches. Judge and Cowell (1997) conducted a survey of 60 executive coaches and found that educational backgrounds varied greatly in their sample. Forty-five percent of the respondents reported having Ph.D.s, and 90% had master's degrees in business or the social sciences. Eighty percent of the coaches studied were between 35 and 55 years of age, with an average of 24 years of work experience. Only 7% of the coaches were employed by organizations to be internal coaches to employees; the remaining 93% were employed by consulting practice firms or self-employed.

A second study that directly explored demographic and background information of coaches was sponsored by ICF and reported on their Web site (Gale, Liljenstrand, Pardieu, & Nebeker, 2002). However, this study included a wide range of professionals identifying themselves as coaches (e.g., personal coaches, business coaches, life coaches), not just executive coaches. Women comprised 71% of the survey sample. Seventy-two percent of the participants were between the ages of 41 and 60. Coaches who affiliate with the title of "executive coach" were on average 49 years old.

Two other studies have examined coaches' credentials and perceptions of effective coaches. Wasylyshyn (2003), a consulting psychologist, published the results of a survey of 87 executive coaching clients regarding their opinions of important credentials for executive coaches. The criteria most frequently cited were: graduate training in psychology; experience in, or understanding of, business; established reputation as a coach; listening skills; and professionalism (i.e., intelligence, integrity/honesty, confidentiality, objectivity).

Garman, Whiston, and Zlatoper (2000) looked at the coaching background from the perspective of media perceptions. Seventy-two articles from the popular press and academic literature were content analyzed. The results of the study showed that less than one third of the articles mentioned training in psychology in executive coaching roles. The authors concluded that psychology training is neither regularly nor universally recognized as important or relevant to the practice of executive coaching.

The Executive Clients

Although the literature has described the recipients of executive coaching services as managers with a high level of authority and responsibility in an organization (Kilburg, 1996), there has been little research to date on the background of recipients of coaching services (Kampa-

Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). In Judge and Cowell's (1997) study, recipients of executive coaching services were typically senior- to mid-level managers, with half of the participants in the CEO position or one level below the CEO. This study also found that there were professionals other than executives, including lawyers, doctors, architects, and entrepreneurs of growing businesses, who engaged the services of executive coaches to help them achieve personal and professional goals. In addition, Judge and Cowell (1997) found that about half of the participants in their study initiated the coaching intervention, while the other half reported that the coaching was prompted by their organization.

In general, the literature has shown that recipients of executive coaching services typically fall into two categories: (a) executives who have performed highly in the past but whose behaviors are interfering with, or not sufficient for, current job requirements, and (b) managers who have been targeted for advancement to the executive level but are missing some specific skills (London, 2002). An article in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2000 confirmed Judge and Cowell's findings that there is a growing, third category of professionals seeking the services of executive coaches, namely, entrepreneurs turning to executive coaches for advice on how to lead and how to handle rapid growth in their businesses (De Lisser, 2000).

Outcomes of Executive Coaching

The presumed outcomes of executive coaching are changes in managerial behaviors with presumed increases in organizational effectiveness. However, rigorous empirical investigations of the outcomes associated with executive coaching are far outnumbered by practitioner articles purporting benefits associated with executive coaching. In fairness, practitioners have also started to express concerns regarding the lack of information on measurement of outcomes. A survey commissioned by Personnel Decisions International found that fewer than 10% of organizations measure the impact of coaching (Bolch, 2001). The Web-based survey of 1,338 coaches by Gale and colleagues (2002) indicated that the evaluations that coaches receive from their clients are mainly subjective in nature and are not empirically valid measures of coaches' actual effectiveness. In this particular survey, 16% of coaches actually reported that they never followed up with their clients.

Studies on outcomes of executive coaching have been conducted by consulting organizations, practicing coaches, and academics. We apply Kirkpatrick's (1996) framework of evaluating training interventions to the executive coaching literature to summarize what we know about the effectiveness of executive coaching as a development intervention for top managers. These four levels of evaluation are: (a) affective reactions to the coaching experience, (b) learning, (c) behavior changes, and (d) organizational results. *Affective reactions* are measures of how participants feel about the coaching experience. *Learning* outcomes tap the amount of knowledge acquired or skills improved as a result of coaching. *Behavior* outcomes measure the extent to which participants change their on-the-job behaviors after being coached. Last, *organizational results* refer to the effects of training on productivity, quality, and/or the achievement of organizational objectives. Because most studies of outcomes of executive coaching include multiple levels of evaluation, we review these studies in order of publication and highlight the various combinations of outcomes assessed in each study.

One of the initial empirical studies on outcomes of executive coaching was a thesis by Gegner (1997). Interviews were conducted with 25 executives to obtain information on their learning experience from being coached. Eighty-four percent of the executives reported positive feelings about their involvement in coaching. Eight executives (32%) reported improvement in their performance, ranging from 10% to 100%. All 25 of the executives reported learning more about themselves or gaining new skills as the most valuable outcome from the coaching process. In addition, all the executives interviewed indicated that coaching had positively affected their personal lives (e.g., improving their interactions with people, helping them prioritize and make decisions about how they use their time). Also, 24% noted they had experienced greater personal growth as well, such as becoming more open to change and having greater self-confidence.

Olivero, Bane, and Kopelman (1997) examined executive coaching as a transfer-of-learning tool. The authors conducted an action research project with 31 managers in the public sector; these participants received executive coaching for 2 months on developing new managerial skills, implementing new measurement and control systems, and executing a required work project that would enhance work unit performance. The success of the coaching was evaluated by affective reactions and organizational results. Qualitative comments were collected from the participants and coaches, and both groups reported favorable reactions to the coaching process. To determine organizational results, participants were asked to retrieve and analyze data on their productivity levels before training, after training but before coaching, and after coaching. The average increase in productivity after training alone was 22.4% and after training and coaching was 88%. Unfortunately, the productivity figures for the period before training were actually collected after training so participants were asked to recall that information after they had been influenced by the training program.

Hall and colleagues (1999) conducted interviews with 75 executives in *Fortune* 100 companies who were participating in executive coaching at the time of the study. The results of their qualitative inquiry demonstrated evidence of positive affective reactions, self-reported learning, and self-reported change in behaviors because of the coaching experience. Executives in the sample most frequently rated the overall effectiveness of their coaching experience as very satisfactory (coded 4 on a 5-point Likert-type scale of satisfaction). Executives experienced several types of learning as a result of the coaching experience. Some of the learning had to do with developing new attitudes or perspectives, such as increased self-confidence, self-awareness, and sensitivity to others. Other major types of learning were becoming more adaptable and flexible in relationships with others and increasing their on-the-job performance.

Kampa-Kokesch's (2001) study examined whether executive coaching had an impact on transformation and transactional styles of leadership of 50 executives. She compared leadership ratings of 13 executives in the early stages of executive coaching (less than 2 months into the relationship) with that of 37 executives in the later stages of executive coaching. The instrument used to measure leadership was the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire x 5 (short form); only one significant difference was found in one of the transactional leadership scales.

A study sponsored by a consulting firm attempted to quantify the business outcomes of executive coaching and used Kirkpatrick's (1996) aforementioned typology of outcomes to assess coaching effectiveness (McGovern et al., 2001). One hundred executives who had com-

pleted a coaching program with the consulting firm were interviewed and, where possible, immediate supervisors or human resource representatives in the executives' organizations ("stakeholders") were surveyed about the program's effectiveness as well. Although ambitious in its goals, this study illustrates some of the problems that have bedeviled evaluation of executive coaching interventions.

For example, to assess learning, the study asked participants and stakeholders to identify their top two development priorities. Unfortunately, this measure of learning represents desired learning but not actual changes in knowledge or skills themselves. Similarly, executives were asked to estimate the return on investment in dollars from the coaching program and to rate its value compared to the money and time invested. Seventy-five percent of the full sample indicated that the value of coaching was "considerably greater" or "far greater" than the money and time invested, but the basis of these estimates was not made clear.

Several other studies have used a self-report methodology to investigate coaching effectiveness. They all indicate positive results, but their sample sizes are quite small. In 2001, MetrixGlobal LLC, a professional services firm, released the results of a study that was sponsored by a *Fortune* 500 firm to determine the business benefits and return on investment for an executive coaching program (Anderson, 2001). The target population for the study was 43 leadership development participants who had been identified as potential leaders and executives. More than three quarters (77%) of the respondents indicated that coaching had a significant or very significant impact on at least one of nine business measures. In a survey of 87 executives, Wasylyshyn (2003) asked participants to cite indications that their coaching experiences were successful. Sixty-three percent indicated that they experienced sustained behavior change (e.g., became better at building relationships), 48% reported increased self-awareness and understanding, and 45% cited that they were more effective leaders (e.g., increased optimism, better confidence and motivational ability). In a study of 24 executive directors of nonprofit firms, participants also self-reported positive reactions to coaching, increased learning, and more effective behaviors at work (CompassPoint, 2003).

Two recent studies of coaching have used more rigorous designs. Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas, and Kucine (2003) used a quasi-experimental pre/post control group design to study the impact of executive coaching on improvement in multisource ratings over a 1-year period. The participants in the study were 1,361 senior managers in a large, global corporation. All of the participants had received multisource feedback (i.e., ratings from peers, supervisors, and direct reports) about their performance as managers. From this group, 404 worked with an external executive coach. Results from the study indicated that managers who worked with an executive coach were more likely than other managers to set specific goals, to solicit ideas for improvement from their supervisors, and to receive improved ratings from direct reports and supervisors 1 year later.

A recent study by Sue-Chan and Latham (2004) examined the relative effectiveness of different kinds of coaches on the performance of participants in Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) programs. Although these participants and coaches do not represent the typical individuals engaged in executive coaching, we chose to include this study in our review because of the recent growth in the use of executive coaching in business schools. In addition, participants in MBA and EMBA pro-

grams frequently have extensive work experience and, in many ways, view the entire MBA program as an executive development activity.

In their first sample of 30 MBA students at a Canadian university, Sue-Chan and Latham (2004) found that external coaches were more effective in bringing about performance changes in teamwork behaviors than peer coaches. A second sample of 23 experienced managers in an EMBA program at an Australian university was used to verify the findings from the first sample. However, in this study, grade earned in a course on human resource development and satisfaction with the coaching process were selected as outcomes. Results revealed that the EMBA students who were assigned external coaches earned a significantly higher grade than those who were assigned peer coaches and were also more satisfied with their coaching sessions. In both samples, credibility of the coach was also assessed and found to be higher for external coaches than peer coaches.

Phases of the Coaching Relationship

Although there may be some variance in how coaches tailor the process to meet the unique needs of executive clients, the literature highlights a sequence of four major activities that occur in coaching relationships: data gathering, feedback, implementation of the intervention (coaching), and evaluation.

Data Gathering

The first phase of the executive coaching relationship typically focuses on setting the foundation for the coaching relationship and defining the executive's developmental goals (Saporito, 1996). There are two major steps in this phase. The first step involves establishing a relationship with the executive, which involves sharing mutual expectations of the coaching relationship and discussing the parameters of the relationship (e.g., confidentiality, norms of behaviors in coaching sessions, etc.) (Feldman, 2001). In the second step, the coach gathers data about the executive and the organization. It is in this stage that the coach may obtain 360-degree feedback through the use of surveys or interviews. At this stage, coaches may also conduct assessments of executives' personality, leadership style, values, and attitudes. Data may be obtained from the executive, personnel records, members of the top management team, organizational employees, and/or board directors (Kilburg, 2000; Winum, 1995). Information gathering may include work issues (e.g., politics and interpersonal relationships) and nonwork issues (e.g., family and personal goals) (London, 2002).

Feedback

In this phase, the coach presents the results of the data collection to the executive client. The objective of this phase is to assist the executive in digesting the feedback and to facilitate the discussion of the executive's strengths and areas for improvement in job performance. The coach may have to help the client overcome resistance to feedback and analyze whether

change is supported by organizational goals and culture (London, 2002). The feedback sessions may range from 2 to 3 hours to 2 or 3 days; they may be limited to the client or may include key stakeholders in the organization (Sztucinski, 2001). At the end of this phase, the coach and executive often identify together the specific behavioral objectives of the coaching intervention.

Periodic Coaching Sessions

In this third phase, coaches work with clients in structured sessions to monitor and reinforce developmental activities, to modify developmental plans, and to discuss ways of overcoming barriers to change (Feldman, 2001). The executive's superior or the human resources director may be included in some of the sessions to review progress and obtain support for developmental activities (Tobias, 1996; Winum, 1995). Because coaches come from very different backgrounds and have very different approaches to the coaching process (see below), the approach to these sessions is often nonstandardized and idiosyncratic.

Evaluation

Once the regular coaching sessions conclude, coaches may follow up with executives to assess the impact of the coaching relationship. Coaches may collect data from clients on their learning experiences and how coaching affected their effectiveness in the organization (London, 2003). If the coach's services are paid for by the organization, the human resources department may conduct an independent evaluation of the consultant's effectiveness with the executive or assess whether the executive's performance has improved since the coaching relationship terminated.

Approaches to the Coaching Process

Although the phases of the coaching relationship are fairly standard across coaches, the approaches taken by coaches to induce changes in executives' behavior vary widely depending on their own academic backgrounds and intellectual traditions. There are five major approaches to executive coaching interventions that have been identified recently by Peltier (2001): psychodynamic, behaviorist, person-centered, cognitive therapeutic, and system-oriented. Each of these approaches is discussed in more detail below; a summary of these approaches appears in Table 1.

Psychodynamic Approach

Individuals often have an idealized notion of who and what they are in the world of work and a distorted sense of how well (or poorly) they perform (Peltier, 2001). In this approach, psychoanalysis is used to help executives explore unconscious thoughts and to increase their understanding of how they think, feel, and react at work. Discussions of defense mechanisms

Table 1
Summary of Coaching Approaches^a

Approach to Coaching	Focus	Elements of Intervention	Criteria for Evaluation
Psychodynamic approach	Client's unconscious thoughts and internal psychological states	Psychoanalysis—uncovering gap between ideal “ego” and reality; defense mechanisms; transference; countertransference; family dynamics	Increased self-awareness of thoughts, feelings, and reactions
Behaviorist approach	Client's observable behaviors	Behavioral principles—intrinsic and extrinsic reinforcement; primary and secondary reinforcement; positive and negative reinforcement; punishment	Increased understanding of antecedents and consequences of behavior; behavior change
Person-centered approach	Client's self-understanding without direct intervention by coach	Creating a trusting and empathic therapeutic relationship	Personal growth and change
Cognitive therapy approach	Client's conscious thinking	Cognitive therapy—identification of distorted thinking and irrational thoughts	New thinking that leads to positive feelings and effective behavior
Systems-oriented approach	Individual, group, and organizational influences on client's behavior	Data gathering and analysis of client's interactions with other individuals; requirements of role, group, and intergroup relations; direct intervention within the organization	Improved job, group, and organizational effectiveness

a. Summary based on approaches discussed in Peltier (2001).

that distort executives' perceptions of themselves and others, ways executive clients handicap themselves at work, and methods for breaking dysfunctional relationships or cycles of behavior are important elements in this approach.

Behaviorist Approach

The focus in this kind of coaching process is on observable behaviors rather than internal psychological states (Bandura, 1977). Coaches help clients understand behavioral principles (e.g., positive and negative reinforcement, punishment, intrinsic and extrinsic reinforcement) so that clients can be more effective in motivating and communicating with others at work. Coaches work with clients to help them understand the environmental cues that stimulate their best (or worst) performance at work; coaches also help executive clients understand how their own behaviors trigger favorable or unfavorable reactions from colleagues.

Person-Centered Approach

The person-centered approach (Rogers & Wood, 1974) focuses more on getting executives to take personal responsibility for what happens to them at work rather than attributing both

bad luck and good fortune to external causes. Coaches accomplish this by developing empathic relationships with executives and helping them see themselves as others see them and as they see themselves. This approach differs from other coaching perspectives in that the coach does not diagnose, label, or give specific advice to the client. Instead, the coach creates a climate where the executive will discover for himself or herself what changes are needed and the will to initiate those changes (Peltier, 2001).

Cognitive Therapy Approach

This approach is based on the premise from cognitive psychology that people can learn to notice and change their own thoughts (Peltier, 2001). With a cognitive therapy approach, coaches explore with executives what thoughts “set off” their emotions at work, often in unproductive ways. Then, rather than focusing on how to change their emotional reactions, coaches help the executives develop techniques for blocking negative thoughts or rechanneling them in more constructive ways.

Systems-Oriented Approach

With this approach, the coach assumes that executives’ behavior is not only the result of intrapsychic forces but is also a response to the multiple work demands (often inconsistent, unrealistic, or vague in nature) put on executives by various stakeholder groups. In other words, the executive’s behavior can only be understood in the context of organizational dynamics (Day & O’Connor, 2003; Peltier, 2001). Using Alderfer’s (1986) embedded intergroup relations theory, Orenstein (2002) advocated a coaching approach that examines within-person, group-level, and organizational-level influences on executives’ performance. In this approach, then, the coach tries to become knowledgeable about the *total* organizational system so he or she can help the executive develop more effective ways of dealing with it. This is the most complex and comprehensive approach to coaching because the foci of change not only include the specific individual but other members of the work group or top management team, too.

Agenda for Future Research

The review of the literature above has highlighted the major areas of inquiry that have emerged on the phenomenon of executive coaching in organizations. In this final section of the article, we offer directions for future research within the major domain areas that were presented above.

Differences Between Coaching and Other Developmental Relationships

Theoretically, we know that executive coaching can be distinguished from business advising, career counseling, mentoring, and clinical therapy. However, what we do not know is the

extent to which there are clear distinctions among these relationships in practice. Although “pure” coaching is clearly different from “pure” advising in theory, in practice, coaching can blend into other types of developmental relationships. For example, although coaches are typically not required to provide specific technical expertise to executives, they are often asked to do so by their clients.

Rather than putting more energy into delineating the conceptual distinctions between coaching and other types of developmental relationships, it might be more critical at this point to focus on the constellations and patterns of coaching behaviors that typically co-occur and/or are typically most helpful to clients. In addition, more research is needed on relationships where coaches are contracted to provide multiple and diverse services, such as enhancing clients’ business skills and helping them redefine their career goals. In other words, some of the research discourse on coaching needs to shift to the relative effectiveness of various *kinds* of coaching relationships.

Another important future research question is whether there are differences between coaches employed by executives themselves and those hired by organizations, either in terms of professional backgrounds or effectiveness. Coaches contracted by individual executives may be more likely to serve multiple roles and may actually be hired purposefully for their ability to provide a particular array of professional services. Consequently, executives with multiple needs and limited time to search for help may gravitate toward “one-stop shop” coaches; these relationships may also be longer in duration than the prototypical executive coaching engagement. In contrast, organizations are responsible for demonstrating a return on investment from their coaching expenses. Hence, we would expect that the role and scope of organization-hired coaches may be more narrowly defined, focused only on professional goals, and be more short-term in nature. Future research studies, then, need to ensure that they collect data on whether the coaching is paid for by the employee or the organization and the resulting scope and scale of coaching services provided.

Coaches and Their Backgrounds

There have been no empirical tests to determine if specific skills or backgrounds make any actual difference in the effectiveness of coaches (Kampa & White, 2002). Some of the existing research suggests that background characteristics of the coach (such as age, education, and work experience) may influence the perceived credibility of the coach and clients’ openness to being coached, but the extant research findings do not go much further than this.

One issue that warrants more research is the selection of coaches themselves by organizations. How do organizations identify a feasible set of coaches and then choose among them? What coach attributes and backgrounds make them particularly desirable to organizations? Second, how do organizations try to match specific coaches to specific clients? Do they use an implicit “similarity” demographic algorithm (men with men, women with women) or an implicit “style” algorithm (nurturing coaches with clients perceived to need a great deal of support)? Are the consequences of mismatches of coaches and clients similar to those seen in the mentoring literature (Ragins, 1997)?

Another direction for future research is the identification of specific dispositional variables and specific skills that may influence coaches' effectiveness. For instance, are there certain dispositional traits that particularly enhance coaches' effectiveness (e.g., emotional intelligence)? Do certain types of professional development or education enhance coaching effectiveness more than others? For example, does some type of degree in psychology positively affect coaching skills, or can effective coaching be taught more quickly and efficiently in shorter training programs? The coaches' own leadership styles—or the type of leadership style the organization wants its executives to display—may also influence the selection and effectiveness of executive coaches.

Because the costs of coaching continue to rise (Johnson, 2004), more and more organizations are turning to internal coaches who, as a formal part of their job duties, coach managers and executives within the firm itself (Frisch, 2001). What kinds of profiles (in terms of dispositions, past experiences, and skills) are instrumental in helping internal coaches succeed? Also, as more and more business schools are using external coaches to work with full-time MBA students, what matching processes are being used in such large-scale coaching programs, and how effective is coaching in a "jobless" context?

Executive Clients

We know very little right now about the specific coaching needs of executive clients. The major categories that have been identified are broad in nature, such as "leadership skills" and "managerial effectiveness" (Judge & Cowell, 1997). Thus, studies that explore the range and variety of clients' developmental needs would make a useful contribution to the literature. In addition, given the expansion of coaching into the MBA population, it would be useful to study the effects of clients' age and career stage on coaching effectiveness as well as their differential expectations of coaches' services.

An especially important direction for future research is identifying the dispositional variables that make executives more (or less) receptive to coaching. Recently, Van Velsor and Guthrie (1998) identified some cognitive abilities that may predict positive coaching experiences, such as the ability to recognize when existing behavior patterns are no longer effective and the ability to identify opportunities for learning new skills. In addition, they suggest several personality traits (e.g., self-esteem, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and the need for achievement) that may positively influence the ability to learn from developmental experiences. Along similar lines, the work of London (2002) and Goleman (1998) suggested that a high feedback orientation and emotional intelligence, respectively, may also influence the extent to which a client is able to benefit from a professional coaching relationship.

Outcomes of Coaching

There are only a handful of extant studies that empirically examine the outcomes of coaching relationships. Within this set, the bias has been to use short-term affective reactions as outcomes most often, with client learning, behavioral changes, and organizational outcomes rarely used as criterion variables. To improve our understanding of whether these professional

coaching relationships really make a difference, though, much more rigorous research is needed. In particular, coaching research needs to use pre/post designs in which there are reliable and valid measures of pre- and post-coaching client performance. In addition, the use of comparison groups or control groups are needed to investigate the relative effectiveness of coaching to other types of developmental relationships (e.g., mentoring) or to no developmental relationship at all.

A particularly difficult issue to address is whether coaching has a tangible effect on *organizational* effectiveness. It is possible that coaching is too many causal links away from financial results to demonstrate direct and significant relationships. However, it might make more sense to consider group-level results (such as post-coaching 360-degree feedback or group productivity) as alternatives in this regard. Such strategies would also have the benefit of using multisource data rather than relying exclusively on self-reports by clients.

Depending on the type of coaching provided and the type of sample, there are other outcomes of coaching that might be considered. In the case of mid-level and senior executives, subsequent performance evaluations and pay raises might be potentially interesting criterion variables. In the case of early-career managers, success in the job search process and getting promotions could be helpful benchmarks. In the case of the “adviser” model of coaching, we might well expect that the coaching process could be tied to financial indicators; in contrast, where the “therapist” model of coaching is used, career or life satisfaction are more relevant criteria to employ. Thus, future research on criteria needs to consider not only using more outcomes of coaching but also more appropriate outcomes for the types of coaching provided and the types of client samples.

Another issue relevant to coaching outcomes that needs greater research is the additive or interactive effects of coaching with other developmental activities. Can coaching work well without some type of initial feedback program? Can the effects of coaching be enhanced by more formal training programs or different kinds of performance appraisal systems?

Phases of the Coaching Relationship

The current literature on the phases of the coaching relationship is predominantly from the perspective of the coaching consultant and is often framed in terms of a how-to guide. There are a variety of ways future research on this topic can proceed.

Of particular importance here is the integration of the coaching literature with the 360-degree feedback literature (London, 2002, 2003). As noted earlier, many coaching relationships begin with some type of feedback experience, so that enhancing the usefulness of the 360-degree feedback is an important foundation for successful coaching. For example, Smither and colleagues (2003) suggested that the extent of disclosure of feedback may influence executives' sense of accountability to respond to the feedback. This suggests, then, that the face-to-face involvement of supervisors or HR officers in the coaching enterprise may have important consequences for coaching success.

Similarly, the contract-setting and expectation-setting steps of the coaching process need more investigation as well. At the broadest level, who is the “client” in an organizationally arranged coaching relationship: the executive or the organization? Whose needs take prece-

dence? What are the boundaries of confidential and nonconfidential information? Are there, or should there be, zones of privacy between coach and client that cannot be breached simply because the organization pays? As an analogy, child psychologists can give the parents of a patient some overall information on the child's progress, but parents are not allowed to have complete and total access to the child's every word simply because they pay the psychologist's bills.

Approaches to the Coaching Process

As highlighted in the literature review, a variety of discipline-related approaches are being used in the coaching process. This presents a major research challenge because it is difficult to compare across processes and theoretical perspectives. That is, coaches typically only use one approach, and clients do not get coached by more than one person. Thus, it may not be possible to explore whether the behaviorist approach, for example, results in more lasting change than the person-centered approach. Instead, researchers should focus on identifying critical elements of the process that characterize functional and effective relationships. As an example, Sztucinski (2001) proposed that client ownership of the process (i.e., the extent to which the client had some choice in participating in the process and a level of control over the process) is critical to a positive coaching experience.

Kilburg (2001) offered a model of coaching effectiveness that involves eight elements: (a) a client's commitment to progressive development, (b) a coach's commitment to the client's development plan, (c) characteristics of the client's problems and issues (frequency, intensity, duration, degree of conflict, and emotionality), (d) structure of the coaching engagement (clarity of agreement, goal specificity, resources committed, roadblocks identified), (e) the amount of trust and empathy in the client-coach relationship, (f) choice of coaching interventions, (g) adherence protocols (e.g., plans for clients to keep appointments and prepare for coaching sessions), and (h) the client's organizational setting (e.g., support for coaching). This framework is an excellent starting point for future researchers in their investigations of the coaching process itself.

Another related direction to pursue in future research is the identification of coaching processes that result in negative outcomes. The literature on mentoring has recently defined and explored the concepts of marginal, dysfunctional, and "toxic" mentoring (Feldman, 1999; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000; Scandura, 1998). What coaching processes, then, might derail rather than advance the careers of executive clients? Some of the problems mentioned in this regard in the practitioner literature are creation of a dependency relationship and opting for quick fixes rather than taking the time to properly diagnose needs and collect data (Berglas, 2002; Noer, 2000). Clients can also contribute to negative coaching outcomes. Clients may resist feedback, lack motivation to change, or may have severe interpersonal problems or psychopathology (London, 2002). Thus, more research is needed on coaching relationships that terminate early to understand the antecedents of failed relationships and the longer-term consequences of poor-quality coaching relationships.

An additional fruitful area for future research on executive coaching would be the identification of moderator variables that affect the coaching process. How do level and type of orga-

nizational support influence the process? Do certain types of organizational climates lend themselves more readily to effective coaching than others? Does the type of coaching process moderate the relationship between coaching and organizational results? For example, an organizational systems approach may strengthen the relationship between coaching and organizational outcomes, while a person-centered approach may result in nonsignificant relationships.

Last, there appear to be some trade-offs between the standardization of coaching (which would improve research rigor) and the desirability of flexibility of coaching approaches (which might improve the helpfulness of the coaching to clients). Within any one organization, these needs are difficult to balance. From a research perspective, then, this suggests the need for aggregation of results from multiple coaches using multiple approaches across a broad array of firms.

Conclusion

On the positive side, executive coaching has emerged as a major developmental tool in industry that has had, at least on the face of it, some positive outcomes for clients and their organizations alike. At the same time, the domain of what coaching encompasses, the activities and responsibilities of coaches, and the kinds of recipients of coaching are now so diverse that it is more difficult to put boundaries around the construct itself and the appropriate range and scope of its associated outcomes.

Perhaps more critically, there is something of a "black box" feel about much of the current coaching literature; we know it can work but often do not know why it works or how it could work even better. Without a stronger theoretical foundation and empirical research, coaching runs the risk of falling into a passing trend that has no advocates because it has no evidence. We are hopeful that the directions for future research provided here will prove helpful to both scholars and practitioners interested in developmental relationships in the workplace.

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