

Research Bulletin

No. 6 Spring 2011

At the end of a 2010 coaching conference, purchasers were asked what new insights would be most helpful to them. One panel member asked how much time she should expect to see elapse between sessions in a coaching assignment. Some of her coach - coachees met weekly, others fortnightly, others less frequently - how should she make sense of such variation? So was born the intention to conduct this study. We anticipated coming up with a few simple guidelines - little did we know that such an apparently straightforward question would lead to a treatise on the nature of reflection, neuroscience and adult learning. We hope you will find the journey as interesting as we did, and that the insights gained will help you to derive even more value from your investment in executive coaching.

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How often should coach and coachee meet?

Executive summary

We interviewed more than 50 clients, coaches and coachees in order to gain a better understanding of the factors driving the frequency with which coach and coachees meet in a coaching assignment.

- » Clients said they liked coach and coachee to meet every 2.6 weeks
- » Coaches said every 2.9 weeks
- » Coachees said they liked to meet once a month

These different stakeholders therefore hold different views as to how often coach and coachee should meet. We discuss some specific contexts in which all stakeholders agreed that it was appropriate for coach and coachee to meet more often than usual. Nevertheless there is a clear underlying inconsistency between client, coach and coachee perspectives. We explore this inconsistency with reference to the different needs of client, coach and coachee, and to theories on the nature of reflection.

Introduction

Just how often should coach and coachee meet? If they don't meet often, is this evidence of a lack of engagement? If they meet too often, could there be an unhealthy dependency developing?

The Standards Australia Guidelines for Coaching in Organizations say:

“ Coaching may take place weekly, fortnightly or at longer intervals. In determining the interval between sessions, stakeholders should consider whether this interval is consistent with the processes, outcomes and type of goal being worked on in the coaching. Where continuity and focused engagement in iterative processes are important, shorter intervals are usually indicated (weekly or fortnightly). Longer times between sessions (e.g. more than three weeks) may present challenges for continuity and engagement. ”

We set out to explore '*processes, outcomes and type of goal*', seeking to identify specific factors that may drive more or less frequent meetings between coach and coachee.

Method

With the intention of engaging 5 – 6 organisations, we invited 18 organisations to participate. Seven organisations from 5 industries agreed to participate, each nominating 4-6 coachees and their coaches, such that we arrived at a sample population of 7 clients, 35 coachees and 17 coaches:

Table 1: Participants

Organisation	Industry	No. coachees	No. coaches	
			Whyte & Co	Other
A	Utilities	5	3	-
B	Government	5	-	4
C	Professional services	6	-	1
D	Professional services	4	3	-
E	Medical sales	4	1	-
F	Medical sales	6	3	-
G	Financial services	5	2	-
		35	12	5

We asked all stakeholders the same basic questions, tailoring the questionnaire for each stakeholder group. We asked all participants to define:

- » what constituted an *ideal* length of time between coaching sessions, and
- » the *minimum/maximum* time to allow between sessions.

In addition, we asked coachees to tell us:

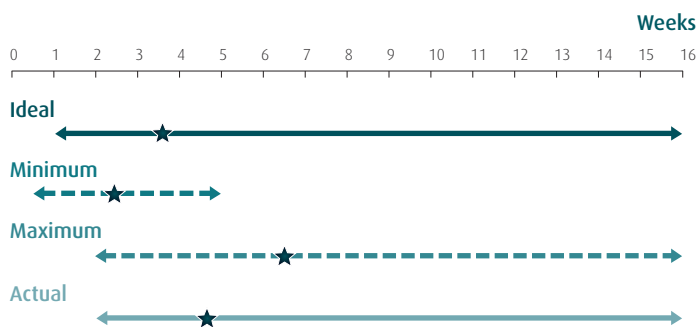
- » the *actual* amount of time the lapsed between coaching sessions in their last assignment.

We asked all participants to articulate the rationale behind their views, illustrating with stories where appropriate.

Results

- » Respondents overall defined an average *ideal* time between sessions of 3.5 weeks, with average *minimums* and *maximums* of 2.3 and 6.2 weeks respectively. The *actual* frequency of sessions (reported by coachees only) was 4.7 weeks. The table below shows both *average* frequencies and frequency *ranges*:

Fig 1. Overall – time between sessions



Two aspects of this data stand out:

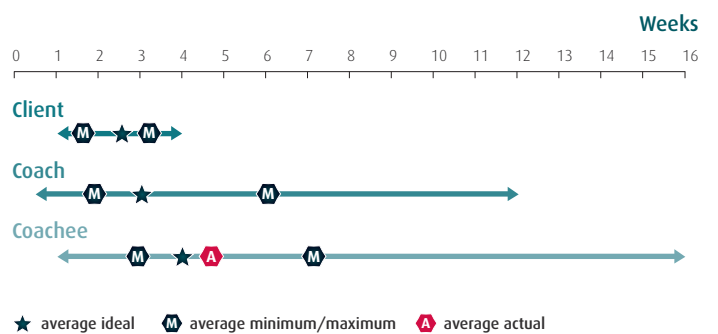
1. Both the average *ideal* and *actual* frequencies are longer than the 1-3 weeks implied by the Standards Australia Guidelines
2. There is considerable variance among respondents. Ideal frequencies, for example, range from weekly to every 16 weeks

We asked ourselves what might be driving this variance, identifying at least three factors:

1. Stakeholder group

The chart below shows ideal frequencies, minimum and maximum frequencies, and overall range of frequencies, for clients, coaches and coachees separately. The data shows considerable variation between the different stakeholder groups, particularly between clients and coachees. For example, coachees reported average *ideal* (4.0 weeks) and *actual* (4.7 weeks) times between sessions, both significantly longer than the *maximum* time between sessions suggested by clients (3.1 weeks).

Fig 2. Different stakeholder groups



Interviewees gave the following rationale for how much time to allow between sessions:

Table 2: Why coaches and coachees shouldn't meet more often than every x weeks

	% of sample mentioning			
	Clients (n=7)	Coaches (n=17)	Coachees (n=35)	Total (n=59)
Coachees need time to do things between sessions	43%	65%	45%	51%
Need to be realistic about work commitments	29%	18%	34%	29%
Coachees need time to reflect between sessions	29%	12%	29%	24%
If sessions are too close together, nothing meaningful to discuss	0%	6%	29%	19%
If sessions are too close together, focus will be too short term	14%	0%	3%	3%

Participants were free to cite more than one reason. Columns don't always add up to 100%

Table 3: Why coaches and coachees shouldn't meet less often than every x weeks

	% of sample mentioning			
	Clients (n=7)	Coaches (n=17)	Coachees (n=35)	Total (n=59)
The assignment will lose momentum and the coachee will lose focus	100%	65%	74%	75%
Leaving too long between sessions means there is too much ground to cover in next session	0%	35%	11%	17%
If coach and coachee don't meet often enough, rapport can diminish	0%	6%	11%	8%
If coach and coachee don't meet often enough, overall assignment takes too long	14%	0%	9%	7%

Participants were free to cite more than one reason. Columns don't always add up to 100%

We noticed that:

- » All three stakeholder groups talked of the need to be realistic about the coachee's work commitments. Looking at figure 2 we can see that coachees do meet less often with their coaches than they would like, but the difference (0.7 weeks) accounts for only 33% of the difference between the ideal frequency suggested by the client (2.6 weeks) and the actual frequency reported by coachees (4.7 weeks).
- » All three stakeholder groups talked about allowing enough time between sessions for coachees to *do things* and to *reflect*, with 'action' mentioned more often than 'reflection' (Gray, 2007)
- » Coach and coachee talk about the impact of not meeting often enough on what happens in the coaching session, more often than does the client. Coachees talk about coming to sessions without anything meaningful to discuss if sessions are held *too frequently*. Coaches focus more on how much time is lost to discussing old ground and new contexts if sessions *aren't held frequently enough*.
- » Clients are more concerned about seeing observable behaviour changes within a specified time period.

2. Nature of assignment

In describing why a particular meeting frequency was most appropriate, some respondents related different frequencies to different coaching agendas. Four patterns emerged.

Fig 3. Four coaching patterns



Regular

The majority of respondents talked about coaching as though coach and coachee should meet at regular intervals over the course of the assignment.

Regular intensive

Respondents named the following reasons why it may be appropriate for coach and coachee to meet more often than 'usual':

1. Role transition - moving into a new role
2. The coachee is seeking to achieve critical short-term milestones
3. Seeking clarity on career goals
4. The coachee is experiencing a crisis and needs support. Some respondents talked here about boundaries between coaching and counseling
5. Pressure to change behaviours quickly ('remedial' coaching)
6. Support to manage a transition out of the organization

Spacing out over time

The coach and coachee initially meet every 1-2 weeks. Once goals are set and rapport is established, then coach and coachee may meet less frequently.

Irregular long term

Some respondents suggested that it isn't meaningful to talk about a standard meeting frequency. Rather coach and coachee should meet according to the needs of the coachee as defined by events/ long term milestones. Some respondents suggested this pattern works best after the coach and coachee have established a good rapport.

Table 4 cross-references the last three patterns with the three different stakeholder groups.

Table 4: Coaching patterns mentioned by interviewees from different stakeholder groups

% of sample mentioning	Clients	Coaches	Coachees	Total
Regular intensive	57%	59%	17%	34%
Spacing out over time	43%	35%	17%	25%
Irregular long term	0%	35%	14%	19%

Participants were free to cite more than one pattern. Columns don't always add up to 100%

About half of the clients mentioned either the 'regular intensive' pattern and/or the 'spacing out over time' pattern. No clients mentioned the 'irregular long term' pattern.

Coaches mentioned all three patterns, mentioning the 'regular intensive' pattern more often than the 'irregular long term' pattern.

Coachees talked less often about coaching patterns generally, perhaps because many had only experienced one coaching assignment. The 'irregular long term' pattern was mentioned almost as often as the 'regular intensive' pattern.

3. Length of overall assignment

Some coachees were less focused on the ideal length of time between sessions and more focused on their overall goals and how long they felt it would take to achieve those goals. If the number of sessions was fixed in advance then they sought to space the sessions available to them over the period of time for which their coach is available.

Discussion

The Standards Australia Guidelines for Coaching in Organizations encourage us to look for differences in "processes, outcomes and type of goal" in determining ideal coaching frequencies. The Standards also suggest a taxonomy for classifying different outcomes and goals, similar to Hawkins and Smith's (2006) four learning types (cited by Carroll (2010)):

- i. **Skills or competencies**, where the coach uses the "knowledge-practice-feedback" cycle to embed learning how to do something.
- ii. **Performance and capability**, where the coach helps the coachee move from using a skill to being able to adapt that skill across contexts.
- iii. **Developmental learning**, where the focus is on more emotional skills such as assertiveness, or managing conflict.
- iv. **Transformation learning**, where the individual is enabled to shift gear into another way of perceiving, evaluating old mind-sets and mental maps and thinking more systemically.

Taken together, these excerpts from the Guidelines might lead us to try and characterize different types of learning in terms of different coaching frequencies. Does skills coaching, for example, lend itself to a process by which coach and coachee meet fortnightly, while transformation coaching is best actioned monthly?

At first glance our findings could be interpreted as supporting such an approach. Some respondents suggested that 'remedial' coaching, transition coaching, and the achievement of short-term milestones, for example, lend themselves to more intensive coaching patterns.

However, what distinguishes these forms of coaching may not be 'process' at all, or even outcomes per se, so much as a reflection of the needs of client and coachee with regard to pace of change. If the immediate need is for a fast change in behaviour, then the optimal process by which outcomes are achieved is largely irrelevant. Whether coach and coachee focus on skills, performance, development or transformation doesn't matter, so long as what happens – happens quickly.

Clients in our survey were particularly focused on seeing early outcomes in the form of behavioural change. This desire appeared to be general, rather than specific to certain contexts. Ongoing conversations with other clients suggest a number of factors may drive this desire, including:

- » The need to manage the expectations of senior management
- » The need to spend budgets within fixed timeframes
- » Core beliefs as to what constitutes effective coaching, based on personal experience.

This often explicit client expectation may in turn be driving the behaviour of coaches in terms of:

- » A focus on providing services predictably and efficiently, providing assurance to the client that something is happening (Sherpa 2010 Executive Coaching Survey)
- » Favouring approaches to coaching most likely to facilitate rapid changes in behaviour. This may manifest itself in the application of a few 'tried and trusted' models of coaching (Clutterbuck, 2010)
- » Labelling non-compliance with a regular coaching schedule in terms of 'resistance' or 'lack of motivation'

This focus on achieving 'quick wins' may be entirely appropriate for coaching assignments where it is clearly in everyone's interests for the coachee to make changes quickly. In other assignments the emphasis on speed may be less meaningful for the coachee than it is for client and coach.

In our view, drawing on taxonomies such as Hawkins and Smith (2006) in an attempt to come with hard and fast rules for coaching is often counter-productive. In real life it is often impossible to know in advance what approach will best serve the coachee. Often coaching goals are difficult enough to define (Van Woerkom, 2010) let alone the means by which goals will be achieved. Effective coaches will likely call upon different approaches at different times in the one assignment.

However, such typologies are interesting in terms of reflecting on the diversity of ways in which coachees may learn. Rather than assume all coachees in all contexts undergo the same learning process, coaches may benefit from paying attention to the way that individual coachees appear to think.

There are lots of learning models to refer to. In *Research Bulletin 5* we referred to the work of Argyris (1991), who suggested that single-loop learning may not always work best in the face of complexity; that to solve more ambiguous tasks, double-loop learning may be more effective. In a similar vein Van Woerkom (2010) suggests that rational models of learning may not work well in ambiguous situations. Both she and Atkins (2006) cite evidence in support of the idea that a significant portion of mental processing is in fact unconscious. Van Woerkom (2010) goes so far as to suggest that cognitive reflection may even *impede* the learning process in some cases; taking a break from the issue is often more effective. She suggests that learning doesn't arise from reflection *on* experience but from learning *in* experience, a process she likens to mindfulness.

Siegel (2007) describes how mindfulness may work from a neurochemical perspective, describing a process of neural integration characterized by gamma waves. He suggests that mindfulness is a teachable skill with reflective dialogue playing a key role. In a reflective dialogue the individual is encouraged to focus their attention on the workings of the mind itself, and to *describe* and *label* mental events. Labelling serves to balance the arousal of the limbic system with left and right hemispheres. These dialogues, says Siegel, also serve in helping people develop their own capacity to think reflectively.

If different coachees learn differently, if some forms of reflective learning are intuitive, and if a lot of learning happens in experience rather than in reflecting on experience, then the effective coach may need to look beyond hard and fast rules and ideals. Indeed the coach may want to reappraise his/her role. Is it to facilitate reflection in the moment, or is it to stimulate a more holistic process by which the individual learns to reflect for themselves?

If a coach *were* to focus on helping the coachee learn for themselves, then one might *expect* them to meet with their coachees less often as their coachee became more capable and empowered. Coach and coachee might then time their meetings to coincide with specific events, relevant to their goals, that may not conform to a regular pattern; the very pattern that some coaches and coachees referred to in this study.

In *Research Bulletin 3* we considered the use of narrative e-mails. Some of the coaches we spoke to in designing that study said that they didn't use narrative e-mails to encourage reflection because they felt it was in their coachee's interests to bring their reflections to a session. As we continue to explore the nature of reflection so we may come to question further this somewhat linear model of reflective practice.

Conclusions

The question we set out to answer was "How often should coach and coachee meet?"

On average our respondents said they liked to meet every 3.5 weeks, a frequency that on the face of it appears to be at odds with the Standards Australia Guidelines for Coaching in Organizations which imply coach and coachee should meet at least every 3 weeks. Looking deeper into the data we found clients and coaches to be more aligned with the Standards Guidelines. It was the coachees specifically who said, on average, they prefer to meet monthly.

This finding challenges the notion that the main reason coach and coachee don't meet as often as client and coach would like is because coachees are just too busy, or else don't prioritize coaching to the extent that they 'should'. From the coachee's perspective, being too busy is sometimes the contributing factor, but only 33% of the time. The rest of the time coachees just don't seem to want to meet as often as client and coach would like, even when apparently committed to achieve their goals.

We explored the possibility that different 'types' of coaching may demand different 'processes' that in turn may drive different coaching frequencies. In that context we found that stakeholders generally agreed that it may be appropriate for coach and coachee to meet more often than 'usual' when the coachee is:

1. Moving into a new role
2. Seeking to achieve critical short-term milestones
3. Seeking clarity on career goals
4. Experiencing a crisis and needs support
5. Under pressure to change behaviours quickly
6. Looking for support to manage a transition out of the organization

We suggest however, that it is unlikely these examples constitute different 'processes' per se, so much as different needs. When achieving a fast outcome is of primary importance to both client and coachee then everyone may be motivated to do the best they can within the time available, regardless of process.

To conclude, our study suggests that there a number of different factors at work driving the 'ideal' frequency of coaching, including the different needs of client, coach and coachee, and the nature of the coachee's learning process. We hope the following questions may be useful for client and coach, not only in establishing expectations for how often coach and coachee meet, but more generally in deriving more value from investments in coaching services.

Questions for the client:

1. Do we, as an organisation, establish an expectation that coach and coachee meet at defined regular intervals?
2. If so, is this because we deliberately and purposefully employ coaching for specific contexts where speed of change is most important, or because we need to operate within other parameters (e.g. budget spend)?
3. To what extent do we interpret coach and coachee meeting less frequently than we would like in terms of i) the coachee being too busy ii) the coachee being resistant iii) the coach being ineffective?
4. Are our expectations around the effective use of coaching driven by personal experience? If so, what was the nature of that personal experience, and are we happy to continue to adhere to these beliefs?
5. If we are using frequency of coaching as an index of quality/success of coaching, what other indices might we use instead, and how might we work with our coaching services provider to achieve better insights into the effectiveness of coaching in our organisation?
6. If the potential role of the coach is not only to help coachees tackle specific issues, but to help them develop their own reflective practice, what new possibilities does this open up as to the role coaching might play in our overall Learning & Organizational Development strategy?

Questions for the coach:

1. Do I, as a coach, have clear ideas as to how often I want to meet with my coachees?
2. To what extent do I interpret an unwillingness to engage as often as I would like in terms of i) the coachee being too busy ii) resistance iii) my own capabilities?
3. What assumptions are driving my beliefs? Do I think I would benefit from exploring those assumptions with a colleague or supervisor?
4. To what extent do I consider my role to be to facilitate reflection in the moment, versus stimulating a more holistic process by which individuals learn to reflect more effectively for themselves? What implications does this have for how I coach?
5. If client and coachee have different expectations of how often we should meet, to what extent am I being driven by one agenda or the other?
6. Could I do more in terms of:
 - a. Understanding the client's perspective, and challenging it if appropriate?
 - b. Helping the coachee work out what may work best for them?
 - c. Helping client and coachee to understand each others' perspectives?

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