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A grounded theory study of the coachee experience:

The implications for training and practice in coaching psychology

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Key words: executive coaching, grounded theory, coach behaviours, coach training, coaching research study and coachee perceptions.

Abstract

Objectives: This study sought to identify the key behaviours used by executive coaches that were perceived by coachees to have the most favourable impact on their experience and progress.

Design: The study used a semi-structured interview design within a qualitative approach.

Methods: Grounded theory was employed to analyse the transcripts and to build a series of descriptive and conceptual codes.

Results: The results from this small scale study suggest that coachees seek not only particular behaviours but also certain personal attributes in a coach. Key behaviours and attributes identified were common sense confidentiality, being collaborative, setting take-away tasks, balancing challenge and support, stimulating problem-solving, effective communication, staying focused, containing emotions, helping develop alternative perspectives, use of a variety of focusing tools and techniques and use of self as a tool.

Conclusions: The study makes some tentative practical recommendations for those involved in coaching practice and coach training.

Coaching's emerging literature

The term 'coaching' has been applied to a wide range of activities across a diverse range of populations and issues. Activities include resolving relationship difficulties (Jacobsen, 1977); job coaching to help disadvantaged individuals gain and retain employment (Davis, Bates & Cuvo, 1983); careers coaching (Scandura, 1992); peer coaching within education (Scarnati, Kent & MacKenzie, 1993); coaching to improve executive performance (Tobias, 1996); coaching to help people with cognitive difficulties learn new skills (Dalton, Morocco, Tivnan & Mead, 1997); coaching to improve performance in interviews (Maurer, Solamon & Troxtel, 1998); coaching to improve sales performance (Rich, 1998) coaching to support older couples coping with infertility (Scharf & Weinshel, 2000); and coaching applicants to fake malingering on psychological tests (Suhr & Gunstad, 2000). While this is by no means a definitive list, it illustrates the wide range of activities to which 'coaching' has been applied.

The literature on coaching has mushroomed over the past five years, reflecting the growth in coaching practice. The emerging coaching market has been estimated to be worth US \$2billion (Fillery & Lane, 2006), and there has been a plethora of publications. However, the majority of publications have been atheoretical, offering case studies or new coaching models devised by coaching practitioners. In the past four years this has begun to change. The focus of recent papers has been on two questions. First, does coaching have an effect, and what effect does it have on the coachee? Secondly, what does the coach do which contributes to change in the coachee.

In 2001 a literature review undertaken by Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson (2001) suggested that only seven studies had been published by that date which attempted to explain the efficacy of executive coaching (Foster & Lendl, 1996; Garman, Whiston, & Zlatoper, 2000; Gegner, 1997; Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999; Judge & Cowell, 1997; Laske, 1999; Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman, 1997). The findings were the beginning of the development for a case for coaching's positive effect. Specifically they suggested that coaching could act as a desensitiser to workplace stress (Foster & Lendl, 1996), aid skills transfer (Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman, 1997) and contribute to changes in management style (Gegner, 1997). More recent studies (Bush, 2005; Conway, 2000; Dawdy, 2004; Day et al., 2008; Evers, Brouwers & Tomic 2006; Gonzalez, 2004; Gyllensten & Palmer 2005; Kampa-Kokesch, 2002; McGovern, Lindeman, Vergara, Murphy, Baker & Warrenfeltz, 2001; Orenstein, 2006; Smither & London, 2003; Sue-Chan & Latham, 2004; Turner, 2004; Wang, & Wentling, 2001) have built on these early efforts and are critically reviewed elsewhere (Passmore & Gibbes, 2007). Others writers have reviewed the progress of coaching research and have suggested that

coaching is beginning to build an evidence base for its practice which has been missing since Gorby (1937) popularised the notion that coaching could contribute to workplace performance (Fillery-Travis, & Lane, 2006). The range and quantity of studies is still developing, with a series of on-going random controlled trials and longitudinal studies underway. The growth of communities of interest within psychology has increased in a number of countries outside the USA, from Australia and the UK to Norway and Denmark. These changes are also being reflected in practice with the emergence of post-graduate coaching training psychology courses and coaching research centres.

The published studies suggest that coaching can contribute towards leadership behaviours such as charisma and inspiration, (Kampa-Kokesch, 2002), it can contribute to improved goal setting and self regard (Evers, Brouwers & Tomic, 2006), it can also aid the development of wider behaviours which are the focus of the specific coaching intervention (Orenstein, 2006), it aids skills transfer (Turner, 2004), contributes to positive peer perceptions of the effectiveness of the individual (Smither & London, 2003), it can enhance resilience (Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007) and have a positive impact on stress reduction (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005).

The key question which follows for psychologists involved in coaching practice and coach training is; if coaching is an effective intervention, what do coaches need to learn to be effective? The focus of this paper is on the practical aspects of the coachee's experience and its implications for both experienced and new coaches working in organisations.

Some writers have highlighted the similarities between coaching and counselling and have argued that researchers can find the answers to which coach behaviours are most effective by reviewing research on therapy (McKenna and Davis, 2009). Others have argued that such a perspective is useful but it fails to take account of the differences between the world of therapy and the organisational world of executive coaching (Passmore, 2009). Such differences include the multiple clients, from the individual to the HR commissioning manager to the individual's line manager. They all hold expectations about the coaching assignments and the outcomes which will be achieved. Using counselling research also fails to acknowledge the need for the coach to understand the business environment, and use this understanding to frame and inform their questions. Senior people have limited time and do not want to explain the role of the Company Secretary or what a 'PID' is for example (a PID is a document used in project management). There is recognition that overall the line between coaching and counselling remains blurred.

Previous work has been conducted on coach behaviours. Hall, et al., (1999) study used a thematic analysis based on coachee interviews. It identified a list of coaching behaviours that coachees found helpful and less helpful. These included reflecting back, being caring and having good listening skills. Other factors have been identified as important including. The coaches' credibility has been identified in a number of studies (Hall, et al., 1999; Sue-Chan & Latham, 2004). The coaches' collaborative style of working has also been cited (Gonzalez, 2004; Hall, et al., 1999). Gonzalez has drawn attention to the use of a discursive rather than instructive style, the need for the coach to be authentic and have integrity the coaches skills in probing and challenging the coachee (Gonzalez, 2004). Other writers have highlighted that it is useful for the coach to have a rich career history which they bring to the coaching work (Bush, 2005; Hall, et al., 1999). Jones and Spooner noted the value for the coach to be confident about their own abilities, the importance of confidentiality on the part of the coach and for the coach to be friendly without becoming a friend (Jones & Spooner, 2006). Also identified in the studies in this area has been for the coach to build the relationship (Day et al., 2008), to provide candid feedback (Lubbe, 2005), to foster self awareness in their coachee (Luebbe, 2005) and for the coach to focus exclusively on the needs of the coachee (Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999; Jones & Spooner, 2006). In respect of the coachee's behaviour few studies have considered this area, but Bush recognised the importance of the individual's commitment to the process as a key determinant of success (Bush, 2005).

At an organisational level, aspects of culture were identified as being important too (Bush, 2005). Of particular importance was the ability to build a partnership with the client organisation and careful matching of coach and coachee (Bush, 2005; Laske, 1999; Luebbe, 2005).

While the majority of these studies have gathered views from coaches, relatively few papers have given a voice to the coachee's experiences (Peterson, 1996; Keil et al., 1996; Blattner, 2005). The focus of these papers has tended to be on a single case study as opposed to a consideration of a range of coachees.

Method

Method

This study used a grounded theory qualitative methodology to explore data gathered from participants. The objective was to discover the personal experiences of coachees'. Grounded theory was selected as a tool for its dual focus on both the grounded individual experiences and its encouragement for researchers to theorise with the data. As a qualitative methodology it was considered ideal as a tool to explore the social processes of coaching with a small participant sample (Charmaz, 2006). While a number of alternative methods have been offered, this study followed the original methodology offered by Glaser & Strauss (1967).

Participants

The qualitative study involved interviews with six directors; three men and three women, five white European and one black Caribbean participant from the public sector. The age range of the participants was from 40 to 55. All the participants held board level positions. The directors ranged in experience from new appointee; having been appointed within the past 6 months and experienced directors in post for more than 5 years. All participants had received a minimum of eight hours face-to-face executive coaching from trained experienced coaches.

The coaches were trained executive coaches and had completed a minimum of a Post-Graduate Certificate in coaching and 100 hours executive coaching experience. Two coaches were selected; one man and one woman, both were in the age range 45-55. The coaches used both GROW / behavioural (Alexander, 2006) and cognitive behavioural coaching approaches (CBC) Neenan (2006). One coach was a psychologist, the other a human resources professional.

The number of participants was limited due to a desire to engage in detail with the material and work to produce a conceptual representation of their experiences of coaching.

Data collection

An initial interview protocol was developed and piloted on two participants. This data was not used in the study. Participant responses from the pilot led to further refinement of the interview protocol for the study. This included the addition of a number of prompts, to stimulate participants, if limited responses were given.

A semi structured method was chosen as it facilitated the development of rapport, allowed greater flexibility and allowed the researcher to enter novel areas with the aim of generating richer data.

The final interview protocol centred around six core themes:

- Personal experience of executive coaching
- The perception of usefulness of executive coaching
- Impact of executive coaching on self regard
- Transfer of executive coaching techniques into workplace practice
- Reflection of what the coaches practice (tools and techniques)
- Perception of its long term value.

In the study a detailed coding structure was used. The transcription used a recognised method in the transcription (Wetherell & Edley, 1999) which drew upon the Jefferson system (Jefferson, 1985) which incorporated data on both the words and the way in which words were delivered.

Data analysis

The creation of themes and sub themes were undertaken manually, rather than through the use of coding software. This decision reflected a desire to obtain a detailed understanding of the data through engaging with the data line by line. Each segment of data was given a separate code with the letter referring to the participant and the number referring to the segment in the transcript.

The researcher used a seven-stage process. The first stage involved the collection and storage of data from which the initial generation of codes were produced. The second stage involved a series of reviews of the descriptive codes. This involved memo writing, creating links between items and refining the coding system. The third stage was to group these descriptive codes into conceptual codes. The fourth stage was to review the findings through an independent researcher. The independent researcher developed her own categories from the descriptive codes. The researcher then compared both categories and their contents and used these to develop a revised coding structure. The fifth stage was to build a framework based on the descriptive codes from the researcher and the reviewer. In the sixth stage a participant was invited to review the descriptive model and the results were compared with the existing literature and with the quantitative study findings. The final stage was to use the coding to build a conceptual diagram to summarise the emerging model.

Results

The results were clustered under six themes (Table 1). This paper concentrates on the findings relating to coach attributes and coach behaviours. In this distinction, attributes were considered to be personal qualities; 'something which a coach has'. In contrast coach behaviours were 'things which the coach does'. It is acknowledged that this is a fine distinction, but reflects the language used by participants in their study.

Table 1: Main themes

Main Theme	Sub-theme
Coachee expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mentoring experiences• Action Learning Set (ALS) experiences• Coachee previous experiences
Properties of the session	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Length of session• Frequency• Timing
The attributes of the coach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Coach experience• Coach is affirming• Coach is non-judgemental• Coach is trustworthy• Coach is independent
The coach's behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'Common sense' confidentiality• Holding emotions• Challenge and support

The coachees behaviour

- Problem solving
- Setting take-away tasks
- Being non-directive
- Using self as a tool
- Developing alternative perspectives
- Questioning, listening & reflecting
- Staying focused
- Being empathetic
- Using tools and techniques

Outcomes

- Preparation
- Using notes
- Being authentic
- Behavioural adaptation
- Exploring motivation
- Sense of self
- Learning transfer
- Managing emotions
- Holistic view
- A shared vision
- Team relationships
- Staff retention

The Coach's attributes

(i) Coach's experience

The previous experience brought by the coach to the coaching session appeared to be a feature identified as a positive contribution to the relationship, giving confidence to the coachee and contributing to the session.

"...and then the coach pointing, you know, using valuable and relevant examples from their knowledge of how.. {XYZ company}.. operates, to guide me through that process, " (J41).

(ii) Affirming and supportive coach

A second attribute was the idea of the coach as an affirming and supportive individual. While for some this was expressed as affirming, for others this was expressed as the coach providing a space to confide and help sort out problems. Also important was the focus of the session towards the coachees' needs, rather than serving the purpose of the coach.

" or affirming that I was right in terms of the approach." (J33).

"I think it's just, it's just re-affirmation all the time". (A99).

(iii) Coach non-judgemental

This slightly different perspective of this same attribute was the idea of the coach as non-judgemental:

“...and having a listener who, you know, is not judgemental., but pointing me in the right direction...” (J32-34).

(iv) Coach is trustworthy

Another perspective within this theme was of the coach being trustworthy. On some occasions this was described as an attribute of the coach and on other occasions as a characteristic. It is difficult to differentiate between these as attributes are in part revealed through behaviours as well as through the credibility and reputation of the coach.

Coachees expected the coach to be worthy of their trust. This was central to building a working relationship.

“..and I felt I could trust, I think trust was a key element of it,..” (J75-76).

(v) Coach’s independence

A fourth attribute was for the coach to be independent.

“ Um.. so that was very valuable, and it also allowed, me to get that stuff out on the table and talk about it from so.., from a real outsiders perspective. That was helpful...” (W22).

Coach behaviours

A second core theme that this paper focuses upon is the coach's behaviour. Coachees identified twelve behaviours which contributed favourably towards their coaching experience; maintaining confidentiality, containing emotions, using a mixture of challenge and support, stimulating problem solving, setting take-away tasks for the coachee, being collaborative, using self as a tool, encouraging the development of alternative perspectives, using effective communications skills such as questioning, listening & reflecting, staying focused during the session, being emphatic plus their use of helpful tools and techniques.

(i) Uses 'common sense' confidentiality

This has previously been identified as one of the cornerstones of the coaching relationship (Ahern, 2001). Generally coachees described a high level of faith in the process. This may reflect the contracting aspect where clear ground rules were set out by the coaches. It may also be an unspoken expectation based on previous experiences of mentoring relationships, which a number of the coachees had held in the past or were maintaining alongside the executive coaching.

(ii) Holding emotion

The aspect of the coach holding, containing or offering a safe space for emotions was viewed by coachees not as a passive act but an active process undertaken by the coach. The use of these behaviours encouraged the coachees to feel confident to be even more open with information. There also appeared to be a link here to the attribute of trust built up by the coach during the forming stage of the relationship.

“the coach was a sponge really, no... a wall where I can bounce things off, stuff didn’t disappear it came back at me, and I’m answering questions....” (S35-36).

For others this space was critical as the coach stepped into roles neglected by others. This was most prevalent for one of the coachees who described his experiences in stark terms during the period as he explained feelings of depression following the loss of a parent and change in his role at work.

(iii) Challenge and support

The ability of the coach to be both challenging and supportive was identified as a key ingredient:

“...but I think that, well they pushed and pushed in terms of trying to bring me out, in the coaching sessions, and I was then getting more out of it by the second and third sessions, ... (F5-6).

The skill of challenging however was identified as being most useful when the challenge was present. For some style was important in this process, for others the style of challenge was less critically. What was important was that challenge was present within the relationship.:

“the fact that they might have done that in a nice way rather than an aggressive way, is more about style isn’t it, but I think their style is still to challenge..” (S99).

Coachees were specific about the ways in the coach used challenge. Challenge could be effective both when used as a style within questioning but also through the coach's use of listening and silence;

"...sometimes the coach challenged me just through listening". (S99).

Coachee's identified that challenge was most effective in helping the individual to recognise and move beyond the comfortable habitual behaviours which they used day to day.

"...that was the thing that was at first, was really bugging me, because I was in a comfort zone, and you know I quite like doing similar things that I know I'm good at, and I remember I take these higher things, complex almost, but I wasn't thinking about that, and that's one more thing that's happened, that I have crawled out of completely out of some of the real comfort zones" (D56).

In addition to challenge was the empathetic behaviours which could be characterised as being supportive. This was expressed through listening and displaying interest in the coachee's story.

The link between this behaviour and personal attributes is difficult to separate. In some cases the coachees saw this as the coach acting in a particular way and others saw this as a personal quality or attribute of the coach.

(iv) Problem solving

Coachees identified two aspects in the process of effective problem solving. The first was the adoption by the coach of a solution focus towards issues which involved helping the coachee to explore barriers and hurdles and developing plans to overcome these. The second was the coachee's development of a meta-skill following engagement in the process. Coachees identified that the coaching process had helped them

become more effective problem solvers. This was strongest where the GROW and CBC models were explained as part of the coaching relationship.

(v) Setting take-away tasks

The use of tasks outside of coaching had mixed responses. Some found tasks irrelevant, while others found them to be useful and constructive exercises which encouraged reflection and resolution to issues. A key factor in differentiating between valued tasks and less valued tasks was the nature of the task itself. Where the task was reflective, coachee's expressed value in the task. More action orientation tasks were less valued. This distinction was explained by coachees in terms of the different types of coaching required for different types of managers, with senior managers requiring a focus on strategy and reflection, while middle managers require more operational and behavioural tasks to take away.

(vi) Being non-directive

The ability for the coach to work collaboratively with the coachee, was identified as helpful:

"Um.. I don't think I would have responded well if the relationship had been a more directive relationship" (F90).

However, the coach needed to do more than ask questions. Coachees saw it as legitimate for coaches to both offer and to give advice, especially where this advice was grounded in the real life and relevant experience of the coach.

"I may have asked for them to expand, rather than just listen, but to actually give me some information" (S83).

(vii) Using self as a tool

The coach using themselves as a tool to help illustrate a key point was referred to by coachees as useful, such as the coaching sharing a story from their personal experience of working in an organisation.

“I can now see that they knew where the outcome should be leading me, but not telling me, getting me to think it through, ...”(D66-69).

(viii) Offering alternative perspectives

This behaviour was identified by coachees of being particularly helpful. The development of an alternative perspective was facilitated by the use of challenge by the coach or by the coach asking probing questions.

“you know they’d ask me a question and I’d give them an answer, and then they’d just push me a little bit further to make me think deeper about the reality of the situation, or whether there are extra dimensions actually to my approach.” (F31-32).

On other occasions the coachees identified the behaviour developing from the position of the coach as an outsider to the situation or organisation.

“..., I wouldn’t talk in the way I did to them that day to anyone in this organisation, and so I couldn’t possibly have got that from anybody else in this organisation what I got back that day....” (A56-57).

(ix) Questioning, listening and reflecting back

Coachees made reference to the coach's use of questioning, listening and reflecting back. The use of questions encouraged coachees to consider issues in more depth and in a more challenging way. The questioning style was also valued for encouraging the coachee to make clear the reasons for actions and articulate future courses of action, in particular making actions part of a conscious process.

"...the techniques that they were using was asking me the questions that forced me to think through... information I already had in my mind, and perhaps hadn't acknowledged consciously" (S30).

A second aspect within the communication behaviours was the use of reflection by the coach. In this behaviour the coach summarised the essence of the previous statement to capture its meaning and highlight potential omissions or thinking errors through the simple restatement of the words. Coachees appeared to value this because it provided space to think and consider the issue from a different perspective.

"...turned things back on me that were plainly ridiculous, were plainly questionable, or plainly needed more consideration by me" (A21).

The third aspect within the communication behaviours identified by coachees was listening. Coachees suggested that the quality of listening was different in coaching compared to how they were listened to elsewhere.

"They might not have welcomed that, but I welcomed that, so you know, they were able to uh.. provide that uh listening... um, they liked to listen" (A20).

This was facilitated by the coach remaining focused during the coaching session.

While valuable as separate behaviours, coachees identified how these elements were integrated to provide powerful interventions that helped them come to their own solutions during the coaching sessions.

“...they listened and then they reflected back and through open questions they helped me to find my own solutions...” (J103-106).

Here the coachee implies the real skill is combining these three qualities together, blending them into a set of behaviours.

(x) Staying focused

The further theme was the ability for the coach to keep the coachee focused. This was seen as helpful and involved bringing the coachee back to the issue in hand and staying solution focused rather than allowing the conversation to slip towards a past orientated approach.

(xi) Being empathetic

Coachees identified the response of their coach to thoughts and feelings that they shared as helpful. The ability to be empathetic to these thoughts and feelings through both verbal and non-verbal communications was noted and valued. There are clear parallels here with earlier statements on communication skills used by the coach as well as on holding emotions.

(xii) Tools and techniques

Coachees also appreciated a coach with an array of tools and techniques which the coach was able to draw on during the coaching session to help the coachee consider things from a new perspective. In the case of the quotes the coachees referred to the use of visualisation techniques drawn from cognitive behavioural coaching (Palmer, 2008) and mindfulness meditation (Passmore & Marianetti, 2007).

“It was very, very, very useful, at the very beginning, you know using that visualising” (J84).

“And the other technique, well it’s not a technique, but the other, the other aspect I think was just retracing what I said before, just being given the time to um... you called it mindfulness ...” (S38-39).

The behaviours are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of coach behaviours

Key coaching behaviours
Agreeing ‘Common sense’ confidentiality rules
Holding the emotions of the coachee
Providing both challenge and support
Offering mechanisms for problem solving
Setting take-away tasks
Being non-directive

Using themselves as a tool

Helping the coachee develop alternative perspectives

Questioning,

Listening

Reflecting back

Staying focused on the topic

Being empathetic

Discussion

This paper sought to derive, from the data, a set of practical implications which can usefully inform the work of coaching psychologists, both as practitioners but also as trainers of coaches.

The findings presented above provide a descriptive account of how coachees' viewed their coaching experiences. This is where the previous published studies have stopped. In this paper an effort has been made, using Grounded Theory methods, to conceptualise the data, and review this against material from previous studies.

A reflection on previous studies

The nature of Grounded Theory studies requires an exploration and consideration of the literature after the completion of the study, rather than before, as a means of preventing the coding being influenced by previous findings.

In this paper the subsequent research is contained at the start of the paper. In broad terms the results from this research echoed earlier studies, such as Hall et al (1999) with the recognition of the need for the coach to offer a style which is both collaborative and discursive, to have a rich career history and thus be credible. Also valued were the skills in listening, questioning and summarising alongside a mastery of coaching techniques, which all added to the credibility and perceived competence of the coach. In this sense the qualitative study drew together the findings from the previous collection of studies on coach behaviour and identified the common ingredients identified by coaches and confirmed by coachees.

In reviewing these findings alongside previously published work a number of implications emerge which have been offered below. It is acknowledged that the nature of interpretation is that others who review the results may be drawn to emphasise different aspects. Further the use of a sample drawn from senior managers at board level and using two coaches who employed specific methodologies will also have implications for the results. The use of psychodynamic coaching or working with middle managers may have identified different features. In this paper I will focus on three possible implications for coaching psychology practitioners and three implications for those involved in coach training.

Some implications for coaching psychology practice

The study identified a number of possible issues for coaching practice and we will focus on three of these in this discussion; problem solving, setting take away tasks and the role of challenging the coachee. The selection of these three reflects that coaching practice differs from practices in counselling, where a difference stance might be adopted in these three areas.

Problem solving

Coachees valued using problem-solving models as well as understanding the models that they were using. There are two benefits. Firstly by using a problem solving style the coach encouraged the coachee to recognise potential pitfalls and develop ways to manage these. The second benefit is the potential role the coach can play in meta-learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978). This learning is enhanced when explicit information is shared with the coachee about the techniques being used. This allowed the coachee to begin to apply these techniques for themselves. While cognitive behaviour therapy has traditionally encouraged the counsellor to share the techniques as part of the approach, this is not discussed in the wider coaching literature. Coaching practitioners may wish to reflect on the way they work and where this is relevant to share explicitly their approaches with coachees, teaching them the techniques for later use.

Takeaway tasks

The use of takeaway tasks (homework) is a feature of counselling practice, but is rarely discussed in the coaching literature. Drawing on the experiences of this group of senior managers takeaway tasks were seen both positively and negatively. The perspective seemed to have been influenced by the type of task or action agreed. Where the task was reflective coachees in this group experienced this as valuable, while more action orientation tasks were perceived by to be less valuable. The high value placed on more reflective tasks may reflect the seniority of the group who were all board level coachees. However it may also reflect power dynamics within the coaching relationship. In counselling the

power dynamic is often seen as the client being less powerful than the therapist. In coaching, particularly in senior management coaching, the reverse is usually true. Two implications emerge. The first is there may be value in the coach engaging in a two-way discussion about the type of takeaway tasks, so the coachee considers this openly and explicitly with the coach. Second, the coach needs to be sensitive to the status and experience of the coachee and to make a judgement about these factors and the nature of the individual.

Challenge and support

Some studies within the literature mention the importance of providing challenge (Gonzalez, 2004; Hall, et al., 1999 Jones & Spooner, 2006). However in the majority of studies the focus is more towards building the relationship and skills in empathy. The focus in this direction may reflect the strong counselling orientation within coaching. While these skills are valuable, participants in this study also recognised the importance of challenge. Reflective questions, body language and silence are power tools which participants in this study recognised as useful in helping them reflect in a way they had not previously done about the issue.

Some implications for the training of individuals in coaching

Having discussed three aspects relating to coaching psychology practice, I will discuss three issues from the study relating to coach training. These three aspects are; managing confidentiality, understanding of sector and business management and developing attributes as well as skills.

Understanding confidentiality

Coachees' in this study valued coaches who treated what was said in confidence. The confidence of the coachee was derived from the clear commitments given during the contracting process as well as a lack of come back from others on what had been said. However, coachees' treated confidentiality as 'common-sense'. In many one to one relationships, such as counselling, the boundaries are clear. There is no report back mechanism to the doctor (general practitioner) on the detailed conversations in the sessions or sharing information with family members. It's a confidential relationship, save for serious illegality or risk of harm. However in coaching confidentiality is more complex, as a result of multiple stakeholders, particularly when the 'client' (the person paying) is the organisation, who may expect and request a detailed report.

This suggests a need in coach training for an exploration of confidentiality: what confidentiality includes and what may be outside of the confidentiality agreement. It also suggests a need for greater levels of high quality support for coaches, possibly for those who have most recently trained. Such support could offer a wider well of experience from which to draw.

Understanding leadership

A second issue to consider in coach training is the value of exploring wider organisational and leadership issues as part of coach training. Participants identified the use of non-directive approaches as being preferable to directive approaches. This may reflect their status as senior managers and may reflect wider psychological preferences which we as humans have in the way we respond to directive behaviours (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). For the coach, these findings amplify the need to develop skills of listening, summarising and asking open questions. However the coach needs to do more than use good questions and summarizing skills. Coachees identified value in the coach being able to understand and interpret. This requires the coach to understand and empathise with the leadership role.

The process of becoming

A third issue is the development of skills and of personal attributes. The skills aspects may be labelled the 'doing' aspect of coaching. The personal attributes aspects may be considered to be the 'being' aspect of the coach.

In the UK counselling courses are often over-subscribed, with more students than places available. Applicants are selected based on their perceived ability to be able to undertake the course successfully and a judgement by the course team that they will make an effective therapist. In contrast coaching has a stronger market approach. The growth in coach training has been led by commercial organisations, and most coaches still are either untrained or their training consists of a few days with a commercial provider, or worse a video to watch at home. However, participants in this study suggested they were seeking both skills and attributes; things the coach did, as well as things the coach was. It may be argued that such personal attributes take longer to acquire than the average commercial coaching course and may even be innate. A move to more robust selection procedures for coach training may select out the individuals who may be less able to take on the coaching role.

Summary

This paper focuses on a small scale study of coaching practice as experienced by board level executives using a Grounded Theory methodology. This study identified a wide range of coaching behaviours which were valued by coachees and confirmed that these findings were echoed by a range of previous studies. It suggests that coachees' value coaching not only as a result of the behaviours used by the coach but also as a result of the attributes of their coach. These attributes may be more difficult and take more time to acquire as they relate to personal qualities of the coach. A series of practical implications are drawn out from the study for coaching psychologists and the training of coaches.

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