

POST GRADUATE CERTIFICATE WORK BASED LEARNING STUDIES (COACHING)

MODULE: WBS 4822

PROJECT MODULE

Project title:

Which factors in a coaching programme have contributed to generating sustained positive change for the coachee?

Student name: NICKY SPODE

Student number: M00218212

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SUMMARY

The research project is a study into which aspects of the coaching process have contributed most to sustained change for a group of coachees at the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Literature searches revealed numerous studies into the benefits of coaching and return on investment. I was unable to locate any studies or literature that referred specifically to the longer term benefits that may have been brought about for the coachee through the coaching process. If, after time had passed, the coachees were still feeling positive benefits from their coaching sessions, what were the underlying factors which had given rise to that sustained change?

The research was conducted in collaboration with the BBC Coaching Network whereby a group of 170 leaders of varying levels of experience were approached to volunteer to take part in the survey. A total of 17 coachees participated, resulting in the following key findings:

- 1) **Better decision making skills** was the highest rated long term benefit, 3 – 6 months after the coaching programme had ended.
- 2) The ability of the coach to enable the coachee to **focus on the positive** was rated as the most important aspect of the coaching relationship in the context of sustained positive change.
- 3) The **meta mirror** and **reflecting back** (appendix vi) were considered to be the two most powerful coaching interventions in the context of the research question.
- 4) **A space to think away from the office** had been a major contributing factor to long lasting sustained positive change
- 5) The involvement of the line manager at the outset was not considered to be a major contributing factor towards sustained positive change for the coachee.

These findings have been significant for me in my on-going coaching work and will be integrated into the existing marketing approach for my leadership coaching business. The BBC may wish to use these findings to inform their on-going coaching training and the coaching programmes that they offer to support the BBC's leadership training programme.

INTRODUCTION

Having worked as a coach within an organisational context and subsequently running my own coaching business, I have long been intrigued to know which aspects of coaching are most likely to sustain change over a period beyond the end of the coaching programme. I am aware that clients can feel empowered to change aspects of their behaviour or life during and immediately after a session or programme has ended, and I am also aware that they sometimes express a wish to be able to extend that feeling into the future but do not always feel able to access it once the effects of the coaching have worn off.

Ongoing self-coaching (the ability of the coachee to ask themselves questions, thereby facilitating their own solutions) once the programme has ended is critical to the robustness of my coaching model. Increased awareness of the elements of coaching that are most likely to sustain on-going change for the client, will result in further reflection and ensure continued improvement and effectiveness of my own practice

OBJECTIVES AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this research project is to gain an insight into

‘Which factors in a coaching programme have contributed to generating sustained positive change for the coachee?’

For the purpose of this project it should be noted that I have a solutions focussed, non-directive and person centered coaching background (appendix vi). Helping the coachee to self-coach once the programme has ended is integral with my coaching model and ensures that I don’t often remain in close contact with them in the longer term. Despite a feedback form immediately after the final session, I am left wondering ‘which bits of the coaching process worked best’ in the longer term?

In coaching we often talk about ‘light bulb’ moments that occur for the coachee during a coaching session. In my experience, what is less often talked about is whether that ‘moment’ has contributed to sustained positive change for the coachee in the future, once the coaching programme has ended.

In order to establish whether aspect(s) of the coaching process have contributed to lasting change for the coachee, I asked a group of BBC employees who’s coaching programmes had ended between 3 – 6 months ago, questions which were centered around:

- Their commitment to an aspect of change at the outset of the programme
- The involvement of the line manager at outset
- Relationship with the coach
- The goal setting process
- The coaching questions
- Barriers to change

My literature search confirmed that there is a vast body of written work around 'change' in coaching. Sir John Whitmore(1) and Bruce Peltier(2) write of the nature of rapid change in the business environment , and Mary Beth O'Neill of the role of the coach as change agent within the organisational context(3). A recent research study by Erik de Haan (Ashridge)(4) studied critical moments in the coaching process – clients and coaches' views were collected 'directly after their coaching conversations'. The chapter written by Annette Fillery-Tavis and David Lane in Palmer & Whybrow's Handbook of Coaching Psychology(5), is dedicated to the subject of the research question 'Does Coaching Work?'. Their chapter looks at measuring the benefits of coaching to provide a return on investment and states that 'studies investigating the impact of manager coaching on key business indicators are difficult to find'. In conclusion they found that there 'is a clear consensus that clients enjoy being coached and believe it is enhancing their professional life. This belief is shared with their organisations. Research is now needed into the how, what works, and for whom questions which will develop coaching practice'.

In the context of existing research regarding the effectiveness of coaching, this project aims to investigate what aspects of the coaching process worked for the coachee in the longer term.

Bibliography – appendix (i)

METHODOLOGY

Choice of research approach

For this project I collaborated with the BBC Coaching Network. My initial thought had been to work with my own client base, but it soon became clear to me that bias, reliability and consistency of data would be issues were I to take this approach. Working with a large organisation, with their own internal coaching network offered the following benefits:

- Access to a wide range of coachees, all of whom had completed their coaching programme within a similar timescale.
- Lack of personal bias as they had not been coached by me.

I had originally planned to use the qualitative case study approach. I had intended to speak to volunteers on a one to one basis in order to gain personal insight into an area that intrigues me. Ultimately I decided that I was unlikely to achieve the consistency of information required, so I designed a questionnaire and left the option open of possible one to one conversations by asking volunteers to check a box to confirm whether they would be willing to be contacted individually should this be required.

Data collection techniques

The data was collected via a questionnaire (appendix ii). *Doing Your Research Project* by Judith Bell (6) and Moser & Kalton *Survey Methods in Social Investigation* (7) were helpful in devising the questionnaire and attempting to avoid potential pitfalls around ambiguity. This quantitative data collection technique was likely to obtain the best consistency of information. In addition to this, due to the subjective nature of my research question and the allocated timescale for the project, I felt that a series of carefully formulated questions together with freeform boxes for respondents to add information of a more qualitative nature, might be the simplest approach to capture potentially wide ranging views. The questionnaire formed a series of specific questions, using the Likert Scale (R. Likert, 1932) in order to measure the strength of the respondent's attitude to the questions, and free form boxes for participants to add further information. My non-directive approach to coaching played a significant part in the formulation of this questionnaire and I took great care to avoid any questions that could be construed as leading. This posed problems as my first attempt at designing the questionnaire resulted in a set of questions so generic that they could have been formulated for just about any subject. To resolve this, I worked in close partnership with a senior member of the BBC Coaching Network, debating whether the questions asked were likely to elicit answers specific

to the overarching research question. I also worked with my i-Coach triad to test the questions and prior to the questionnaire being sent out, it was piloted with 3 members of the BBC Coaching Network as a way of ensuring robustness and avoiding ambiguity in the wording of questions. As a coach I'm extremely interested in the different lenses through which people view life. This has given me a heightened awareness around potential for ambiguity depending on the respondent's world view and life experience.

Ethics

Permission to do the research was obtained from the Head of the BBC Coaching Network. Permission was also sought and received from the data protection expert at the BBC regarding use of the Coaching Network database to access their record of staff who have been coached. The database was accessed by a member of the Coaching Network and a fair collection notice was attached to the questionnaire. A member of the BBC Coaching Network initially sent out an e-mail (appendix iii), in consultation with me, to all coachees who had completed their coaching programmes between 3 – 6 months, asking for volunteers and explaining the purpose of the research. I then contacted the volunteers and worked with them directly, and confidentiality was made explicit. Other than the initial collaboration with a member of the BBC Coaching Network and the pilot exercise, the project did not place any further demands on the BBC.

PROJECT ACTIVITY

Diary of activity

August 2008 – approached Head of BBC Coaching Network to request permission to collaborate on a research project and discuss research topics that would be of mutual interest and benefit.

September 2008 – research topic is mutually agreed and a senior member of the BBC Coaching Network team is allocated to work in partnership with me. A face to face meeting takes place at the end of September to agree on the basis for the proposal.

Agreement is sought and gained from the BBC data protection expert, to use the BBC Coaching Network database to e-mail a group of BBC coachees to request volunteers to complete the questionnaire.

October 2008 – the draft proposal is drawn up, agreed with the BBC and submitted to Middlesex University Supervisor for comment and guidance. Proposal accepted by Supervisor end October.

November 2008 – questionnaire is devised, reviewed and re-written in collaboration with the BBC. Pilot takes place with 3 members of the BBC Coaching Network and questionnaire is deemed fit for purpose.

A member of the BBC Coaching Network has been asked to help in the administration of the project. We collaborate on the wording of an initial e-mail which is sent to all BBC coachees who have completed their coaching within the last 3 to 6 months. The e-mail is sent out in late November and requests volunteers for a confidential survey, giving a brief insight into the research question and making confidentiality explicit. Recipients of the e-mail are given 5 days to respond to the request. They are to respond to the BBC Coaching Network representative who will then put them in touch with me directly.

December 2008 – questionnaire is sent out to volunteers. Volunteers are contacted directly by me – they are thanked, confidentiality is once again made explicit and any questions are answered in advance of completing the questionnaire. They are given 10 days in which to complete and return the questionnaire. Of an initial group of 170, I had 18 volunteers. Of these volunteers, 17 ultimately completed and returned the questionnaire.

January 2009 – data is collated, analysed and presented. Use of Excel spreadsheet to capture data in first instance (appendix v). Draft project is sent to Supervisor.

February 2009 – Supervisor makes final recommendations.

March 2009 – project finalised and submitted.

Critical discussion re the process of conducting the research

As a newcomer to research practice, I initially found it difficult to start the project – my question, whilst intriguing to me, felt ill formed and I didn't know how to get started. I decided to discuss with the Head of the Coaching Network and together we agreed on a question that we were both keen to answer.

A senior member of the team was allocated to represent the BBC. Our early meeting revealed an ethical issue regarding permission to use the BBC's database to access names of coachees. This matter was swiftly resolved and we were free to go ahead and make contact with the group.

Before requesting volunteers, I devised the questionnaire. I consulted Judith Bell (Doing your Research Project), and familiarised myself with the potential pitfalls of the exercise. Potentially leading questions and ambiguity were my chief enemies and having been on the receiving end of such questionnaires whilst working at the BBC, I was keenly aware that anything other than a simple and short questionnaire was likely to be binned due to time restriction.

Discussion ensued with my BBC partner, my i-Coach triad and other people I knew who had done research projects. Eventually a simple questionnaire was crafted that we felt was likely to elicit answers relevant to my specific research question. It was piloted by 3 members of the BBC Coaching Network and deemed fit for purpose.

I was hugely grateful to the Coaching Network for giving me access to administrative support. It made sense to me that one of their staff should make initial contact with the group for consistency of communication and to increase the chances of a good response rate. This proved to be a correct assumption. Throughout the responses, there was a recurring theme that the respondents had loyalty to the Coaching Network – for example, one volunteer wrote '[my coach provided me with loads of good advice and tips for survival. I'd be happy to reciprocate and help out](#)'.

Due to the simplicity of the questionnaire, responses were accurately completed and returned directly to me. Volunteers were asked if they would be willing to receive a one to one interview should the need arise, later in the research project.

When the questionnaires were returned to me and the information had been extracted, I was satisfied that the information received was adequate to explore my research question within the scope of this project. For this reason, I decided not to conduct individual interviews.

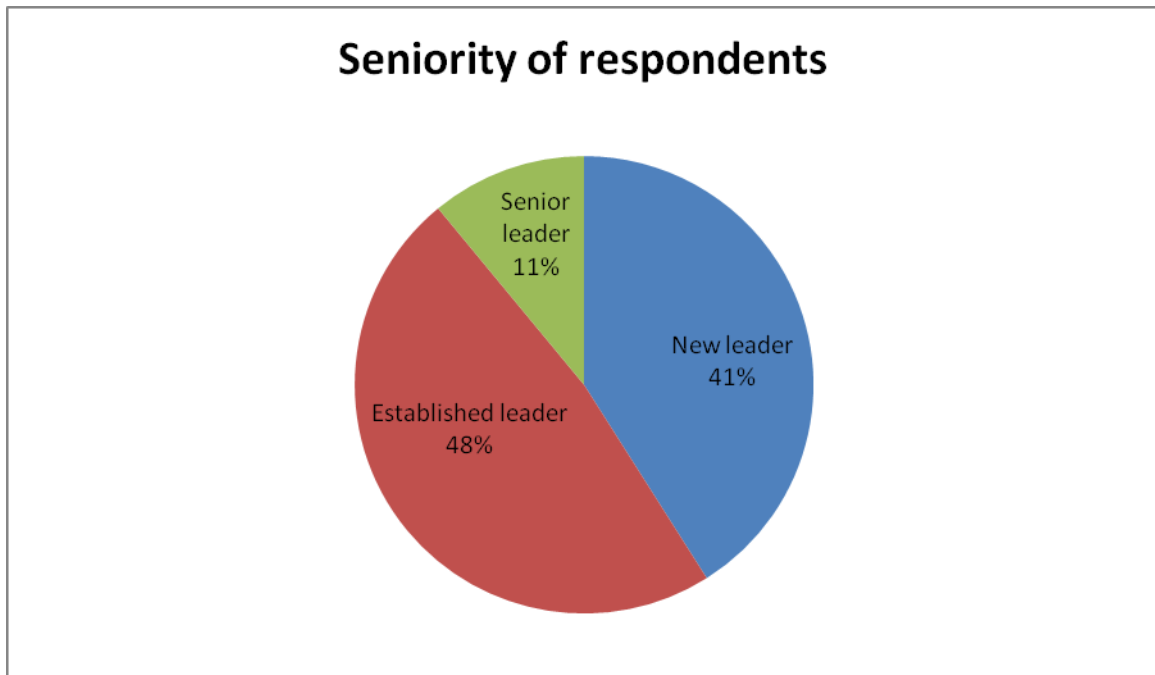
A significant time later, on final completion of the project, I found myself wishing with hindsight that I'd specifically asked for qualitative responses if a respondent disagreed with my statement or question. The only free form information I requested was if a respondent agreed with the statement.

PROJECT FINDINGS

Out of the 17 respondents, 7 were new leaders, 8 were established leaders and 2 were senior leaders.

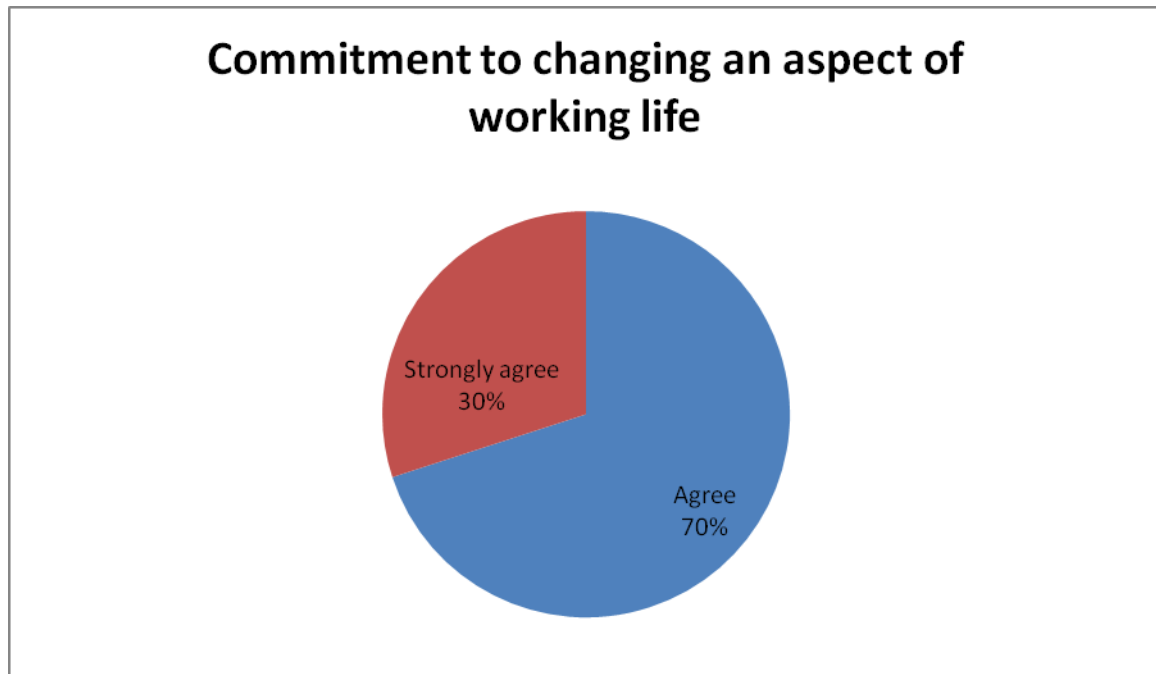
1: How would you describe your level of leadership responsibility?

Chart 1



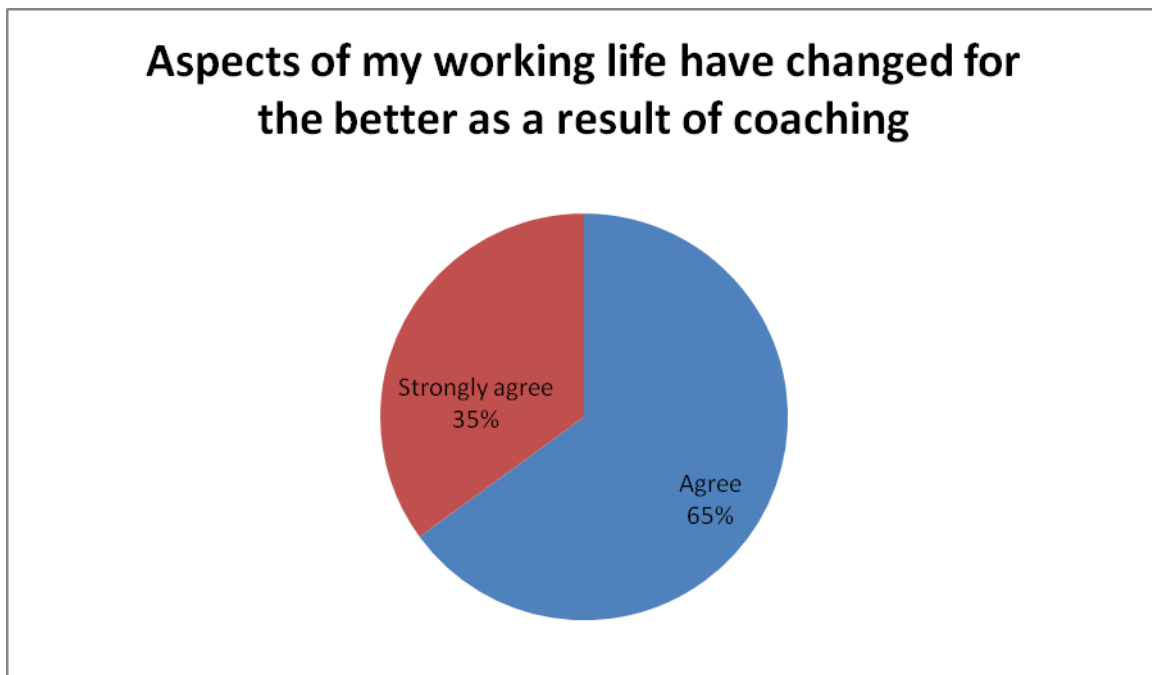
2: At the start of my coaching programme, I was committed to changing an aspect of my working life.

Chart 2



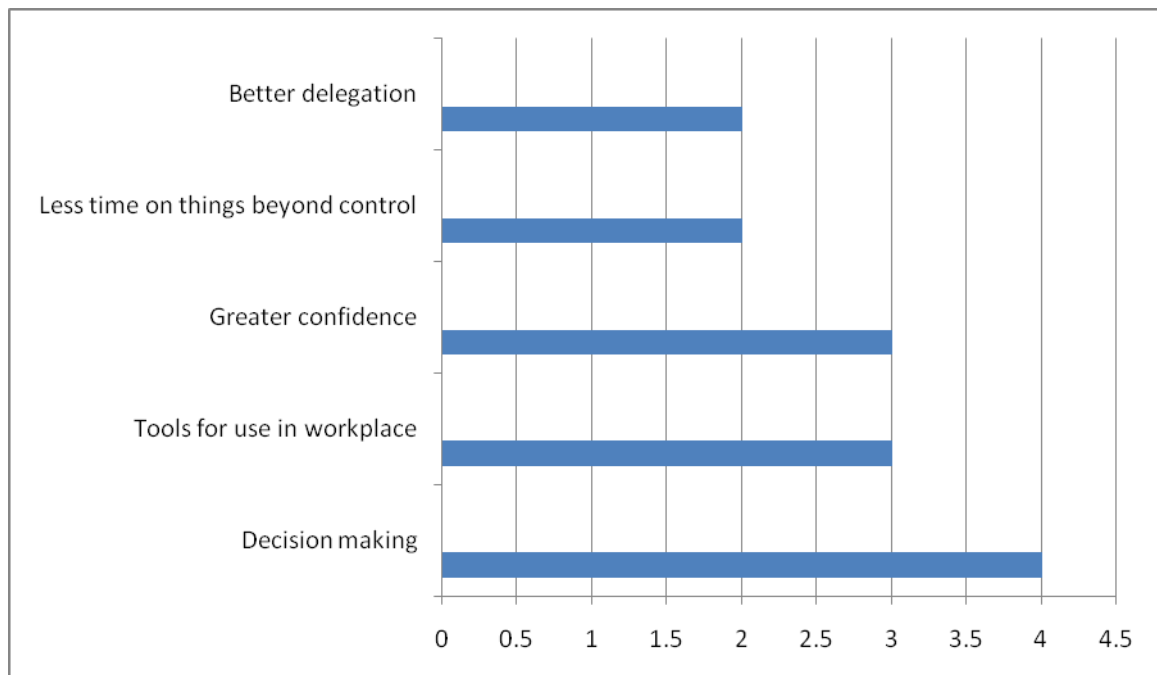
All people who responded were committed to changing an aspect of their working life at the outset of the coaching programme.

3: Aspects of my working life have changed for the better as a result of coaching.



Respondents reported that the greatest amount of sustained change had been in the areas of confidence, decision making and tools for use in the workplace. From the qualitative comments obtained from question 3 of the survey, the following pattern emerged:

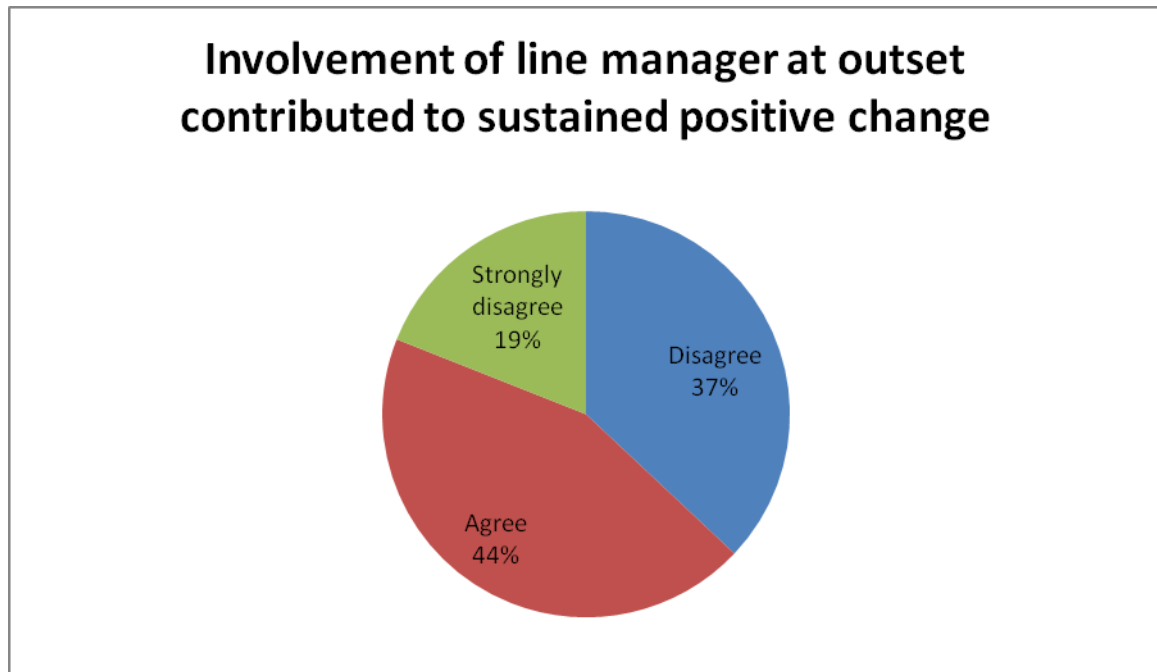
Chart 4



Other themes that emerged were more exploration of possibility, increased self awareness, increased ability to listen to gut feeling, more self belief, more direct when offering feedback, better at dealing with change, improved working relationships, better problem solving abilities and making less assumptions. I could establish no correlation with levels of seniority.

4: The involvement of my line manager at the outset of the coaching process, contributed to sustained positive change.

Chart 5:

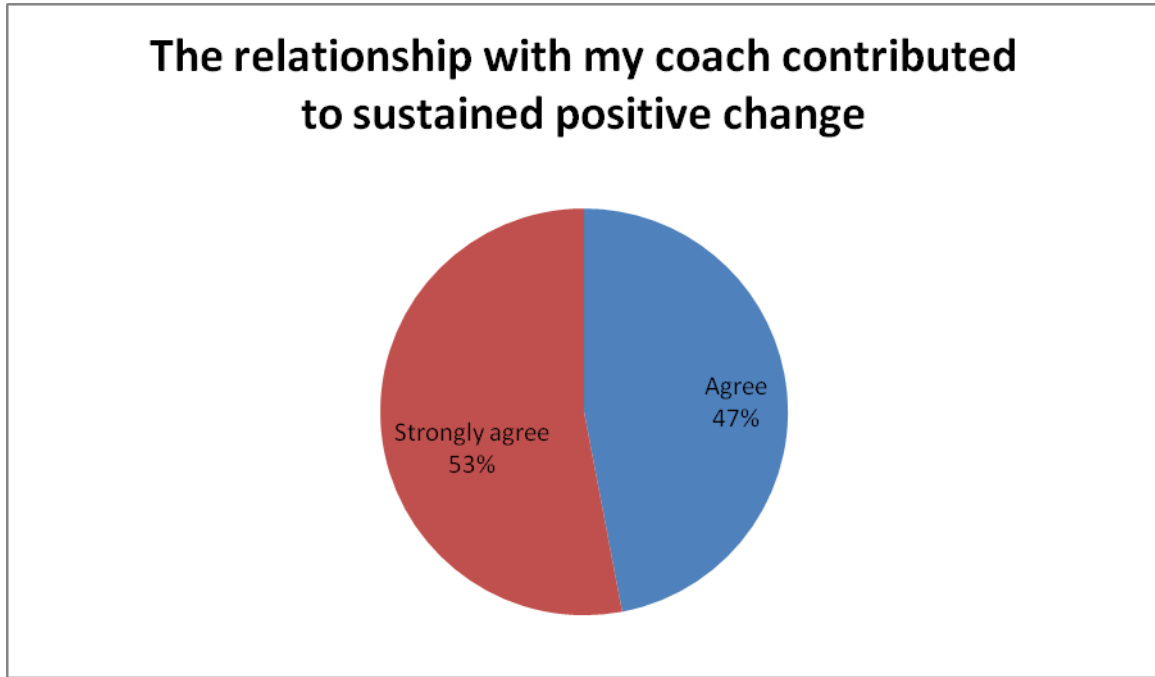


Of the 7 respondents who agreed, the common theme was around support in terms of accountability for actions achieved, objective setting and career progress. Of those who disagreed, little qualitative data was added although one respondent who strongly disagreed said that 'My line manager was part of the issue. He was unable to communicate and agree coaching objectives that were SMART' (appendix vi). I found no correlation between levels of seniority although both senior leaders disagreed/strongly disagreed that their line manager's involvement at the outset was a factor contributing to sustained positive change.

5: The relationship with my coach contributed to sustained positive change.

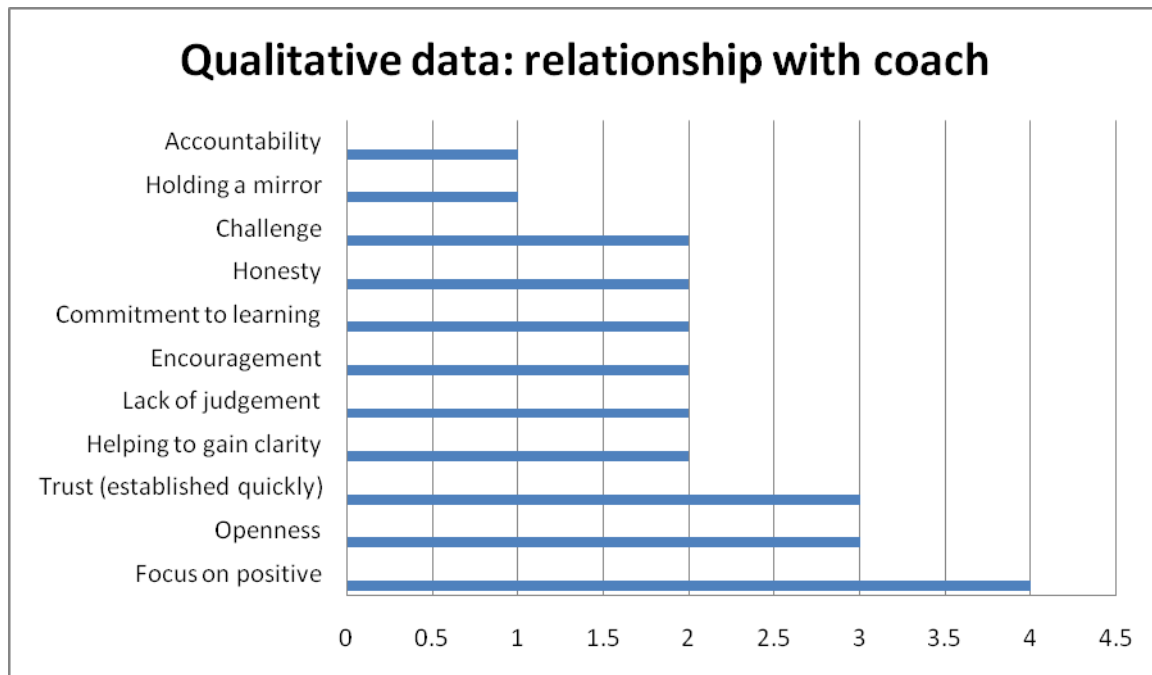
All respondents either agreed or strongly agreed:

Chart 6



So what was it about the relationship with their coach, that had contributed towards sustained positive change? The qualitative comments give us the following indications:

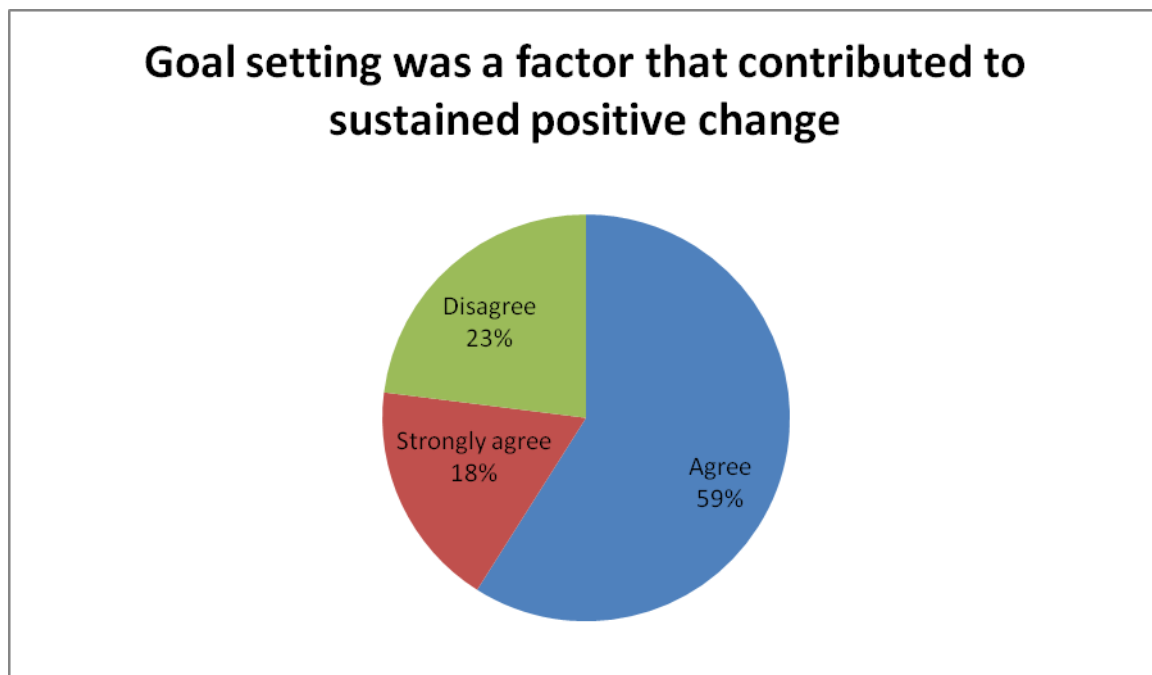
Chart 7



Key words from the qualitative responses on the survey indicated that a focus on the positive, openness and trust were the most important aspects of the coaching relationship that had contributed to sustained positive change.

6: Goal setting (appendix vi) during the coaching process was a factor that contributed to sustained positive change.

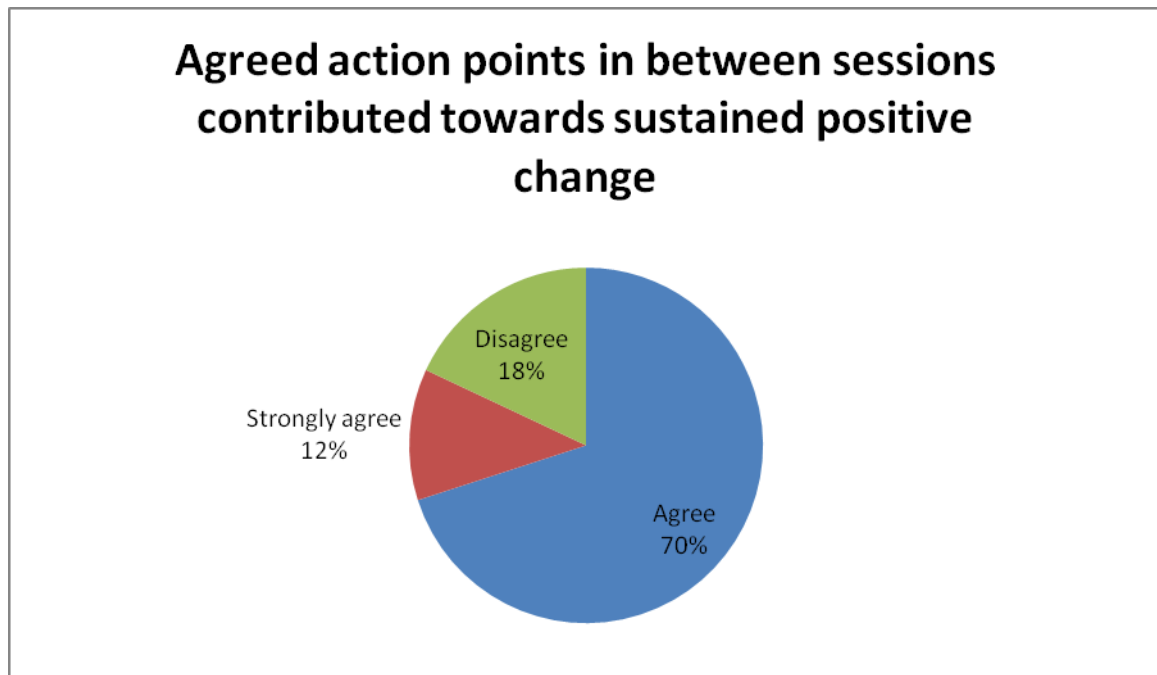
Chart 8



Of those respondents who gave qualitative information around this question, focus during the session and clarity of next steps were the main reasons for people agreeing that goal setting had contributed towards sustained positive change for them. I did not receive qualitative data from those respondents who disagreed – this could be an area for further study.

7: Agreed action points to be completed in between coaching sessions contributed towards sustained positive change.

Chart 9

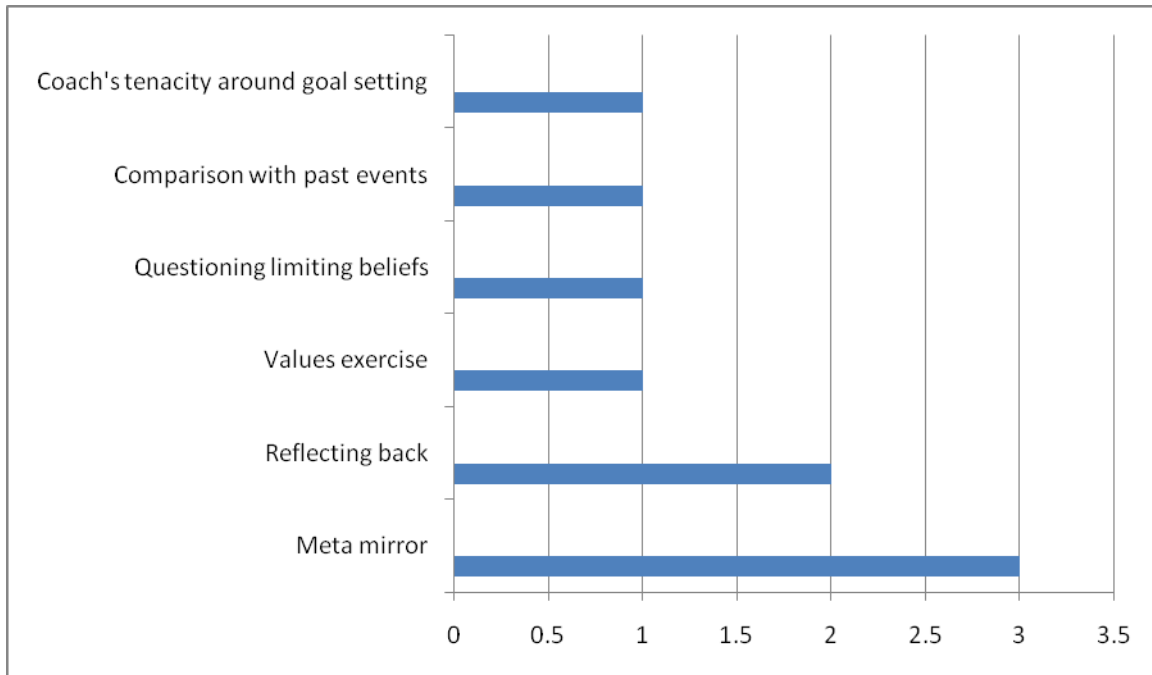


Of those who responded positively, 'focus' was again the main contributing factor towards sustaining positive change, together with 'positive momentum'. Other factors attributed to agreeing action points were; having a plan; continuity in between sessions; taking action and thinking things through.

8: Was there a particular coaching question or something that your coach did/said that stands out for you as having contributed towards sustained change?

13 of the 17 respondents said that this had been the case. The chart below demonstrates the range of interventions.

Chart 10

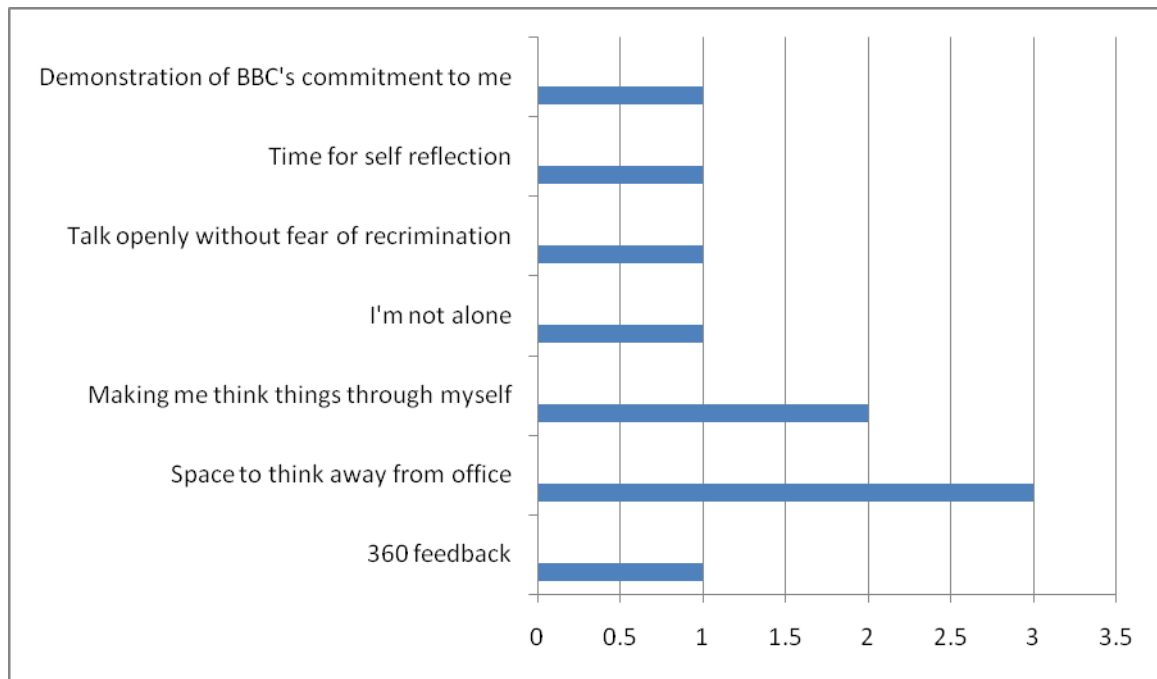


Analysis of this question proved to be more difficult than expected as respondents are not familiar with coaching terms and had not given 'labels' to the types of intervention that worked best for them. The data in chart 10 has been prepared by me grouping different types of responses and labelling them in coaching terms (appendix vi). It is revealing to discover that 'holding up a mirror' to the client is the coaching technique that has contributed most to sustained change in the longer term.

9: In addition to the factors already explored in the questionnaire, the volunteers were then asked if there was anything else about the coaching process that they thought had contributed to sustained change.

Of those who responded to this question there is an indication that taking time away from the office as a space to think, had contributed to sustained change:

Chart 11



10: Respondents were asked if there was anything else that stood out for them regarding their coaching experience.

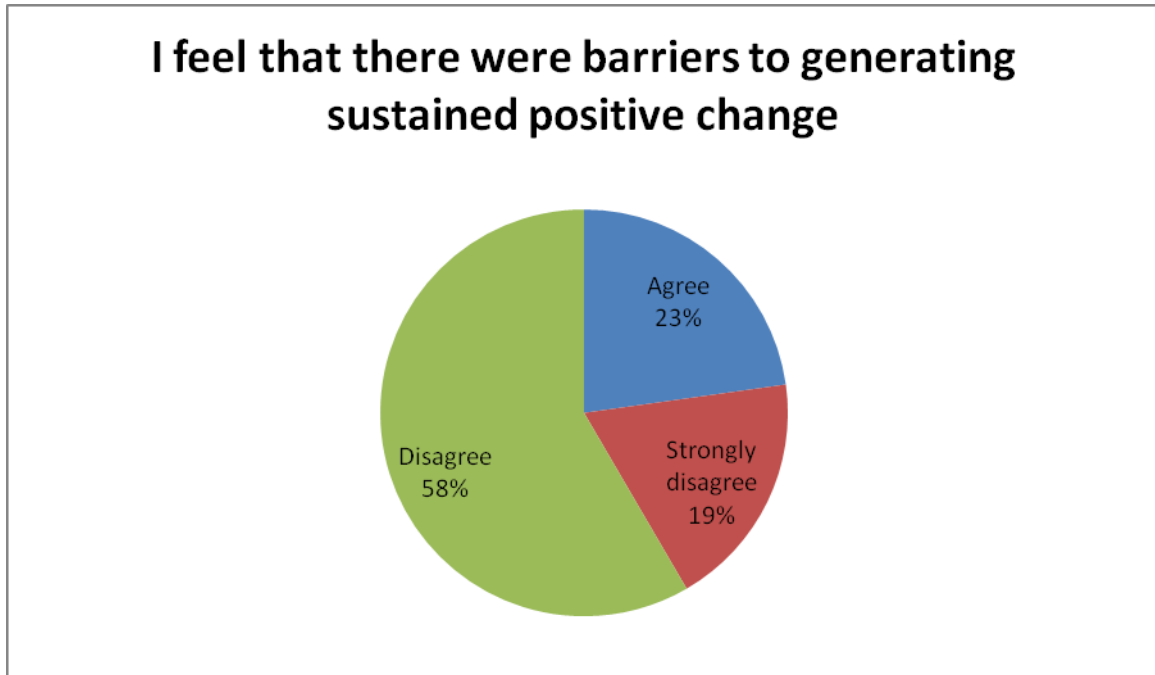
This question was asked in an attempt to reduce the risk that other areas of importance to the coachees may not have been covered in the questionnaire. Responses were of a qualitative nature, with no obvious emerging patterns. Comments ranged as follows:

- The importance of the coach's style in building the coachee's confidence in the interventions. My interpretation of this is that a trusting relationship at the outset is important in gaining the coachee's confidence.
- Time for reflection.
- Talking to an objective outsider.

- Specific questions were of long term benefit.
- Allowing time for reflection before the session.

11: I feel that there were barriers to generating sustained positive change.

Chart 12



The majority of respondents did not feel that there had been barriers to sustained positive change.

Four respondents did think that there were barriers and their comments are as follows:

- 'Managing up. Trying to get the support to make positive changes. Not that my management team are unsupportive but getting time with busy people can be very challenging'.
- 'I don't believe we can change what is outside our control but you can learn how to deal with it'.
- 'Only four coaching sessions and it's possible to forget what you have learnt and slip back into bad habits'.
- 'Making time in work to do the sessions and the action points'.

So both lack of time and lack of a supportive management structure were seen as potential barriers to long term sustained positive change as a result of the coaching process.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

In conclusion, all respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that aspects of their working life had changed for the better since their coaching programme, with **better decision making** topping the list of perceived benefits, closely followed by greater confidence and tools for use in the workplace. More than half of the respondents disagreed with the statement that the involvement of their line manager at the outset of the programme had contributed towards sustained positive change. Key themes that emerged were that they felt that there was a lack of specific goal setting and difficulty managing up due to line manager being too busy or unsupportive. Interestingly, I could find no correlation between level of seniority of the group and their responses. I had hoped that there would be correlation, as it could have provided data which could be interesting in terms of requirements at different management levels. I ran several different analyses based on this query but found no area of statistical significance between responses and levels of seniority. This may have been because only 2 of the sample group were senior leaders which could have been representative of the original group who were contacted (3 – 6 months after coaching programme had ended but random levels of seniority) or could be attributed to other factors such as senior managers being less prepared to spend time completing a questionnaire. I can only speculate.

Respondents unanimously agreed that the relationship with their coach had contributed to sustained positive change, with 53% strongly agreeing that this was the case. The most popular reason given for this was that their coach helped them to **focus on the positive**, closely followed by **a trusting and open relationship**.

When asked whether goal setting was a factor that contributed towards sustained positive change, the majority either agreed or strongly agreed. A substantial 23% disagreed. Of those who gave qualitative information, **focus and clarity** were popular reasons for finding goal setting to be of benefit. Similar responses were received for the question as to whether agreed action points in between sessions had contributed to long lasting positive change. Focus was again the main benefit listed and the coachees also enjoyed having a plan, continuity between sessions and the positive momentum which they felt was gained by agreeing on actions.

The volunteers were asked if there was a particular coaching question or something that their coach did or said that had contributed to sustained change in the long run. Initially I found this data difficult to interpret as the coachees were not versed in coaching terminology. I grouped the qualitative responses under headings and was most interested to discover that the **meta mirror** was

an exercise which had contributed to a high level of long lasting change amongst the respondents, with the second most popular response being the use of **reflecting back**. The study shows that visualising and hearing things from another possible point of view are powerful interventions in contributing to sustained positive change for the coachee.

The respondents were asked if there was anything else that stood out for them in the coaching process that had contributed towards sustained positive change for them. Response to this question was limited, but the two main themes that emerged were that a **space to think** and being required to **think for themselves**.

Finally, the volunteers were asked whether they perceived any barriers to generating sustained positive change. A total of 77% of respondents did not perceive any barriers.

Recommendations

Although the group is too small to extract significantly significant data, some key themes have emerged which I will integrate into my existing coaching practice and share with the BBC Coaching Network. The most significant themes that have been generated are:

- **Better decision making skills** was the highest reported long term benefit after the coaching programme has ended. This will form a key part of the on-going marketing for my coaching business as I attempt to make the benefits of coaching explicit to potential clients.
- The ability of the coach to enable the coachee to **focus on the positive** was rated as the most important aspect of the coaching relationship. This information is significant in helping to affirm my existing belief that focussing on the positive should play an important role in my personal coaching model and framework.
- 56% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed when asked if the **involvement of their line manager at the outset** had contributed to sustained positive change for the coachee. Further research into this area could be a fascinating insight which could inform my leadership coaching practice in the future and potentially inform the BBC Coaching Network's offering within the Leadership Essentials programme.
- The **meta mirror** and **reflecting back** were considered to be the two most powerful coaching interventions in the context of the research question. This information is significant for me in marketing my coaching business as I attempt to reach out in a meaningful way to potential clients. It may also inform the BBC Coaching Service when training new coaches.

Key words: **Leadership, Coaching, Change**

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Project Supervisor Middlesex University: Jean O’Neill

