

Grant report for the Institute of Coaching

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Title:

How the behavioural changes are sustained over time after the coaching intervention has ended? Participant perceptions of the effects of coaching one year later

Author Note

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Abstract

This qualitative study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) explored the perceptions of seven participants on the effects of coaching a year after the coaching ended. The research questions were, (1) How do participants perceive the effects of coaching and sustain changes one year later, (2) what challenges were experienced, and (3) what factors enabled them in sustaining their changes. The participants in this study were the seven middle managers whom the practitioner-researcher coached earlier a year ago. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews of the participants. Five themes identified related to the first research question are: (1) Goal setting, focus and achievement of goals, (2) Ability to think differently, (3) Changes in behaviour, (4) Increased self-awareness, and (5) Personal growth and development through increased self-confidence. The challenges participants faced (research question 2) were: lack of time and difficulties in making individual changes. The factors that enabled sustained changes (research question 3) were: self-discipline and focus, and self-motivation to change and develop. This study is expected to fill the knowledge gap existing on this topic.

Key words: long term effects of coaching, changes, durable changes
sustainability, factors, enablers, challenges

Introduction

Coaching is defined in a variety of ways by different authors and practitioners (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; De Haan, Duckworth, Birch, & Jones, 2013; Soneh et al., 2015).

Researchers typically define coaching as a short- to medium-term relationship between an executive /leader/manager (referred to as the coachee or client) and a professional coach with

the expressed purpose of improving the coachee's work effectiveness (Fieldman & Lankau, 2005). A perceived effect of coaching implies change experienced by a coachee resulting from the coaching process. A review of the existing studies that have empirically examined outcomes of coaching indicates that most often, the aim of these studies has been to identify what the outcomes at the end of coaching are, such as client learning, behavioral changes, and client satisfaction (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011); Koroleva, 2016). Less attention seems to have been given to studying the long-term effects or sustainability of coaching as experienced by the coachees over the longer term (Koroleva, 2016). Therefore this study aimed at exploring the perceived effects of coaching a year after the coaching intervention ended, and what factors challenged and enabled the sustainability of changes experienced.

Background information and relevance to coaching

Using the goal-centered and solution-focused evidence based coaching approach, this practitioner-researcher conducted a coaching intervention for seven manager-coachees during May to July 2014. The goal outcomes at the end of the coaching found through qualitative research interviews were identified to be positive for most coachees. Also, the coachees expressed their intention to sustain the changes over time, as they strongly felt it to be in their own interest. This is a follow up study with the same coachees after a year to identify the changes experienced and how they were sustained. The findings from this study are expected to benefit the coaching profession on what coachees experience as the long term effects of coaching are and how sustainability of changes in thinking and behaviours resulting from coaching may be better understood and coaching practice aligned accordingly.

The Literature on Executive Coaching

Executive coaching *per se* emerged in the 1990s as an intervention geared specifically to changing the behavior of middle- and senior-level managers (Fieldman & Lankau, 2005). An overview of the literature relevant to executive coaching indicates that most studies primarily aim at knowing the outcomes at the end of coaching.

Studies on long term effects or sustainability of changes over time

Bennett (2010) observed that there are two purposes of executive coaching: (1) the attainment of the client's goals or outcomes as the immediate consequence and (2) some form of learning for sustainability. Few studies have however explored the impact of coaching beyond the end of the coaching intervention, with follow up studies conducted after a time varying from 3 months to 5 years from the end of the coaching intervention.

Within the limited literature on sustained long-term effects of coaching the key findings are: Increased self-awareness (Bozer, Sarros & Santora, 2013; Gegner, 1997; Harrington, 2006; Koroleva, 2016; Wasylshyn, 2003; Whyteco, 2014), sustained behavioural changes such as: feeling responsible for performance (Gegner, 1997; Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas & Kucine, (2003); building better relationships (Wasylshyn, 2003); openness to new behaviours (Finn, Mason and Griffin, 2006); choice responsibility (Harrington, 2009); change of habits

(Outhwaite & Bettridge, 2009); sustained behavioural changes (Korn/Ferry, 2009), setting clear goals and action (Finn et al., 2006; Smither et al., 2003; improvement in performance (Smither et al., 2003), better confidence and motivational ability (Wasylyshyn, 2003; Whyteco, 2014). self-efficacy (Finn et al, 2006), changes in thinking (Outhwaite & Bettridge, 2009; Whyteco, 2014). These findings are observed to be the direct effects of coaching relating to the coaching goals or objectives. Some indirect effects of coaching were found in Whyteco's (2014) study, which stated that some important personal changes and transformation occurred as an indirect effect of coaching, and the long term impacts did not always relate to coaching goals.

Factors for successful long term impacts of coaching as seen from the literature are in three categories: (1) coachee factors: Being ready for change (Koroleva, 2016); coachability (commitment, motivation, accountability and self-efficacy) (Korn/Ferry, 2009), (2) coaching relationship (Koroleva, 2016), and (3) coaching related factors: Setting clear goals (Smither et al., 2003); Coachee action and feedback from coach (Smither et al., 2003); Koroleva, 2016).

It is also seen that some authors reported barriers or obstacles to sustaining changes. Gegner (1997) found that the obstacles to sustaining long term changes are: (1) time, (2) environment and (3) other pressures. Outhwaite and Bettridge (2009) observed that a major barrier to sustaining change is 'mindset' (individual's knowledge, awareness, and perspectives).

Therefore, the research questions this study addressed are: (1) How do participants perceive the effects of coaching and sustain changes a year later? (2) What challenges were experienced by the coachees in sustaining their changes? And (3) what factors enabled the coachees in sustaining their changes?

Methodology

This research study is practitioner-research (Costley, Elliott, & Gibbs, 2010). with qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) to explore lived experiences and perceptions of the coachees. The participants in this study were selected purposively by following up seven previously coached managers a year ago. Written informed consent to participate in this research was obtained from the seven participants and also from the company (where four of these seven participants were still working at the same company), and ethics clearance obtained for the research.

This practitioner-researcher was completely out of contact with the same coachees over the year after coaching ended, and this research gave an opportunity to revisit and interact with the same coachees, after a year, with natural curiosity and inquisitiveness to hear about their experiences of being coached, any progress made by the individuals or challenges faced, besides the formal research inquiry. The coachees too were not expecting the same practitioner-researcher to visit them a year after coaching ended, since this extended research was not a pre-planned event. They came to know about this research on the perceived sustained changes only when the practitioner-researcher approached them during the first visit

with the research proposal to explain the purpose and modalities of this research to obtain their consent to participate and also the company consent. The coachees were quite willing to talk and give research interviews. Everyone kept an open mind and talked freely during the interviews conducted in the next visit for which prior appointments were fixed on mutually convenient dates and time schedules. Through this research the practitioner researcher was also looking forward to learning and assessing how his own coaching approach worked in their case. Grant (2013) observed that research as part of one's practice, when conducted by a practitioner well trained in research methods, has the potential to be extremely valuable and has made a significant contribution to the emergence and dissemination of the findings for development of strong evidence base for coaching.

On the other hand some scholars might argue (Rooney, 2005) that because the practitioner-researcher, who is an "insider" by virtue of his working relationship with the participants, he or she is no longer "objective". Rooney (2005) cautions about the likelihood of practitioner's prior relationship with participants impacting on their behaviour and conversation during the research interviews, which may be different from an independent researcher. Such a possibility could exist if there was an ongoing and continued relationship between the practitioner-researcher and the participants, which is not the case in the context of this study.

The practitioner-researcher kept an open mind with academic interest throughout the process of this study to minimise own biases entering and affecting the findings in some way, and also had a peer, his previous Masters' research supervisor, to review the *process*, methodology and findings through several collaborative discussions and reviews that took place by means of emails, telephone talks and also Skype.

Consistent with IPA practice, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews of the participants were conducted using open-ended questions, audio-recorded and transcriptions obtained from a service provider. The interview questions aimed at eliciting how the participants experienced the achievement of their coaching goals after a year compared with immediately after the end of coaching, the changes they experienced and sustained, their overall coaching experience and other effects the participants experienced as a result of coaching, what challenges they experienced and what factors enabled them to sustain the changes.

The transcripts of all audio-recorded interviews were analysed using IPA (Smith et al., 1999; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The process of analysis was iteratively carried out and involved reading and re-reading the transcript a number of times. In the first stage the transcript of one participant was taken for idiographic analysis making notes on interesting significant points while understanding and interpreting what he was saying on his experiences and perceptions relevant to the research questions, simultaneously writing theme titles using key words. From the emergent themes and the clusters associated with them, connections were identified that led to identifying and listing superordinate themes. The extracts from the participant's transcript were suffixed with page and line number for reference. This process was

repeated to analyse interviews of the other participants, until the master list of themes was consolidated and finalised for the group using the guidelines given by Smith (2011). Transcripts were de-identified and pseudonyms are used in this report.

Findings

It was observed that, overall, six out of seven participants in this study were found to have made positive progress in their goals and career, and one however lagged behind because of lack of action to change own behaviour. With regard to the first research question, this study identified five themes of the effects of coaching the participants experienced and sustained a year later. These are discussed and interpreted in relation to the literature as follows.

1. Goal setting, focus and achievement:

Most participants experienced and sustained this change which in their view benefitted them personally and professionally. Much of the executive (leader/manager) coaching is conducted for helping the clients define, set and achieve goals. A sample quote from one participant is:

“It (coaching) has changed me. Made me define the business goal and find my way of achieving the ultimate goal” (Dick, 5.13); “that (coaching) helped me become more focused” (Dick, 15.21).

This theme supports similar findings from the literature, setting *clear goals* (Smither et al., 2003) and *action plans for goals* (Finn et al., 2006)

2. Ability to think differently:

All participants learned to think “out of the box”, taking multiple thinking approaches and broader perspectives in exploring their issues, which is a perceived change experienced and sustained by all participants. This is the core philosophy of coaching -- to influence client’s thinking process. Sample quotes from one participant are:

“Coaching enabled, taught me to think differently, to think broadly...” (Ben, 6.4)

“enabled me to analyse a problem or a situation from various angles...” (Ben, 6.5)

A change in thinking, as a sustained effect of coaching, was reported in the literature (Outhwaite & Bettridge, 2009; Whyteco, 2014).

3. Changes in behaviour:

Most participants experienced and sustained behavioural modifications found beneficial for them in the pursuit of their goals. Achieving beneficial changes in behaviour is also among the most common aims of coaching. Sample quote from one participant is:

"I had to change the way I did things with people...my friends. Now the new things that I am into (part time studies) and I have to give them time. I would say a lot has changed." (Kahn 26.17)

Several coaching researchers reported sustained behavioural changes such as: feeling responsible for performance (Gegner, 1997; Smither et al., 2003), building better relationships (Wasylyshyn, 2003), openness to new behaviours (Finn et al., 2006), choice responsibility (Harrington, 2009), change of habits (Outhwaite & Bettridge, 2009), sustained behavioural changes (Korn/Ferry, 2009).

4. Increased self-awareness:

All participants became more aware of their own strengths, capabilities, weaknesses and shortcomings consequential to coaching, that led them to modify their own thinking and behaviour to pursue their goals; a change most of them experienced and sustained. Sample quotes for example are:

"Being aware of these things now...it's constructive self-awareness" (Charlie, 21.12)

"I always knew about them but, at times, you take all these things for granted until the coach asks you questions – so that you see that." (Dag, 12.16)

Increased self-awareness is a key sustained effect found from coaching research (Bozer et.al., 2013; Gegner, 1997; Harrington, 2006; Koroleva, 2016; Wasylyshyn, 2003; Whyteco, 2014).

5. Personal growth and development with increased self-confidence:

This is an interesting finding from the experiences of most coachees having made positive progress personally and professionally, such as moving up the career ladder, going into self-employment, indicating some indirect changes most participants experienced and sustained. Some example quotes are given below.

"It (his confidence) is very high. I'm more courageous than before" (Kahn, 12.25)

"The setting up of this (Law) firm is a success of the coaching process...helping me have the confidence to actually get away from the fear of the unknown and actually getting into doing it..." (Neel, 10.3)

In the literature it is found that better confidence and motivational ability (Wasylyshyn, 2003; Whyteco, 2014) is a sustained effect of coaching. This theme of perceived indirect effects is in agreement with Whyteco's (2014) research finding which stated that long term impacts of being coached didn't always relate directly to coaching goals.

As regards the research question 2, two themes were identified as the challenges experienced by the participants in an effort to sustain the changes. These are (1) lack of time and (2) difficulties in making individual changes. All participants generally experienced lack of time to derive full benefits of the coaching intervention and also to reflect sufficiently due to work pressure and shortage of time and resources. For example, one participant said,

"It's just a series of issues..." (Charlie, 9.25) "...time and space. Because it needs..." (Charlie, 21.29) "Sustained behavioural change requires time and space to practice" (Charlie, (4.17). Yeah, there is no time to think". (Charlie, 5.9)

Some coachees experienced individual difficulties that challenged their attempts to sustain the changes. For instance, Kahn admitted that he was faced with challenges of old behaviours popping up occasionally.

"Challenges were there..." (Kahn, 26.5) "...Temptations would be there..." (Kahn, 17.8)

In the literature, it is observed that Gegner (1997) found the following similar obstacles to sustaining long term changes: (1) element of time, (2) environment and (3) other pressures. Outhwaite & Bettridge (2009) reported that a major barrier to sustaining change is 'mindset'.

In respect of the research question 3, the factors that enabled participants to sustain changes are: (1) Self-discipline and (2) Focus and Self-motivation to change and develop. As one participant stated,

"But nothing is going to stop me from going forward even if I do not perform it as I would have hoped to, but I am still going to push on further." (Kahn, 13.11)

An example quote from a participant self-motivated for professional growth is given below:

"Desire to keep...to learn some more, to keep growing." (Ben, 7.7)

Conclusions and implications for practice

The practitioner-researcher concludes from the findings that sustained effects of coaching over a time are linked to coachee satisfaction derived from fulfilling their goals and desires. There is a need for the coaching process to identify and work on coachee interests to ensure that coachees gain satisfaction (aligned to the 'Law of Effect' in Psychology) in achieving desired goals and thereby experience durable changes in thinking and behaviour. The coach's role in reinforcing client interests/passion is thus crucial in achieving client satisfaction leading to sustained changes in client behaviours. The role of passion in sustainable psychological wellbeing is a well recognised phenomenon (Vallerand, 2012). The coach would do well working with client interests turning them into passions helping them to realise durable changes and

goals. The Practitioner-researcher would like to state further that the evidence based goal-centred solution focused coaching approach worked well in this case contributing to sustained effects.

Recommendations

To address the chances of practitioner-researcher-bias creeping in, further studies may be conducted by independent researcher other than the coach. There is ample scope for further research on this topic using different coaching approaches, longer periods and variety of coaching situations and samples to gain wider knowledge base.

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