

**Executive Coaching:  
The Leadership Development Tool of the  
Future?**

**Research**

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Executive Coaching:  
The leadership development tool of the future?

By

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## Executive Summary

*'Coaching is the secret weapon of many outstanding organisations' Burdett (1998)*

Executive Coaching is not new to organisations although over the past decade its popularity has surged. This is due to a number of organisational trends, such as organisational downsizing, a rapidly evolving environment where executives must constantly anticipate and prepare for change and the recognition that pre-emptive leadership development is critical in helping key employees acquire the appropriate leadership behaviours and skills to avoid leadership crises.

This exploratory study aims to determine the impact of executive coaching on the development of leadership competencies. It also seeks to assess which components of executive coaching are most likely to maximise the results achieved from the leadership development tool. The two-pronged project methodology is designed to validate the hypotheses of executive coaching identified in the literature against the experience of executive coaching practise in large UK organisations. A survey of HR professionals and semi-structured interviews with three stakeholder groups, namely HR professionals, Executives and Coaches form the primary method of data collection; providing qualitative and quantitative insight into the nature of executive coaching.

Overall research findings reveal that executive coaching is considered effective by all stakeholder groups. It is also regarded as good value for the investment in time and money that it demands. The leadership competencies researched were considered to be well developed and offered some sustainability. Inferences to improved financial performance could be made based on previous research by Hay/McBer. The findings also offer guidance as to the attributes of the components of executive coaching that enhance its effectiveness.

The project concludes that while there is still a demand for empirical research in this field, there are organisations that are using executive coaching to great effect for the benefit of both personal development and business performance.

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DLA	Sara Lee
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Ernst & Young	UBS

## Project Rationale

There are numerous reasons why executive coaching is becoming more popular within organisations and these are detailed below.

Firstly, the rate of organisational change is accelerating in such a way that executives now need to be continually prepared for change. de Geus and Senge in their book, *The Living Company* suggest that executives' "ability to learn faster than [their] competition is [their] only sustainable competitive advantage." (1997, p.X) In this context, executive coaching is a strategic tool which increases behavioural flexibility and helps leaders to identify, reflect on and take the action required to fill the gaps in this highly complex and global business world. (Smith & Sandstrom, 1999).

Secondly, organisational downsizing has contributed because positions that would have prepared managers for more senior positions have been removed (Warrenfeltz, 2000). Managers are therefore being promoted faster to relatively bigger roles in flat organisational systems and may lack the requisite, yet sometimes intangible, leadership skills that executive coaching can be used to build.

Thirdly, leadership development has often been reactive and concerned itself- with remedial behavioural change. Today, there is a growing recognition of the costs associated with derailed executives and organisations are beginning to accept the benefits of pre-emptive and proactive executive coaching. (Greco, 2001; Kilburg, 1996c)

Fourthly, executive management success is often viewed as a function of the productivity of subordinates (Allenbaugh, 1983); this in turn demands better developed interpersonal and team-building skills which may be assisted by executive coaching (Greco, 2001).

Fifthly, in a business economy where knowledge is recognised as a prime asset, it is essential that organisations improve leadership and personal development to ensure retention of valuable executives (Philabaum, 1999).

Finally, it has always been recognised that it is "lonely at the top". However in a world where corporate performance is scrutinised and the rewards/penalties for

success or failure are intense, executives are often frustrated by the inability of those around them to offer straightforward counsel (Lukaszewski, 1988). In this context, executive coaching offers a safe and objective haven for executives to develop their ideas (Masciarelli, 1999).

The literature highlights how high-achieving individuals such as athletes, performers, and public speakers have used coaching as a means to improve their performance (Witherspoon & White 1996a, 1997). However, there is limited literature on executive coaching and surprisingly little empirical research on its efficacy. This exploratory research offers a new perspective on the effectiveness of executive coaching on the development of leadership competencies. It also aims to contribute to our knowledge of leadership development and to the emerging literature on executive coaching.

### Research Objectives

The research aims to:

1. Determine the effects of the attributes of coaching components on personal performance as perceived by three stakeholder groups — HR professionals, executives with experience of coaching, and coaches external to the organisation.
2. Explore the effects of these attributes on the sustainability of leadership competencies and thus the personal performance of leaders.
3. Make recommendations as to which coaching attributes might be modified in order to maximise competency development thereby improving personal performance and optimising return on investment from coaching.

## Literature review

### Leadership

In order to assess the impact of executive coaching on the development of leadership competencies, it is important to briefly examine what the literature understands to be the nature of leadership. Leadership is a trait that is highly prized in most organisations and has been the topic of extensive research. A comprehensive literature review reveals that “there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept” (Yukl, 1989, p2).

Whilst the majority of the literature asserts that leadership involves propelling others towards the achievement of defined organisational goals, it has been defined in terms of individual traits, behaviour, role relationships and occupational position. A good deal of the literature refers to effective leaders being able to balance concern for task with their concern for people. Others conceptualise leadership in terms of function: according to Senior (1991, p.207) leadership comprises three main functions, namely strategic, tactical and interpersonal. These functions are used to distinguish leadership from the planning, co-ordinating and controlling tasks of a manager (Mintzberg, 1979, p.194).

Contingency theorists, including Rollinson, Bonnsetter, Fiedler and Goleman argue that there is no such thing as “one best style” of leadership and focus on identifying the variables that make one style more appropriate than others (Rollinson et al, 1998, p.345). Bonnsetter agrees, suggesting that “leaders must be ready to adapt how they relate to those they lead with the face of a chameleon.” (2000, p.137). Goleman too argues that effective leaders do not rely on a single style but ‘use a collection of behaviours in the right measure and time to suit the business situation’. He identifies six styles of leadership: coercive (demanding immediate compliance), authoritative (defining objectives but allowing subordinates to devise their own means), affiliative (encourages teamwork and innovation), democratic (builds consensus but can create a sense of ‘leaderlessness’), pacesetter (best suited to highly skilled, self-motivated types) and coaching (useful in developing people for the future where they are aware of their weaknesses and eager to improve their performance) (2000, p.78).

Goleman (2000) suggests that the literature focuses on a spectrum of activities that leaders **do** which directs the lack of consensus on the competencies required. However, he suggests that there is consensus on what leaders **should do** – leaders should get results.

Work establishing which leadership competencies to evaluate has thus concentrated on identifying which competencies yield positive results. Whilst there is limited research in this area, one study by Hay & McBer drawing on a random sample of 3871 executives worldwide, demonstrates that leaders with the best results do not rely on one leadership style or set of leadership competences but use a variety of them depending on the situation. This research distinguished six leadership styles which had a measurable effect on “climate”. “Climate” refers to the six factors that influence an organisation’s work environment. Namely its flexibility, its employees’ level of responsibility, the level of standards that employees set, the accuracy of feedback on performance and the relevance of rewards, the clarity employees have about the mission and values of the organisation and finally the level of commitment amongst employees to a common goal. All six leadership styles described in the research were seen to have a measurable effect on each element of “climate”. However the research went further and demonstrated the impact of “climate” on financial results such as revenue growth and profitability. They discovered a correlation between the two – thus leaders who used styles that positively affected the “climate” had better financial results than those who did not. It is important to note however that organisational “climate” is not the only driver of performance, economic and competitive forces impact too. However the analysis suggested that “climate” impacted significantly and accounted for nearly a third of the improvement in financial results. (Goleman, 2000)

Four of the six leadership styles were demonstrated to correlate more in favour of a positive climate. These styles are described in Table 1 (below) in order of their significance on financial results.

	<b>Authoritative</b>	<b>Affiliative</b>	<b>Democratic</b>	<b>Coaching</b>
<b>Modus Operandi</b>	Mobilises people towards a vision	Creates harmony and builds emotional bonds	Forges consensus through participation	Develops people for the future
<b>Style in a phrase</b>	“Come with me”	“People come first”	“What do you think?”	“Try this”
<b>Emotional Intelligence competencies</b>	Self Confidence Empathy Change catalyst	Empathy Building relationships Communication	Collaboration Team leadership Communication	Developing others Empathy Self Awareness
<b>When style works best</b>		To heal rifts in a team or to motivate people during stressful circumstances	To build buy-in or consensus, or to get input from valuable employees	To help an employee improve performance or develop long-term strengths
<b>Correlation between leadership style and climate</b>	0.54	0.46	0.43	0.42

**Table 1 - Adapted from Leadership that Gets Results – HBR Mar/Apr 2000**

Many studies including this one have show that the most effective leaders switch between a variety of leadership styles. Seasoned leaders are sensitive to how they affect others and seamlessly adjust their style to get the best results.

The research showed that the coaching style was used least. The authors attributed this to the paradox of the coaching style's positive effect on business performance as coaching focuses predominately on personal development not on immediate work-related tasks. However, they pointed out that leaders who ignored this style were passing up on an influential tool as its impact on "climate" and performance was strikingly positive. Reasons cited for this impact were that coaching requires constant dialogue which allows employees to feel free to experiment as they will receive quick and constructive feedback. It was also felt that coaching increased the strength of the commitment driver because of its implicit message "we are investing in you because we believe in you, so we expect your best efforts" which encouraged employees to rise to the challenge. However, employees did have to be "up for it", the authors pointed out, as the coaching style made little sense when employees were resistant to learning or changing their ways.

This study provided an effective link between leadership competencies and style with financial performance. Thus for the purposes of this study, Goleman's leadership styles were considered an effective set of competencies to evaluate for the purposes of this research. The key competencies that were chosen to be tested were Emotional Self-Awareness; Accurate Self-Assessment; Self-Confidence; Adaptability; Initiative; Empathy; Developing others; Influence; Communication; Teamwork and Collaboration.

### Leadership Development

As discussed, much of the literature produced on the subject of leadership to date has concentrated on defining leadership; that is what and who leaders should become, with minimal attention given to exploring *how* leaders can develop the requisite skills for success. Before we analyse the literature on executive coaching, it is important to establish which attributes are associated with effective leadership development and how leadership interventions are currently measured.

Leadership development is traditionally offered to high-potential employees and leaders in the form of in-house training programmes and access to management schools and MBA courses. Smith (2001) suggests that nothing can fully prepare a

person for some leadership tasks, such as firing someone for the first time or being blocked by a politically motivated colleague. These competencies can only be learnt by actually doing it, reviewing the situation carefully and working on how the learning can be built on for next time. This sort of learning is supported either by action learning programmes where the syllabus is highly tailored to focus on the issues facing the organisation and the leader within it, or by executive coaching which promotes an environment that provides a safe space for reflection and learning to occur. These approaches to leadership development elicit relevant information rather than disseminating what a trainer thinks is good for the participant. The actions are the responsibility of the individual participant and the coaching or action learning programme environment provides a safe place for reflection and learning to occur whilst using the organisation itself as a learning laboratory. These forms of development are supportive of the philosophy that for learning to be effective it needs to have the surrounding context and recognise the unique combination of competencies of the individual (Smith 2001).

### Measuring Leadership development

Research efforts in more established disciplines such as psychotherapy and counselling, management development and training have yielded very few definitive results to support the efficacy of their methods.

Psychotherapy and counselling research has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of these methods as a process that can diminish anxiety, depression, phobias and many other forms of psychic distress. However there is no definitive and objective evidence as to why or when they are effective, and what precisely their effectiveness should be. There are literally hundreds of major competing “brands” of psychotherapy all claiming excellent, demonstrable results. Researchers like Lambert (1992) have pointed out that no broadly accepted series of studies has yet demonstrated the superior efficacy of a particular method. (West & Milan, 2001).

A handful of studies in the wider field of management development and training suggest that activities akin to coaching are successful as they accomplish their intended goal. Morrow (1997) has demonstrated the economic utility of corporate-wide training. Dixon and Young (1997) positively evaluated a programme to help leaders take effective action. However, increasingly critics are concerned about the shortage of research in the area of behaviour change, including Fielder (1996) who

has asserted that many leading management development programmes are untested and of uncertain value. Estimates of the extent to which skills taught in company training programmes carry over into day-to-day practice on the job are as low as 10%. Goleman calls much of corporate training and development a “billion-dollar” mistake and also cites one study which found that one ‘people-skills’ seminar left executives worse off than before. Although this may not be representative, it does demonstrate that positive outcomes from executive development are not a given and thus underlines the need for organisations to evaluate and measure the results of their development programmes.

### What is executive coaching?

The recent attention in the literature on executive coaching can be explained in part by increased demand although that demand is fuelled in turn by the popular press advocating the effectiveness of coaching based on limited empirical evidence. Thus along with the increase in demand there has come amplified concern regarding the definition and standardisation of executive coaching. This is particularly relevant for organisations using external coaches as opposed to in-house managers in a coaching role, as external coaches are less controllable due to the confidential nature of coaching.

In order to define executive coaching it is useful to look at each word separately. Overall it is agreed that the quality which distinguishes an **executive** from a manager is a sense of perspective that requires a ‘big picture’ view of the world, and an ability to envision global and long-term consequences for each alternative. Witherspoon and White (1996) point out that the root meaning of the verb ‘**to coach**’ is to convey a valued person from where one was to where one wants to be – much as an actual coach or carriage would take a passenger on a journey.

The most frequently quoted definition in the literature defines executive coaching as “a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction, and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client’s organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement.” (Kilburg, 2000, p.67) This definition was used for the purposes of this research.

The common factors of the various definitions describe executive coaching as a confidential, highly personal learning process (Belf, 1995, p.1) partly because it is a one-on-one experience rather than the workshop or seminar situation which must cater to a group requirement. Smith (1993) emphasises executive coaching's facility for long-term development whether on a remedial or progressive basis.

Coach, mentor, consultant, counsellor and tutor are all terms used in the literature. The term coaching is more common in the literature of training and development, while the other terms are used in the literature on teaching and psychotherapy. Burdett (1998, p. 144) warns against confusing coaching with counselling or psychotherapy, as coaching is concerned with enhancing performance, not addressing the emotional landscape. Allenbaugh (1983) places coaching between the two poles of teaching and counselling, emphasising that although personal issues may be taken into account, the stress is on job performance not personality change. Mentoring was described as different to coaching principally because it is usually conducted by a senior person within the organisation and focuses specifically on career development via specific assistance such as network contacts. (Grant, 2001; Hudson, 1999).

Executive counselling, executive consulting and executive coaching should also be differentiated (Sperry, 1993). Executive consultants give direct advice and executives tend to have expectations of the consultant, principally that that advice will increase their effectiveness as a manager by providing specialist knowledge. (Somerville, 1991). In counselling, the therapist functions primarily in a process-orientated and non-directive role. However in executive coaching, the coach may use a more expert-orientated and directive role depending on the situation. In coaching both partner's come from a position of strength – respectful of the other parties complimentary skills and expertise. Coaching is also usually focused on the present and the future and works around character issues or analysis of the client's childhood. (Grant 2001)

Executives have a strong bias towards action and find long-term, dynamically orientated psychotherapy tedious. Time limited dynamic approaches are therefore more in line with the executive's natural inclination towards action and outcomes.

### The roles of Executive Coaching

For decades sportsmen, public speakers and performing artists have used coaches to help them perform better. The aim of executive coaching is to help high achievers improve performance in the long term by providing feedback (so they can learn from their own action) on executive performance over an extended period of time, with an emphasis on facilitating progress rather than instructing. Coaching adapts to client need, and because executives are in different stages of their careers and in varied settings, executive coaching represents a continuum of roles which help them to learn, grow and change.

According to Witherspoon and White (1996), one way to think of executive coaching is to think of the client need. For example, does the executive need to learn a new skill? Perform better in the present job? Prepare for a future leadership role? It is also important to understand whether the executive acknowledges these needs and if they are willing to accept coaching. The coaching role refers to the coach's primary function in helping the client learn and change. With many coaching roles possible, one must be identified as primary to avoid confusion about expectations, time and effort amongst key stakeholders. Role clarity assists in determining how to initiate coaching; what to emphasise and what to ignore. In practise the coaching roles may overlap although it is useful to acknowledge a change in role. Witherspoon and White describe the roles of executive coaching based on primary functions:

- Coaching for **skills** (learning sharply focused on a person's specific skill)
- Coaching for **performance** (focuses broadly on a person's present job)
- Coaching for **development** (focuses on a person's future job)
- Coaching for the **executive-agenda** based.

Popper and Lipshitz (1992) identify two purposes, improving performance at a skill level and enhancing psychological development by a process of empowerment, where the coach strengthens a person's belief in their ability to do things. This is known as **self-efficacy** and comes from Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. It is essentially cumulative by nature because a person who experiences success is more likely to believe in that as a possibility and will therefore continue with the behaviour. Clearly, this is a long-term learning process, and thus self-efficacy cannot find meaningful expression in short-term learning relationships characteristic of lectures, seminars and workshops. Rather it is suited to the inherent longevity of the coaching relationship.

What does this mean for leadership development? Simple and technical skill development includes a certain amount of imitation and practising. Traditionally these skills were developed over time by watching one's line manager. However, today there is less opportunity to learn through observation as there are fewer people to imitate and there is less time to practise. Thus, employees who are facing the development of more abstract or complex accomplishments such as leadership skills require support which can be delivered through executive coaching. Coaches plan for situations that have the potential for success, set a relevant and individualised learning pace and make intensive use of reflection on action taken.

### Main Themes Evolving from the Literature

A brief review of the literature on coaching shows that it clusters in three bodies of literature: the *psychological, training and development*, and *management*. (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). The literature also reflects the key themes for coaching to be: definitions and standards, purpose, techniques and methodologies, the comparison with counselling and the requisite credentials of executive coaches. The review demonstrated that there is an extensive history and broad empirical base available on the general topic, especially in athletics and dealing with problems of special needs populations. Although none of these studies reported specifically on the effects of external coaches working directly with managers, they are broadly suggestive that coaching of various types is successful in improving aspects of an individual's behaviour.

There was surprisingly little empirical research on the efficacy of executive coaching in the practise of management and leadership (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson 2001). This is particularly so for the practise of coaching by external coaches although this lack of empirical foundation has not inhibited practitioners or authors from advocating their approaches or publishing their views (Garman et al 2000).

Most formal research on coaching in management comes in the form of graduate dissertations. Few papers were found to attempt to quantify the business outcomes of executive coaching. One such paper was a study conducted by Manchester Consulting Inc, a provider of executive coaching services. Their research aimed to demonstrate the impact of executive coaching (using external coaches) on the organisation's bottom line (McGovern et al, 2001). Since an experimental trial was

not possible they attempted to demonstrate a chain of impact (Phillips, 1997) based on their experience. This was described as “coaching translates into doing, doing translates into impacting the business, this impact can be quantified and maximised.” (McGovern et al, 2001 p.3) The study produced evidence of the effectiveness of coaching and estimated an average ROI of \$100 000 for the sample, 5.7 times the initial estimate.

## **Methodology**

The research methodology was two pronged and designed to explore the attributes of executive coaching along with their effect on the development of leadership competencies. The research targets three stakeholder groups, namely **human resources professionals** (who often initiate the adoption of executive coaching); **executives** (to gain insight into which coaching components those with experience of coaching thought best aided leadership development competencies); and **executive coaches** (so as to understand the components and process of coaching). In this research an executive coach is a consultant external to the organisation.

The study was exploratory and thus combined qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Qualitative methods are particularly well suited to studies which canvass a variety of opinion and stakeholders. A qualitative approach is also appropriate when there is no established theory to provide testable hypotheses and where concepts remain fuzzy. The survey complimented the qualitative data by providing statistically significant quantitative data from one stakeholder group to increase the validity of the findings.

The sample for the survey of HR professionals was drawn primarily from the FTSE 500 List and targeted management development managers and HR directors. The sample for the qualitative interviews included 60 executives, coaches and HR professionals who were contacted initially through personal networking and by using a snowballing technique. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format to increase consistency thereby improving the validity and comparability of the data collected (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p.149). Test interviews were carried out, and all the interviews were conducted by one interviewer with precautions to minimise bias built in to the design. The majority of the interviews took place face-to-face and lasted on average 45 minutes. Seven interviews were conducted telephonically. The survey was disseminated using post, email and an online survey. A 23% response rate was achieved although the response rate of those who had experience of using external coaches was 11%. All results were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

## Definitions

**Executive coaching** was defined for the purposes of this research as “a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction, and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client’s organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement” (Kilburg 2000, p.67). For the purposes of the quantitative survey “coaching” was defined as a relationship between an individual external to the organisation who works hand-in-hand to unlock a client’s potential in the workplace. (Hills, 2002)

**The Executive** is the client receiving the coaching in this study. For the qualitative interviews, executives were defined as senior managers who are either on the board of a company or who have P&L responsibility for a business unit within the organisation. The type of information gathered on the executive was profile information for example age, gender, position in organisation, time in role, level of education and primary subject of education.

**The Coach** in this study was an external consultant who was employed to work one on one with an executive to improve their personal and work performance. Similar profile information was gathered on the coach for example: age, gender, education level, primary subject area, number of years’ business experience, formal coaching training, preferred methodology or techniques. Information was also gathered on the perceived importance of certain attributes of the process and their own attributes as well as their perception of the effectiveness of coaching on the development of leadership competencies.

### **Leadership Competencies**

This research tested the development of ten of Goleman’s leadership competencies: emotional self awareness; accurate self assessment; self-confidence; adaptability; initiative; empathy; influence; developing others; communication and teamwork and collaboration. These were chosen due to the link that the Hay/McBer research had made to increasing financial performance from the development of six leadership styles which included these leadership competencies.

### Hypotheses

A lot of data was gathered from this research, however the key hypotheses addressed by this study are:

1. Executive coaching can develop leadership competencies that contribute to leadership performance
2. Executive coaching which focuses primarily on personal development rather than immediate work-related tasks is more effective in improving and sustaining leadership performance.
3. Executives that perceive coaching as developmental are more likely to improve their performance through executive coaching.
4. Executive coaching that facilitates reflection is more likely to assist in the development of effective leaders.
5. The ability to act flexibly as required by different situations is a leadership competency that can be developed through executive coaching.
6. Successful executive coaching is based on a relationship in which the executive is responsible for his own learning
7. The opportunity to practise leadership competencies on the job whilst participating in executive coaching increases the effectiveness and sustainability of their development.
8. Attempts to measure the behaviours and competencies developed in executive coaching are likely to reduce the sustainability of the competencies developed.
9. Perceived coach effectiveness relates more to process skills than to business experience.
10. Executive coaching impacts on the financial performance of an organisation and delivers value for money.

## Findings

### Survey Findings

This study is primarily interested with those survey respondents who are currently using external coaches in their organisations. Of the 96 responses received (10 were spoilt, 86 complete) 59% of the respondents fell into this group, which offered sufficient data for a valid statistical analysis. The industries represented in this group were professional and financial services, consumer goods, technology and telecoms, power and utilities, media, transport and pharmaceuticals (although there was only one respondent from this sector which limits the ability to generalise the findings to pharmaceuticals as a sector). The following high level findings were made from the sample that was using external coaches:

- 86% of the sample had experienced external coaching
- 82% ran leadership development programmes of which 62% incorporated executive coaching
- 45% felt coaching was effective in achieving defined goals and 10% felt it was very effective
- 70% of the sample thought executive coaching was of good or excellent value with respect to investment in time and money
- Obstacles associated with coaching:
  1. Costs
  2. Difficulty in demonstrating a link with business outcomes as opposed to personal benefits
  3. Time commitment required by executive
  4. A shortage of “good” coaches, well matched for senior executives
  5. Positioning coaching as remedial
- 59% of respondents described the positioning of coaching within their organisation as mainly developmental. and 10% rated it as purely developmental. This reflects the recognition that positioning coaching as remedial with executives may reduce commitment to the process and impact on its effectiveness

- 88% felt an internal employee could effectively coach a senior manager
- 69% of managers were formally taught to coach
- Majority of coaching was being offered to Executives, Senior managers or managers in transition
- Main reasons for using executive coaching included increasing 'impact and influence'; to support culture change and supporting individuals moving into new roles or regions
- Coaching was not generally offered as a reward for employees
- 67% of the sample used assessment tools, namely 360° feedback, Myers Briggs™ and Fyro-B
- A typical performance coaching programme dealing with a maximum of two performance issues was one to six sessions
- Developmental coaching varied from a once-off session to between one and twelve sessions per annum
- The majority of sessions occurred monthly or were on request
- The average length of a session was between 1 and 3 hours
- The majority of coaches were not paid on performance. Payment tended to be made as a set fee for a programme or on an hourly rate. Most organisations picked up 100% of the cost of the coaching.
- Few organisations had a measurement process in place and of those who did the majority relied on subjective data such as peer, line manager and subordinate feedback.

- For performance coaching the role of HR and/or the line manager was considered important in setting the goals. This was not considered appropriate for developmental coaching.
- The majority felt that coaching time should be spent on personal content, developing self awareness as opposed to focusing on business content.
- The criteria used to select coaches were (in order of importance)
  1. The ability to build rapport and establish credibility quickly
  2. Track record
  3. Business experience
  4. Some formal coaching training or experience in counselling or psychology
  5. Industry knowledge (where it was required to establish a common vocabulary and understanding)
  6. Organisational awareness

### Interview findings

The semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with executives, HR professionals and coaches support the survey findings by offering qualitative insights into the characteristics required for executive coaching to be effective. The sample consisted of 42 interviews. Almost half of the interviewees held post-graduate qualifications, with nearly half of those qualifications being in the arts, with the remainder split between general management, accountancy and finance, science and medicine/engineering specialisations. Just over half of the interview respondents were between the ages of 35-44 years with the majority of the remainder between 45-54. There was a fairly even split between male and female interview respondents, with a slight skew towards females. The effectiveness of coaching was rated as effective or very effective by all but two of the interview respondents. When asked to describe their evidence for this conclusion the majority used intangible measurements such as intuition, feedback from peers and subordinates, confidence and stress level of the executive. This reflects the literature which states that there needs to be a more standardised system of measurement.

Key findings across the interview sample can be summarised as follows:

- Coaching requires a commitment to change from the executive to be truly effective
- Positioning coaching as developmental increases the commitment from the executive
- Coaching was more effective if the environment offered clients the opportunity to practise their newly acquired behaviours between sessions
- Confidentiality was considered critical and there was some indication that the 'more' confidential the process the more effective it became. There may be a multitude of reasons for this finding.
- The individual match between coaches and executives was identified as important (64% of executives chose their own coach or were offered a choice).
- Popular traits of coaches were that they were non-judgemental, kept people on track, were gentle but tough, knew how to draw out solutions through questioning and a variety of other tools, and knew when and how to challenge.
- Other attributes required of coaches were as follows: business experience (83%) followed by age/maturity (81%), organisational awareness (64%) gender (57%), psychology training (40%) and industry experience (33%).
- Gender seemed to play a role in coach selection although it varied from one individual to another. Of the 12 executives from large organisations in the sample, 75% had chosen or were matched with a coach of the same gender. By comparison, in terms of age match, only one executive was assigned to a coach of the same age – all the other coaches were older than the client.
- Obstacles to coaching were considered to be
  - Lack of opportunity to practise behaviours learnt in coaching
  - Availability of high-quality coaches
  - Cost involved (time and money)
  - Degree of openness required from the executive
  - Positioning of coaching in the organisation
  - A lack of rapport between executive and coach
  - Concern that dependency on coach is developed
  - The role of the organisation and confidentiality
  - The "ego" of the coach

- Benefits were considered to be:
  - 100% of the interview sample found coaching to be time-efficient
  - Coaching built inner confidence and executives felt more in control of their lives in general
  - 76% felt no other development tool could offer similar benefits
  - The development of the competency to manage ambiguity
  - Confidence and personal well being
  - Increased motivation
  - Opportunity to reflect
- The intangibility of personal development benefits make measurement of the efficacy of coaching to the business hard to quantify

Overall the interview respondents were positive in their perception of the effectiveness of executive coaching in developing leadership competencies. Motivation and confidence were improved, because respondents felt supported and inspired by coaching

#### Findings of the hypotheses

This final section evaluates the research findings in the context of the literature review and the identified hypotheses.

### **1. Executive coaching can develop leadership competencies that contribute to leadership performance**

The interview findings support the hypothesis that leadership competencies as defined by Goleman are effectively developed. The finding that competencies are also sustained indicates that executive coaching is likely to contribute to leadership performance in the long term. The leadership competencies that were the most highly rated for being developed through executive coaching include the development of impact and influence, self awareness and self assessment which are critical to a fluid adoption of the most effective leadership style. Executives increased their competency in developing others and their empathy. As coaching is a bespoke development activity each executive respondent would have had different competency gaps. Thus it is difficult to generalise that these are the competencies best developed through coaching or whether they were the competencies chosen to develop by our sample. However, responses from the coach and HR professional stakeholder groups were based on experience across

a range of executives and reflected no significant differences to the competencies most frequently developed by the executive group.

**2. Executive coaching which focuses primarily on personal development rather than immediate work related tasks is more effective in improving and sustaining leadership performance.**

Our study has shown that the majority of our sample consider the time spent on personal content in coaching sessions to be critical to the effectiveness and sustainability of leadership competencies. The majority of the learning in the coaching sessions is directed by the executive as an area that has been chosen to be worked on and thus the executive takes responsibility for the learning. Apart from the increased degree of commitment from the executive that a focus on personal development creates, leadership competencies require a different form of development which focuses on the process of eliciting information and learning rather than disseminating learning as described by Smith. The ability to manage tasks is not a leadership skill; the ability to manage ambiguity and to influence managers of managers is. These skills are not difficult to learn, and demand a form of action learning in order to motivate learning. Also, the executive has to “want” to change their behaviour. The findings of this research can confirm the hypothesis that coaching which is focused primarily on personal development is more effective in improving and sustaining leadership competencies.

**3. Executives that perceive coaching as developmental are more likely to improve their performance through executive coaching.**

There is clear evidence in the interview sample findings that organisations that have managed to effectively position coaching as a positive development process rather than a remedial process view executive coaching as more effective. Even where there are some executives that are working on what could be referred to as “remedial” interventions the positioning of coaching as a process to help you perform at your peak and only for those who we value enough to invest in, sparks an internal desire and commitment in the executive to engage in the process. As the learning is all self-managed it is unlikely to have much effect if the executive doesn't see the value in the process or feels resentful or defensive about the way the coaching has been positioned. Thus the findings from this research can confirm this hypothesis.

**4. Executive Coaching that facilitates reflection is more likely to assist in the development of effective leaders.**

The skills required to lead are considered different to the skills required to manage, however the skills that help executives succeed initially are those that demonstrated their ability to control, direct, close down or contain information and resources including people. Leadership requires almost the opposite set of skills, opening up and balancing a range of opportunities and managing ambiguity. The literature review supports the notion that leadership competencies are less likely to be developed in a training environment where information is disseminated and suggests that leaders learn these skills for themselves through experience, facilitation and reflection. Our interview sample has confirmed the benefits of being able to take time out to reflect on what is working and what is not. Some were surprised by the notion of identifying activities that they should “stop doing” as opposed to those they should be doing more of which illustrates the change in the perception of what behaviours are required and valued the more senior you become in the organisation. Based on the findings in the interview sample, this hypothesis can be confirmed, as reflection used as a tool for self-directed learning is an eliciting learning style which is more likely to develop leadership skills as described in the literature.

**5. The ability to act flexibly as required by different situations is a leadership competency that can be developed through executive coaching.**

This hypothesis is confirmed by the interview sample who confirmed that the competency of ‘adaptability’ can be effectively acquired through executive coaching. The act of flexibility is further enhanced if the leader can accurately assess which type of leadership behaviour is required and move with ease between a variety of styles. Our research confirms that leaders do acquire the ability to gain greater self awareness and accurate self assessment which assists in the development of flexibility. Thus this hypothesis can be confirmed.

## **6. Successful executive coaching is based on a relationship in which the executive is responsible for his own learning**

This hypothesis is confirmed by the interview and survey findings which demonstrate that the executive is directly involved in assessing their learning gaps and in agreeing the plan of action for their own development. There is also a clear contract which clarifies the role of the coach as a facilitator, merely helping to unlock potential that already exists – “eliciting” learning rather than directing learning. For those executives who embraced the challenge and made time to work on their behaviours between sessions, results were clear, one executive was promoted three times in the space of one year after engaging in executive coaching. Those executives that struggled with self-management were the first to admit that a lot of the responsibility for the limited success they had achieved on some tasks was the lack of focus and motivation on their part to make the change happen. It is interesting to note here that they commented on a motivation cycle which seems to be associated with self-directed learning. It is important in that it implies that the coach needs to create momentum early on in the coaching process so that results are achieved and positive experiences delivered prior to the plateau phase.

## **7. The opportunity to practise leadership competencies on the job whilst participating in executive coaching increase the effectiveness and sustainability of their development.**

As the literature describes, the requirement for self-efficacy is considered critical to development of leadership competencies. One way the literature suggests building self-efficacy is to give executives the experience of doing something well. This research suggests that the sustainability of learning is likely to be greater when one has experienced success as one is more likely to disregard a failure in favour of the prior successful experience and thus build self-efficacy. Thus it is important that executives are given the opportunity to practise their newly developed leadership skills in the context in which they work. For the majority of executive respondents in our sample this was the case and executive mentioned the effectiveness of being able to try something new whilst being supported by the coach. However some coaches in our interview sample had worked in organisations where clients had been ear-marked for leadership roles and provided with coaching. However these executives were not in leadership roles

and thus had little chance to practise thus decreasing their opportunities to experience success and build self-efficacy. Our findings do support this hypothesis but further research would be required to make the argument more compelling.

**8. Attempts to measure the behaviours and competencies developed in executive coaching are likely to reduce the sustainability of the competencies developed.**

This hypothesis cannot be confirmed conclusively from this research partly due to the small number of organisations who were formally measuring their coaching programmes. However, for many stakeholders it was intuitively felt that an increased focus on tangible results would reduce the degree of intimacy and openness in the relationship as there would be a requirement to see visible changes in behaviour quickly. It was generally thought that if a coach spent their time in developing capabilities and behaviours that their style would be more directive and would not encourage the degree of ownership that the non-directive facilitation provides. Also there were concerns on the sustainability of the behaviours and capabilities developed due to the lack of awareness of what drives the executive to behave as they do. This approach would be more sustainable as it would allow the executive to modify their behaviour on recognition of the negative driver as opposite to mechanically behaving in a certain way which feels uncomfortable.

**9. Perceived coach effectiveness relates more to process skills than to business experience.**

The findings of this research confirmed that the attributes associated with a good coach were process skills which encouraged executives to reach their own solutions or view problems from a different perspective. These skills included establishing rapport to allow intimacy and trust in the relationship, listening skills, understanding when to challenge and how, facilitation, reflection skills and powerful questioning. In the survey the criteria for selection of “ability to build rapport” and “ability to establish credibility quickly” were considered essential by 84% and 86% of respondents respectively. The interview results confirmed these and described the process skills using words such as those mentioned above. Business experience was rated as the second most important attribute for a coach to possess with 83% of the interview

sample and 59% of the survey respondents rating it as essential. These findings confirm the hypothesis that process skills are considered more closely linked to the effectiveness of executive coaching than business skills.

### **10. Executive coaching impacts on the financial performance of an organisation and delivers value for money.**

There are two key findings which support this hypothesis. The first is similar to the hypothesis above in that this research is based on the Hay/McBer research which demonstrated that financial performance correlated with Goleman's leadership styles. Our findings have demonstrated that the leadership competencies as Goleman describes them are developed through executive coaching and thus we can imply that financial performance will be improved based on the Hay/McBer research. Another finding which supports this hypothesis is the perceived value of executive coaching based on the investment in time and money. These findings showed that 62% of the interview sample and 69% of the survey respondents rated the 'value' of coaching as good or excellent. Note that the sample of coaches were not asked to rate the 'value' of coaching due to the perceived bias, so these results reflect the views of the executives and the HR professionals alone.

#### Limitations of the research

Four limitations of this research can be identified and should be considered when reviewing the findings of the research. First, due to the time constraints the project provided a perceptual study into the effectiveness of executive coaching on financial performance of organisations, without measuring the change in financial performance directly. The second limitation is that this study has been conducted across a variety of organisations and industry sectors. This could have resulted in extraneous variables in one industry. Future research should consider repeating this study on a larger scale or in a specific industry or organisation. Third, the research was confined to the United Kingdom and as a result may reflect a cultural bias in terms of what components of coaching are perceived to be effective. Finally, the research targeted three stakeholder groups for the qualitative research and only the HR professional group for the quantitative research.

## Conclusion

There is now an increased demand for executive coaching from organisations which have recognised that leadership development is integral to company success. The reason for this upsurge in interest is due to a number of trends, the most notable of which is that the within a rapidly evolving corporate environment, where it is now acknowledged that executives need a broad and flexible portfolio of leadership competencies which can be applied appropriately to the situation in hand. With this extra demand there has been concern that standardisation of coaching quality and effectiveness measurement needs to occur, in order that the costs incurred in providing one-to-one executive coaching are recouped – if not directly in terms of financial performance benefits then in terms of visible improvements in executive efficiency (whether task-related or otherwise) and company morale. Although the intangible nature of the benefits that coaching provides accounts for any shortcomings in the validation process to a large degree.

It is accepted that there is less opportunity for executives to learn on the job and the literature supports the thesis that conventional short-term learning approaches, such as in-house workshops, seminars and group training are failing to deliver the requisite skills base. Executive coaching as a synthesis of complementary techniques that fuse the positive elements of executing consulting, counselling, teaching and long-term, one-on-one tailored learning delivers these competencies more effectively.

Obstacles to coaching were usually matched by concomitant factors, so that perceived impediments such as the risk of dependency or fears about confidentiality were offset by benefits such as the high value of long-term cumulative learning, the benefits of a bespoke programme and the advantages of a one-to-one approach. Similarly a feeling that there is a lack of clear goals (which only relates to performance coaching) is countered by the development of a facilitative approach. Likewise concerns about measurement, quality of coaches and the organisation's ability to address these issues are balanced by the holistic benefits that improved interpersonal skills, increased confidence and self-efficacy can bring.

Overall, it is clear that a lot more research needs to be done, particularly empirical research, and investigations that unpack the link between improved financial performance and executive coaching. However, the fact remains that coaching is proved here to be extremely effective in helping senior executives and high potential staff develop leadership competencies that are sustainable.

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