

# Is executive coaching more effective than other management training and development methods?

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to present an analysis of the results of applying executive coaching (EC) as a management competency training and development strategy, setting up a comparison with other known training and development methods.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A dual sample is used. On the one hand, information is collected from a sample of 100 managers who participated as coachees in an EC process. On the other hand, the study provides the opinions of 236 HR managers as prescribers and promoters of company executive training and development actions.

**Findings** – The results suggest that EC is an effective management training and development method (MTDM). Furthermore, it is confirmed to be more effective than the rest of the techniques analysed in relation with sustained and observable management behaviour changes, whilst also providing advantages and drawbacks in its use.

**Practical implications** – Coaching seems to provide the most effective method for altering a selected number of concrete managerial behaviours, although its cost, length, and specificity limit its capacity to be used exclusively as a tool for continuous and generalised management training.

**Originality/value** – In addition to incorporating two different samples and points of view within the analysis, this work contributes evidence regarding behaviours addressed in EC processes – a feature that has received little analysis in the academic literature – and breaks new ground by comparing the results of this method with other MTDMs in terms of their degree of effectiveness in attaining observable and lasting behaviour changes.

**Keywords** Mentoring, Management development, Coaching, Training methods, Continuing development, Executive training

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Both the firms and the executives themselves are aware of the importance of training for performing managerial tasks. They generally accept that there is a positive relationship between executives' skills intensity and their contribution to the firm's success. They are aware of the need for continuous management training as a means of permanent development, especially within the framework of a highly dynamic competitive environment (Castanias and Helfat, 2001; Pickett, 1998).

Nonetheless, firms are still doubtful as to the benefits of the different management training and development methods (MTDMs), due to a lack of knowledge of their specific effects on their executives' development and on company results. In this context, Saks *et al.* (2011, p. 181) frame the question, "But is management training and development effective?"

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The managerial training market is opaque and contains strong information asymmetries between suppliers and demanders. It is therefore hard for firms to appraise the quality and utility of different training techniques and providers. At the same time, despite the great popularity of the different practices for developing executive competencies and the need to utilise them, in general, little research has been carried out on their use and effectiveness (Phillips and Phillips, 2001; Suutari and Viitala, 2008), and the results of the available research are somewhat discouraging, ranging from a marked asymmetry between programs (Collins and Holton, 2004) to results that have proved less effective than presumed (Powell and Yalcin, 2010), to moderately effective results (Burke and Day, 1986). These limitations can lead to problems of adverse selection that restrict the training investment to be made (Landeta *et al.*, 2009; Barrutia *et al.*, 2014).

This low level of satisfaction with the instruments employed in management training and development in organisations (Luthans, 2002) also appears to explain the constant emergence of new practices and fashions in executive training. One of the most important practices to emerge in recent years is executive coaching (EC), which offers an apparently more attractive alternative to classic executive training tools (Kilburg, 1996; Feldman and Lankau, 2005; Joo, 2005; Ely *et al.*, 2010; Cameron and Ebrahimi, 2014; Page and de Haan, 2014; de Haan *et al.*, 2016; Grover and Furnham, 2016).

EC is an MTDM that seeks to match managerial competencies with the requirements and context of an organisation. The coach has a commitment, in a collaborative partnership with the executive, to establish and clarify the purpose and objectives and develop an action plan designed to satisfy them. Through regular meetings, the coach accompanies the executive in a process designed to modify particular behaviours at work (Passmore, 2007; Lewis-Duarte and Bligh, 2012). Behavioural changes achieved through such practices tend not to be massive, but occasional, and focus on specific kinds of conduct. This means that each form of behaviour needs to be worked on individually before different types of conduct are integrated within the overall behaviour. Many scholars identify this individually tailored nature of EC as one of the main reasons for its success (Witherspoon and White, 1996). One characteristic feature of coaching is that its central component is behavioural practice. Thus, through this kind of totally personalised intervention, where privacy, a non-judgemental perspective, and session confidentiality offer the coachee a safe environment (Jones *et al.*, 2016), the executive is encouraged to develop new approaches and conducts and assess them, in order to improve efficiency through constructive feedback.

The greatest added value of coaching seems, therefore, to be the increased probability of learning being transferred to the professional field (Bartlett, 2007; Knight, 2009; Bright and Crockett, 2012), given its strong orientation towards customised transmission of behavioural knowledge and towards the evaluation and reinforcement of the progress made by the executive.

Despite the great acceptance of coaching in the professional field as a human resources development practice (Liu and Batt, 2010; Page and de Haan, 2014) and its success and popularity as an MTDM, its effectiveness is hard to evaluate and there are no conclusive results on the matter. Studies conducted to measure EC results are limited by the methodology adopted, either because they exclusively rely on self-reporting for assessing the effectiveness of the instrument (Feldman and Lankau, 2005; Grover and Furnham, 2016) or because the sample sizes used are generally small (Gyllensten and Palmer, 2005; Grant *et al.*, 2009; de Haan *et al.*, 2016). Some studies have also expressed a degree of scepticism as to its effectiveness, calling into question the return on the investment made in establishing the practice (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006). Finally, although recent works comparing different training techniques (Suutari and Viitala, 2008; Martin *et al.*, 2014) were analysed, there are no studies considering EC and comparing it to other MTDMs.

This work helps bridge the gap in the assessment of the results of different MTDs, particularly EC practices. It first assesses behavioural changes resulting from a coaching process. Second, it compares the results of EC with those of other techniques usually employed to achieve behavioural change, offering a dual assessment – by executives who have participated in an EC process and by HR managers, usually responsible for choosing, implementing and assessing MTD activities. Third, it identifies the main advantages and drawbacks of EC as an MTD.

The results of this research will therefore provide heads of firms with information that will allow them to assess the suitability of applying EC in their organisations, based on their objectives and suggest some outcomes they might hope to obtain from other alternative techniques. This should help them to better select actions geared towards securing the management competencies their organisation requires.

The document reviews the literature on management competencies and their alignment with the firms' needs. It also considers the effectiveness and limitations of the training practices commonly to bring about behaviour change in executives. This is followed by an explanation of the methodology used in the empirical study, and a discussion of the results. The paper concludes with a series of conclusions and implications for human resource management.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1 Alignment of management competencies with organisational needs

For an organisation to be successful in achieving its mission, the individual and collective competencies of its staff must be aligned with the strategic company management proposal (Cardy and Selvarajan, 2006). For this reason, it must be developed taking the needs of the firm and its component individuals as its reference point. This is especially important in the case of managerial resources, owing to their strategic nature and potential for influencing the organisation's long-term results (Seibert *et al.*, 1995; Graham and Tarbell, 2006).

Management competency is the set of knowledge, capacities, or abilities manifested in observable (and usual) behaviours directly associated with the technical excellence of executives in the exercise of their job (Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Boyatzis, 2008). Developing executives' competencies therefore involves improving a wide range of behavioural, cognitive, and social knowledge and capacities (manifested in observable behaviours) through different training systems and initiatives (Day and Halpin, 2004).

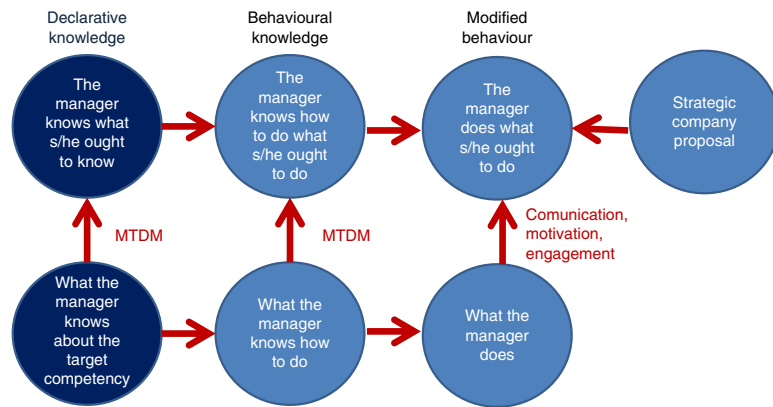
Fitts (1964), Huber (1991), and Anderson (1995) identify three sequential stages in the learning process: a first, cognitive stage, in which learning is based on the acquisition of knowledge of competencies (declarative knowledge); a second, associative stage, related to application of this knowledge (procedural or behavioural knowledge); and a third, autonomous stage, in which procedural knowledge is applied automatically, and where a point is sometimes reached at which declarative knowledge is gradually lost.

Organisations must therefore align their executives' competencies with their strategic needs. To do so, they have to act upon these individuals' procedural knowledge, in order to change their behaviours permanently (see Figure 1).

From a behaviourist perspective of management development, therefore, once the management competencies aligned with the company's strategic proposal have been identified, organisations will seek to modify their executives' behaviour and steer it towards the desired behaviour in line with the target competency. For this purpose, executives may have to adapt their previous levels of both declarative and, above all, behavioural knowledge, with support from MTDs (Figure 1).

Seibert *et al.* (1995) hold that competency development requires action-directed training, in the sense that it must be connected to work situations if the competency is to take on a genuine overall significance. Accordingly, in competency-based training processes, the learning processes to be encouraged should be geared towards action by the participant,

**Figure 1.**  
The process of  
declarative and  
behavioural  
knowledge alignment



**Source:** Own work adapted from Fitts (1964) and Anderson (1995)

taking as its reference the organisational framework within which the work situation is a learning situation.

Nonetheless, training practices whose activities are oriented exclusively towards transmitting declarative knowledge, aimed at impacting the individual's cognitive capacity, continue to be the norm (Greiner *et al.*, 2003). This type of training has been widely criticised, principally where transversal competences are involved, since it fails to put the knowledge –and thus the connection between learning and associated behaviour change – into practice (Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). Companies therefore need training practices, or a combination of practices that simultaneously affect individuals' cognitive and behavioural capacities.

## 2.2 MTDMs

A great number of techniques exist for the application in managerial training and development. One classic criterion used to classify this set of methods is to differentiate between planned development techniques, following a programme conducted by the organisation and/or executive to obtain the competencies required; and unplanned development techniques, normally run outside working hours, on a casual non-programmed basis (Mumford, 1997).

Another common criterion for categorisation is to distinguish between on-the-job and off-the-job methods (Woodall and Winstanley, 1998), depending on whether training mainly takes place in-house or outside the firm. Generally, on-the-job methods form the part of programs organised by the organisation itself and tend to adapt better to the specific needs of executives and the firm, whereas off-the-job methods require the participation of outside agents, who are usually specialized in training practice, but less so in satisfying the actual needs of the organisation (Neary and O'Grady, 2000).

This aspect of training customization is also the key when it comes to distinguishing between formalized training techniques – which bundle the knowledge that is to be transmitted within courses that are appropriate for a whole group of potential clients or pupils (internal or external courses, of different formats and lengths) – and individualised management development practices or activities which, while they may be planned in line with their objectives, are relatively free in their development (mentoring, coaching, job rotation, etc.) (Yukl, 2002). Following the management development approach outlined in the previous section, Table I offers a summary of the characteristics of a selection of the planned training practices most commonly used in organisations today.

| Method                                 | Definition  | Classification  | Advantages   | Limitations  | References  |
|--|---|---|--|--|---|
| Executive coaching (EC)                | Based on a regular meeting between an executive and a coach<br>The coach accompanies the executive in a process designed to modify particular forms of behaviour at work, establishing and clarifying the purpose and objectives and developing an action plan designed to fulfil these through constructive feedback | On-the-job, mainly Individualised Behavioural knowledge High cost                                     | Highly personalised<br>Allows lessons learned to be put into practise<br>Active attention  | Focusses on only a few forms of behaviour  | Passmore, 2007<br>Lewis-Duarte and Bligh (2012), Bright and Crockett (2012), Jones <i>et al.</i> (2016) |
| Attendance-based training courses (TC) | Approach designed for subjects to receive, the declarative knowledge they need, usually passively, helping to generate reflections, attitudes, and innovative behaviour to develop the competencies targeted by the courses   | Off-the-job, mainly Formal Declarative Knowledge Moderate cost  | Easy control of contents<br>Flexible format in terms of content, duration, etc.  | Not tailored to individual needs<br>Passive attention<br>Difficult to translate to executive practise<br>No post-course follow-up  | Bowles and Picano (2006), Knight (2009), Suutari and Viitala (2008)                                     |
| E-learning courses (ELC)               | Online training courses. Can also be partially classroom-based (blended learning)<br><br>Rungtusanatham <i>et al.</i> (2004)  | Off-the-job, mainly Formal Declarative Knowledge Low cost   | Freedom and speed of access, flexibility, overcomes barriers of time and space<br>Capacity to update contents continually  | Less effective in the development of generic abilities<br>Little or no interaction<br>Scant motivation offered   | Gascó <i>et al.</i> (2004), Suutari and Viitala (2008),   |
| Job rotation (JR)                      | A development activity that promotes a kind of basically experiential learning, where managers gradually acquire different knowledge, abilities, and skills as they perform tasks and responsibilities corresponding to each of the jobs they engage with   | On-the-job Individualised Behavioural and declarative knowledge Low explicit cost, high implicit cost | Learning experiences of theoretical and practical knowledge, Capacity to see problems from different perspectives<br>Respect for other functions<br>Appreciation of the need for collaboration | Possible lack of alignment between learning and needs<br>Possible drop in productivity level owing to the effects of the learning curve<br>Possible negative employee perceptions, poor person-work assignation, and general inequalities in the workplace | Suutari and Viitala (2008), Casad (2012), Campion <i>et al.</i> (1994), Dragoni <i>et al.</i> (2009)    |

(continued)

**Table I.**  
Management training and development methods

| Method                | Definition   | Classification  | Advantages  | Limitations   | References  |
|-----------------------|--|---|---|---|---|
| Outdoor training (OT) | Technique or programme frequently applied in executive competency development, which uses nature as a classroom and experimental learning as a method  | Off-the-job, mainly Formal Behavioural Knowledge High cost                        | Very practical Generally entertaining, training and recreational activity   | Poorly adapted to individual needs Learning and transfer to the workplace disputed  | Tuson (1994), Goldenberg (2001), Jones and Oswick (2007), Burke and Collins (2001)                              |
| Mentoring (M)         | Method that is grounded on a system of tutoring or support, where a more senior executive, generally working as a volunteer for no monetary gain, guides and orients an employee or manager with whom s/he is not associated in the chain of command and who is professionally less experienced, to allow the mentee to achieve professional maturity and develop a set of specific competencies | On-the-job Individualised Behavioural and declarative knowledge Low explicit cost | Helps mentees to secure improvements in their professional career and personal life and helps mentees to obtain improvements in their own promotion, reputation, personal satisfaction, and knowledge Transmission of knowledge on the rules and values of the profession and/or organisation | Need for trained and motivated mentors Under the control of the training transmitted by the mentor (risk) Need to guarantee confidentiality and harmony between mentee and mentor | Kram (1985), Scandura (1992), Allen <i>et al.</i> (2004), Eby <i>et al.</i> (2008), Sketch <i>et al.</i> (2001) |

Table I.

### 3. Methodology

To meet the objectives of this study, information was obtained from two independent samples: the first made up of executive coachees and the second of HR managers from Spanish firms. These were examined separately or together, depending on the specific aim pursued.

The first subsample comprises 100 Spanish executives ( $n = 100$ ) who had taken part in at least one EC process with a certified coach. Their responses refer to the most recent EC process in which they had been involved (in cases where they had participated in more than one). The executives had an average age of 41.0, and 34.4 per cent were women. Access was provided through two certifying associations and four coaching consultancy companies, as well as various firms and business associations promoting training initiatives through EC. Data were collected via an online questionnaire. The website for collecting the online responses was active between January and June 2014. The executive coachees were asked for information on the characteristics of the coaching process, the different degrees of behaviour change experienced, and their perception of the capacity of the different training techniques presented in the questionnaire to change managerial behaviour.

The second subsample consisted of 236 HR managers ( $n = 236$ ), selected at random from the population of all firms registered in the SABI (Iberian Balance Sheets Analysis System) database with registered offices in Spain, employing 200 or more workers – a total of 3,990 firms. The information was gathered via telephone surveys, in January and February 2014.

The HR managers were asked to answer the same questions as the executive coachees assessing the effectiveness of coaching in bringing about behaviour change, as well as questions assessing the other managerial training techniques selected. In this case, however,

they were asked to reply on the basis of their accumulated knowledge and experience in executive resource management and development. Additionally, as prescribers and promoters of MTD actions, they were also asked, by way of an open question, to say what they considered to be the main advantages and drawbacks of EC as compared to other techniques.

The scale used to measure the behaviour change variable was adapted from measurements proposed by Ely and Zaccaro (2011). This consists of eight indicators assessing: whether there has been any modification in the coachee's behaviour; whether this change has been sustained over time and whether it is perceived by other people in the organisation (superiors, colleagues, and subordinates); also whether there is a better performance of managerial tasks, a better fit with company needs, and a greater acceptance by the coachee of the changes. All items were evaluated using a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 represents a very low degree of agreement with the assertion of change, and 7 a very high degree of agreement. Reliability analyses indicate that this scale has a very high level of internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.937$ ).

To make a comparative assessment of the effectiveness of the different training techniques, the informants (executive coachees and HR managers) were asked to score the following management development practices from 1 to 7 for their contribution to regular observable change in the executive's behaviour: coaching, long external courses (MBAs, etc.), short external courses, in-house courses, day schools/seminars/conferences, job rotation as part of a management development plan, e-learning, outdoor training, and mentoring.

The questionnaire was initially reviewed by various academics and later, in a focus group, by a group of 13 professional coaching experts (HR managers, coaches, and coachees) in the Autumn of 2013, guaranteeing content validity. The final questionnaire pre-test was drawn up with this group of experts.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1 Behaviour change resulting from a coaching process

The first question is whether there is a change in behaviour as a result of being involved in a coaching process. The results of this study suggest that EC has a strong capacity to modify executive behaviour. In a joint evaluation by executive coachees and HR managers, the eight dimensions related to behaviour change scored an average of 5.14 out of 7.

The average score for the coachee subsample was higher than that for HR managers (5.36 compared to 4.93). The score was also higher for seven of the eight indicators measured, although the difference is significant in only five, appearing to reflect the existence of a certain optimistic bias in the coachees' judgements (see Table II).

These results are therefore in line with others supporting the idea that EC contributes effectively to sustained behaviour change (Wasylyshyn, 2003) and that changes brought about in the coachee after the intervention are perceived by their collaborators.

| Variables (measurements of behaviour change)   | Coachees |         | HR managers |         | Total    |         | Brown-Forsythe |
|--|----------|---------|-------------|---------|----------|---------|----------------|
|  | <i>n</i> | Average | <i>n</i>    | Average | <i>n</i> | Average |                |
| Modification of observable behaviours          | 99       | 5.495   | 125         | 4.896   | 224      | 5.161   | 17.068***      |
| The changes are sustained over time            | 98       | 5.561   | 124         | 4.581   | 222      | 5.013   | 38.625***      |
| The changes are perceived by subordinates      | 95       | 5.221   | 125         | 4.936   | 220      | 5.059   | 2.744          |
| The changes are perceived by peers             | 92       | 5.098   | 125         | 4.880   | 217      | 4.972   | 1.420          |
| The changes are perceived by managers          | 86       | 4.919   | 125         | 4.968   | 211      | 4.948   | 0.057          |
| Improvement in performance of managerial tasks | 97       | 5.464   | 122         | 5.074   | 219      | 5.247   | 5.880*         |
| Behaviours more in line with company needs     | 95       | 5.474   | 125         | 5.056   | 220      | 5.236   | 6.172*         |
| Greater capacity for adaptation to changes     | 98       | 5.612   | 124         | 5.064   | 222      | 5.306   | 10.994**       |

**Notes:** Differences significant are for: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table II.**  
Assessment of coachees and HR managers concerning behaviour changes derived from an EC process

#### 4.2 Comparison of the effectiveness of different MTDMs for managerial behaviour changes

The second issue was whether EC is more effective than other MTDMs commonly employed. The first conclusion that may be drawn from Table III is that, in the opinion of the individuals who make up this sample, EC is the MTDM that contributes most to sustained observable behaviour change in executives.

The results also suggest a difference between the relative preferences of executive coachees and HR managers, with the score given by the two groups significantly different for all techniques except outdoor training (see Table III). Indeed, when compared to HR managers, executive coachees opt more for individualised MTDMs (coaching, job rotation, and mentoring), which are more flexible and more likely to match their personal and contextual needs, and which more specifically address behavioural knowledge.

Human resource managers, in contrast, show a greater inclination than executive coachees for formalized techniques (courses in different areas, day schools, seminars, conferences, and e-learning) focussing more on the transfer of declarative knowledge and offering a design that fits better with the organisation's needs, budget, planning possibilities, and capacity to control results.

In order to ascertain whether the assessment of EC by all informants is significantly higher than that for all other MTDMs, a paired samples *t*-test was then conducted, this time grouping the two subsamples (coachees and HR managers) together. EC shows positive and significant differences ( $p < 0.001$ ) when compared to all other techniques, and is, overall, the technique deemed to be most effective for bringing about behaviour changes.

Techniques targeting acquisition of behavioural knowledge with a more personalised relation with the trainee (coaching, mentoring, job rotation, etc.) scored higher than those concentrating on transmission of declarative knowledge; this is consistent with an increasing trend in the literature to stress the need to use techniques that are oriented towards action and experiential management development (Seibert *et al.*, 1995; Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Greiner *et al.*, 2003; Suutari and Viitala, 2008). In addition to these two features (experientiality and orientation towards action), Webster-Wright (2009) notes that in the area of professional development, training should be continuous, social, and relevant to practice, all aspects that these techniques usually tend to fulfil.

Thus, in line with the findings by Davis (2014), classic on-site training structured around courses with different formats does not appear to be the most effective way of projecting MTD. This does not mean that it is not relevant or appropriate for the transfer of declarative knowledge, but that it must necessarily be complemented by an opportunity to put the knowledge acquired into practice in a real setting, where real business issues can be resolved. In this regard, the lowest-rated techniques are those that involve more passive pupil behaviour: online training, where the knowledge transmitted is basically technical and

| MTDMs                                  | Coachees  |              | HR managers |              | Total      |              | Brown-Forsythe   |
|--|-----------|--------------|-------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------------|
|  | <i>n</i>  | Average      | <i>n</i>    | Average      | <i>n</i>   | Average      |                  |
| <b>Coaching (EC)</b>                   | <b>99</b> | <b>5.909</b> | <b>129</b>  | <b>5.178</b> | <b>228</b> | <b>5.496</b> | <b>24.346***</b> |
| Long external training courses (LETC)  | 76        | 4.816        | 151         | 5.278        | 227        | 5.123        | 7.648**          |
| Short external training courses (SETC) | 92        | 4.315        | 218         | 4.706        | 310        | 4.590        | 5.513*           |
| Internal training courses (ITC)        | 91        | 4.538        | 207         | 5.014        | 298        | 4.869        | 8.728**          |
| Day schools/seminars/conferences (DSC) | 92        | 3.870        | 184         | 4.320        | 276        | 4.170        | 5.569*           |
| Job rotation (JR)                      | 71        | 5.310        | 135         | 4.800        | 206        | 4.976        | 8.758**          |
| E-learning courses (ELC)               | 74        | 3.432        | 166         | 4.060        | 240        | 3.867        | 9.346**          |
| Outdoor training (OT)                  | 69        | 4.768        | 148         | 4.635        | 217        | 4.677        | 0.485            |
| Mentoring (M)                          | 56        | 5.446        | 91          | 4.714        | 147        | 4.993        | 14.389***        |

**Notes:** Significant differences are for: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table III.**  
Assessment by coachees and HR managers of the contribution of different techniques to a lasting observable behaviour change in (coachee) executives



interaction with the rest of the students is very limited; and conferences, seminars, and day schools, which also involve little interaction and are only slightly –if at all– tailored to the specific needs of each executive. This also squares with the primary trend in the literature.

Attendance-based courses and outdoor training stand in a half-way position, although probably for different reasons: attendance-based courses provide structuring and appropriate transmission of declarative knowledge, but suffer from a lack of action and behavioural knowledge transmission, while outdoor training concentrates on behavioural knowledge, tends to be lightly structured, does not address technical knowledge and, as in the case of classroom-based courses, the training is only tailored to a small degree to personal requirements.

#### 4.3 Advantages and drawbacks of coaching as an MTDM

Having analysed the effectiveness of EC as an MTDM, we will now focus on the main advantages and drawbacks, in order to provide HR officers with the tools to more accurately assess whether it should be introduced.

Out of the 176 HR managers who answered this question, 52.27 per cent said that the main advantage of this methodology is the customization of competency development and the way in which it adapts to an executive's specific needs.

Others felt that the principal advantage consisted of improvements in team leadership skill (7.95 per cent), and the fact that it makes it possible to address certain basic aspects and behaviour of professional/personal life that are difficult to tackle with other training practices (6.85 per cent). Among the advantages least-frequently mentioned (fewer than 5 per cent of informants) was an increase in managerial self-awareness, encouragement of attitudes and capacities, and the practical nature of the methodology.

With regard to the perceived disadvantages of this approach, 20.37 per cent of HR managers felt that the main handicap was the high cost. Other factors mentioned included: excessive length of time required (sessions), leading to a loss in work hours (9.88 per cent); difficulty finding a good professional coach because of the prevailing intrusiveness in this market (6.79 per cent); the time spread involved in the process (6.17 per cent); and the commitment and motivation required from the executive for the method to be effective (7.41 per cent). Other disadvantages mentioned by a smaller number of HR managers include *inter alia* the scepticism of senior management; lack of applicability; the enormous variety of courses on offer; and the fact that it is difficult to measure its impact.

The evidence from HR managers therefore squares with the literature (Witherspoon and White, 1996; Bozer and Joo, 2015; Jones *et al.*, 2016), stressing the personalisation of competency development to the executive's needs, and its suitability for addressing attitudes, abilities, and skills that are difficult to develop with traditional techniques, because of its eminently practical nature, focussing on the executive's key problems and needs.

However, the major limitations noted by HR managers include some practical aspects that have received little attention in the literature: the high cost (also mentioned by Sherman and Freas, 2004; Phillips and Phillips, 2005; Ely *et al.*, 2010), and the protracted time (Ely *et al.*, 2010) required (which also translates into increased cost). They also mentioned difficulties in finding a good coach and in securing a commitment from executives and senior management, factors that have also been addressed in the literature (Kombarakaran *et al.*, 2008; Rekalde *et al.* 2015), mainly in defining the conditions necessary for success in a coaching process.

### 5. Conclusions and implications for management

Organisations can use a wide variety of MTDMs. The main differences between them are the level of orientation towards the acquisition of declarative or behavioural knowledge and the degree to which they are tailored to the specific needs of each executive or organisation. In principle, the methods that facilitate the acquisition of behavioural

knowledge on an individualised basis would appear to be the most appropriate for achieving the change in behaviour needed to develop the target management competencies, and EC is one such technique.

This work offers a multiple assessment of the capacity of coaching to achieve an observable and lasting modification in executive behaviour. It was constructed from the responses of two broad samples of managers: executives from different firms who have engaged as coaches in a coaching process and HR managers who are familiar with coaching and have, in the main, applied it. The study also compared the capacity of EC to that of the most commonly used MTDMs. Various implications can be drawn from this analysis for decision making in executive staff development:

- (1) Coaching is a very effective technique for developing the management competencies that an organisation needs, due to its ability to modify managerial behaviours in a directed, personalised way, and make such changes last.
- (2) It is the technique that meets with the widest acceptance and is the highest rated among both executives and HR managers, thus increasing its probability of success.
- (3) The high level of acceptance among executives for EC and also other personalised action-gearred techniques such as mentoring and job rotation, allow this technique to be applied, not just as an instrument for changing behaviour, but also as an item of motivation and reward.
- (4) Human resource managers, however, also continue to trust attendance-based executive training courses, especially when they are of longer duration or internal, possibly because of the opportunity they provide for better control of the content transmitted and the process result.
- (5) Management competency development, aligned with the strategic needs of the organisation and executives' interests, requires the use of different training techniques that will guarantee the appropriate transmission of the declarative and behavioural knowledge that executives need to modify their behaviour in the direction that the organisation seeks.
- (6) Of all these techniques, coaching seems to provide the most effective method for altering a selected number of concrete managerial behaviours, although its cost, length, and specificity limit its capacity to be used exclusively as a tool for continuous and generalised management training.

These conclusions should be further tested in future studies that overcome some of the limitations of this work – possible bias resulting from: self-reporting by coachees; rating by HR managers of techniques chosen and financed by them; the fact that the coachees were contacted through coaching certification organisations. Despite the difficulties of the confidentiality of the coaching processes and access to executive coaches and coaches, future studies should longitudinally evaluate the capacity of coaching and other MTDMs to modify behaviour based on a plural assessment of each process by the trainee, superiors, colleagues, and subordinates, preferably in different geographical and cultural contexts.

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