

First, we'd like to thank everyone who gave us feedback on our first Research Bulletin. The response has been very encouraging, so encouraging that we've decided to release the second Bulletin now, rather than wait three months!

Research Bulletin No. 1 reported on a study of coaching clients – the people who commission and pay for coaching on behalf of their organisation. The results highlighted the diversity of client's expectations of executive coaching. This Bulletin turns the focus onto the coachees themselves – their expectations of coaching before the assignment begins, and their experience of coaching as reported after the assignment is finished. The results suggest that many coachees are surprised by the extent to which coaching as a process facilitates greater self awareness and insight.

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Coaching and the paradoxical nature of change

Summary

We studied 79 randomly selected coaching evaluation forms looking for trends in goals set, outcomes reported, and for evidence of changes in the coachee's expectations of coaching. Our results support the idea that both coachee and client are often surprised as to what happens in coaching, and that coachees are surprised how much they learn about themselves in a successful assignment. These findings are discussed with reference to neuroscience and change theory.

The Study

Why does the executive coaching industry continue to grow and grow? Because it works – according to Diane Coutu and Carol Kauffman (*What Can Coaches Do for You?* Harvard Business Review, January 2009). Yet still no-one really understands *how* it works – including the people being coached. We examined 79 completed assignments forms containing sufficient details for the purpose of this study, specifically looking for:

1. Trends in goals set by coachees,
2. Trends in outcomes reported by coachees, and
3. Any significant differences between goals set and outcomes reported.

We worked with our standard coaching evaluation forms, which record both the initial goals set at the beginning of each assignment, and an evaluation of the assignment, completed after the last session.

Background

There is a school of thought that seeks to clearly delineate executive coaching from other types of coaching, such as life coaching, and other disciplines, such as counselling, on the basis that executive coaches are contracted to work only on issues of direct relevance to organisational goals. For such practitioners, to venture into the personal domain is to cross a professional boundary. Coaching clients (i.e. the people in the organisation who pay for the coaching assignment) would seem to agree. Coutu and Kauffman (2009) surveyed 140 leading coaches and found just 3% who said they were hired to address personal issues.

However, Coutu and Kauffman also found that 76% of coaches surveyed, did report assisting executives with personal issues – despite client expectations. This is consistent with our own practice where we often find that coachees don't find it meaningful to set rigid boundaries between work life and private life, or between their behaviours at work and their behaviours outside work. It may be that some practitioners, and clients, are establishing somewhat artificial boundaries for fear of entering the 'grey area' between executive coaching and life coaching or counselling, a journey for which not all coaches are well equipped.

Results

Every goal or outcome related to a skill of some kind. We categorised these skills into management skills and leadership skills. Management skills are defined here as those required to execute short term, operational, logical/rational tasks; skills such as time management, communication, and delegation. Leadership capabilities are defined here as relational, applied to influencing and engaging people in delivering longer term goals.

The graphs to the right shows **goals in dark green**, and **outcomes as the dark green bar plus the light green bar combined**. In other words, when it came to the end of an assignment, some coachees defined their success not only in terms of their original goals, but also in terms of some new, unanticipated outcomes.

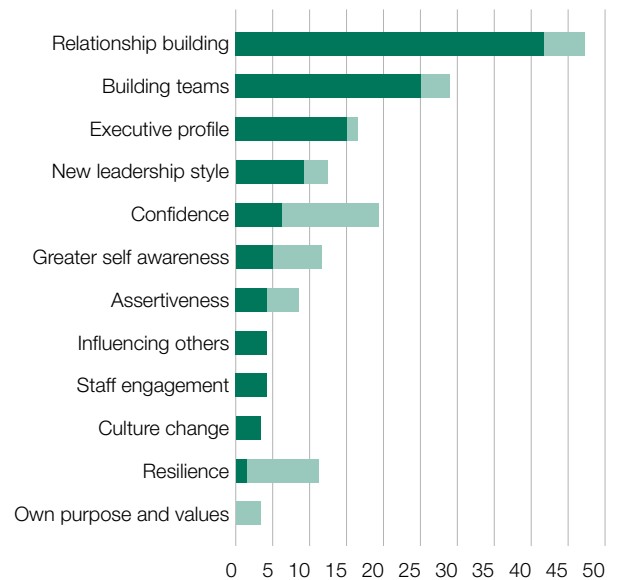
From the graph we can conclude that over the course of an assignment:

1. There is a shift in emphasis from management skills to leadership skills. Coachees entered coaching with goals around both leadership and management skills, with leadership skills outnumbering management skills by just over 2:1. When coachees came to evaluate what they had gained from coaching at the end of the assignment, the ratio of leadership skills to management skills climbed to almost 3:1.
2. Coachees spend more time than they had anticipated on self awareness/self insight. *Outcomes* around confidence, resilience and self-awareness generally, were mentioned 2½ times more often than they were as *goals*.

Number of coachees naming management skills as goals (dark green) and outcomes (dark/light green combined)



Number of coachees naming leadership skills as goals



Benefits of executive coaching



Number of coachees reporting (n=79)

This suggests that coachees spend considerably more time exploring issues of self than they had originally planned, and that the experience is valuable, to the extent insights gained were framed in terms of significant outcomes.

Our evaluation data also enabled us to analyse what coachees found most valuable about coaching. The graph at the bottom of page 2 shows that 37 out of 79 coachees talked about the value of the coach as a 'sounding board' and/or the opportunity to reflect.

Discussion

Daniel Siegel in his book *The Mindful Brain* talks about reflective learning and the value of imagery in disrupting the way our thinking tends towards becoming limited and inflexible. Reflection, he suggests, has three aspects to it; receptivity, self-observation and self-awareness, all of which may involve pre-frontal neural integration in the brain.

In this context one role of the effective coach may be to create an environment in which the coachee is receptive to new perspectives, has an opportunity to reflect on him/herself, and to develop a more advanced level of self-awareness. All of which may be essential ingredients in the facilitation of behavioural change.

This notion of personal change, starting with a focus on where the individual is *now*, rather than where the individual would like to be, is what Arnold Beisser called '*The Paradoxical Theory of Change*' more than thirty years ago. According to Beisser:

“Change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual or by another person to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and effort to *be what he is.*”

For some this notion of coaching may sit at odds with what is sometimes described as being a linear, logical/rational transaction between two people. The GROW model for example, can make coaching sound like a straightforward process, in which goal setting is simple, and change takes place through staying focussed on the goal.

Our work suggests that whilst effective executive coaching is indeed solution-focussed, both goal formation and the process of transformational change are often complex.

Our research suggests that one of the ways in which executive coaching is effective is through the provision of a confidential and 'safe' place for people to engage in reflection, often of a quite personal nature.

This reflection serves as the basis for sustainable behavioural change, which in turn leads to the business outcomes that both coachees and clients are looking for.

As executive coaches ourselves, this perspective makes a lot of sense. Many of the people we coach express dissatisfaction with the amount of time they feel able to dedicate to reflection; the latest crisis, the next deadline, the hastily called meeting, always seem to get in the way. The increasing popularity of coaching may be one consequence of the lack of quality time busy executives are able to dedicate to reflection. By making time to reflect in the presence of someone appropriately skilled, so we create for ourselves the opportunity to learn how to behave more effectively in the service of our organisations.

References

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