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A systematic review of executive coaching outcomes: Is it the journey or the destination that matters the most?

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we focus on a specific type of personal and professional development practice -executive coaching- and present the most extensive systematic review of executive coaching outcome studies published in peer-reviewed scholarly journals to date. We focus only on coaching provided by external coaches to organizational members. Our purpose is twofold: First, to present and evaluate how executive coaching outcome studies are designed and researched (particularly regarding methodological rigor and context-sensitivity). Secondly, to provide a comprehensive review of what we know about executive coaching outcomes, what are the contextual drivers that affect coaching interventions and what the current gaps in our understanding of coaching practice. On that basis, we discuss and provide a research agenda that might significantly shift the field. We argue that methodological rigor is as important as context-sensitivity in the design of executive coaching outcome studies. We conclude with a discussion of implications for practice.

Introduction

Within less than three decades of existence, the executive coaching (EC) field has rapidly grown to become a multibillion-dollar global market (Armstrong, 2011, p. 183). As of 2012 there were approximately 47,500 professional coaches worldwide with nearly \$2 billion total revenue generated by coaching globally (ICF, 2012). Over time, the nature of coaching interventions has significantly changed. A Harvard Business Review survey of 140 coaches revealed that just over a decade ago coaches were mostly hired to address toxic behaviors in leadership, whereas now they are hired to develop high-potential performers (Coutu et al., 2009, p. 92), including to assist coachees' transition to new roles (Sherpa Coaching Survey, 2014). These developments have affected management education. Courses that foster reflection and personal development are becoming popular in MBA curricula and executive education portfolios (Petriglieri, Wood, & Petriglieri, 2011; Datar, Garvin & Cullen, 2010).

On the other hand, despite its high demand, the coaching industry still seeks professional legitimacy and is seen as a developing field with high variation in coaches' background, coaching practices and quality (Drake, 2008; Ennis et al., 2008; ICF, 2014). An International Coach Federation study found that the profession's biggest obstacles are “un-trained coaches” and confusion in the marketplace about coaching benefits (ICF, 2012). This lack of clarity is also reflected in research.

The field still lacks a “clear and agreed sense” of what “outcomes” should be or how they should be measured (De Haan & Duckworth, 2013, p. 12).

Despite its short history, the EC field has produced a small number of review papers that have sought to survey the research and practice of coaching (e.g. Jones, Woods, & Guillaume, 2016; Grover & Furnham, 2016; Theeboom, Beersma & van Vianen, 2014; Segers, Vloeberghs, Henderickx & Inceoglu, 2011; Ely et al., 2010; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). These papers and our work are in line with recent calls (Arbaugh, 2011; Rynes & Brown, 2011) for more review-type pieces in management education and learning. Building on prior research (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015), we offer a systematic review of all peer-reviewed articles on EC outcomes and discuss the research and practice implications. We argue that although methodological rigor is important and discussed in prior meta-analyses and other review studies on EC outcomes, the social contextual aspects of a coaching intervention have been largely neglected in such reviews. We, therefore, call for a reframing of the future research agenda that takes these into account.

This is the first study that systematically reviews in such depth both the “what” (coaching impact and quality of evidence) and the “how” and “why” (coaching practice and social contextual influences) of EC. The field has been preoccupied with *whether* coaching works and has paid much less attention to *how* it works. It has been mostly focused on

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a micro-level analysis of EC outcomes, which is unsurprising considering the one-on-one nature of coaching practice. EC research has also been indirectly preoccupied with the *meso* level (how changing one's behavior or improving one's leadership skills leads to better interactions with individuals and groups within and outside the organization) and very limitedly with the macro level (organizational benefits from EC). Research questions that link or integrate these (micro, *meso* and macro) levels of contextual analysis warrant the field's attention, too.

What is executive coaching?

In this study, we focus on EC provided by an external to the organization coach typically in collaboration with the organization, excluding all other coaching or consulting practices (e.g. life coaching, internal/managerial coaching, mentoring). EC is a *targeted, purposeful intervention* that helps executives develop and maintain positive change in their personal development and leadership behavior (Grant, 2012a). As such, it is a "process" which involves the partnership of three key stakeholders: the coach, the coachee (i.e. the executive) and the coachee's sponsoring organization (Ennis et al., 2008; Garman, Whiston & Zlatoper, 2000; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Kilburg, 1996; Michelman, 2004; O'Neill, 2007; Witherspoon & White, 1996). It is different from counseling and other therapeutic interventions (Passmore, 2009, p. 272). Unlike psychotherapy, EC does not address mental health problems (De Haan, Duckworth, Birch & Jones, 2013) and unlike counseling and psychotherapy where performance measurement is primarily based on client self-report, EC measurement should relate to the executive's and sponsoring organization's bottom-line performance (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001, p. 211). Most importantly -and different to other interventions- the individual goals of the intervention must "always link back and be subordinated" to strategic organizational objectives (Ennis et al., 2008, p. 23).

The coaching intervention is characterized by high context-sensitivity as a result of the unique mix of environments, characteristics, motivations and attitudes of stakeholders who have direct effects on coaching outcomes. Moreover, the diversity of coaches' backgrounds and training (e.g. business, psychology, sports) brings variations to coaching practices employed (Bono, Purvanova, Towler, & Peterson, 2009). Under such a pluralistic conceptual and practice backdrop, we set out to conduct a systematic review of the field.

Research questions and data collection process

EC outcome research is young. Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson (2001, p. 206) found only seven empirical studies up to 2000 that explored the effectiveness of EC [Foster & Lendl (1996), Garman et al. (2000), Gegner (1997), Hall, Otazo & Hollenbeck (1999), Judge & Cowell (1997), Laske (1999) and Olivero, Bane & Kopelman (1997); later amended in an article erratum by Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson to include Peterson's (1993a) dissertation]. As of 2005, Feldman and Lankau (2005, p. 830) identified "fewer than 20 studies that have investigated executive coaching with systematic qualitative and/or quantitative methods". In a more recent review, Ely et al. (2010) identified 49 leadership coaching evaluation studies (only 20 peer-reviewed, with the rest being non-peer-reviewed, dissertation and conference presentations). We identified 110 peer-reviewed outcome studies on executive coaching, with 32 of them published in journals with an impact factor.

Review studies – including ours- agree that despite the significant growth of EC outcome studies over the last 20 years, the research quality varies. A challenge is that coaching studies are often carried out by practitioners who may pay little attention -if at all- to carefully crafted research procedures. On the other hand, more scholars now use experimental or quasi-experimental methods which are particularly promising for outcome evaluation (e.g. Osatuke, Yanovsky, & Ramsel,

2016; Bozer, Sarros & Santora, 2014; Moen & Federici, 2012a, 2012b; Grant, Green & Rynsaardt, 2010). This echoes the field's call for evidence-based coaching that draws on behavioral and social sciences (Grant, 2003; Stober & Grant, 2006) to increase its credibility and quality of practice (Drake, 2009, p. 12). It also reflects the need to take stock of the wide range of outcome studies produced so far.

Why this review of the field - and why now?

Our focus on EC outcome research complements Segers et al.'s (2011) conceptual effort to understand the coaching industry via a 3-dimensional theoretical framework [coaching agendas (i.e. what); coaches' characteristics (i.e. who); and coaching approaches/schools (i.e. how)]. We believe that improvements in research quality will help the industry to enhance its status as a profession built on evidence-based practices. Our work both complements and is different from prior reviews of EC outcomes. Among the most notable efforts to review the field are the early qualitative reviews by Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson (2001) and Feldman and Lankau (2005) and the more recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses by Ely et al. (2010), Theeboom et al. (2014), Jones et al. (2016) and Grover and Furnham (2016). We next explain how our work is distinctive compared to these and where we make a contribution.

Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson's (2001) and Feldman and Lankau's (2005) early reviews may not be as in-depth regarding the various aspects of EC outcome research as our study and the four other systematic reviews and meta-analyses are. Yet, these were the field's early attempts to take stock of its research. Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson (2001) offered the first, seminal review of this literature. Later, Feldman and Lankau (2005) sought to summarize key outcome studies, research methods and content issues regarding the coaching practice (e.g. coaching relationship and coaching approaches) and proposed a new research agenda. Our review is distinctively different from the field's four main reviews in recent years (Ely et al., 2010; Theeboom, Beersma & van Vianen, 2014; Jones, Woods & Guillaume, 2016; Grover & Furnham, 2016): Ely et al. (2010) systematically reviewed -as we did- both qualitative and quantitative studies, but they focus specifically on leadership coaching evaluation. The authors distinguish between formative and summative evaluations and offer a detailed review of methodologies, data sources, analysis approaches, and evaluation criteria. In comparison, we not only systematically review these elements in all (110) peer-reviewed EC outcome studies published until the end of 2016, but also assess a wider range of variables beyond the evaluation parameters explored by Ely et al. (2010). Moreover, we review studies for their contextual considerations, positive or negative outcomes, how these relate to each coaching stakeholder and whether social context has been accounted for.

Besides broadening our analysis on methodological issues relating to these studies, the focus on *social context* is a key contribution that we make here and one that none of the prior review studies and meta-analyses have effectively explored. For instance, Jones et al.'s (2016, p. 254) statistical meta-analysis sought to take a multi-level approach (individual, team, and organizational outcomes) and explore coaching evaluation criteria at the individual level across affective, cognitive and skill-based outcomes. Their intention was to test whether the reviewed outcome studies converge in that workplace coaching works and at which levels or outcome categories the effects are strongest. By comparison, we do not seek to quantify the effectiveness of EC, but instead shed light on weaknesses of the research designs used and discuss the need for a more context-sensitive research approach. Theeboom et al. (2014) also conducted a statistical meta-analysis of only 18 quantitative studies but focused only at the individual level, providing a numerical value for the positive effect coaching has.

A further distinction in our work is that -unlike Jones et al.'s (2016) and Theeboom et al.'s (2014) meta-analyses and Grover and Furnham's (2016) (qualitative) systematic review- we examine the full set of EC

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