
Return on Investment in Executive Coaching

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Abstract

Executive coaching, as defined as an intervention aimed toward helping executives improve their performance and consequently the performance of the overall organisation, has gained enormously in popularity. However there are few empirical studies which link coaching to improved results, and therefore there is little evidence of its effectiveness as a leadership development tool.

From a managerial viewpoint the issue is that the Return on Investment (ROI) of coaching is not easily measurable. The relevance of this research project to the field of management is that it will provide a basis for managers to evaluate the effectiveness of executive coaching through the application of an integrated coaching evaluation framework considering the client, coach, client-coach relationship and coaching methodology, as well as providing the field of management with empirical evidence regarding the business impact of executive coaching for 100 (planned) coaching engagements.

As an Executive Coach for the last three years, this research study will allow me to take a rigorous, academic approach to better understanding this field. From a professional practice point of view this research will contribute to the further professionalisation of executive coaching and provide a platform for marketing the results of this research in support of business development.

This research project is focused on coaching of leaders in organisations. It draws on resources from the fields of Management, Psychology and Training & Development. The question this research project aspires to answer is:

“What does the application of an integrated evaluation framework tell us about the effectiveness of executive coaching?”

Executive coaching, as defined as an intervention aimed toward helping executives improve their performance and consequently the performance of the overall organisation,¹ has gained enormously in popularity. The evaluation of the exact impact of executive coaching on both individuals and organisations is lagging behind this growth - as demonstrated by the few empirical studies which link coaching to improved results.

From a managerial viewpoint the issue is that the Return on Investment (ROI) of coaching is not easily measurable². From an academic point of view the problem is that “whether or not it [executive coaching] does what it proposes, remains largely unknown because of the lack of empirical studies”³. For executive coaching to become a recognised profession, education, on-going professional development, certification and the establishment of a body of knowledge through empirical research are prerequisites. Simple ROI (return on investment)

calculations based on self-reports and assumptions are not sustainable to provide evidence in terms of coaching effectiveness and therefore a more complete framework is required to help to explain both the effectiveness and its causes.

The relevance of this research project to the field of management is that it will provide a framework for managers to evaluate the effectiveness of executive coaching through the application of an integrated coaching evaluation model in which, as suggested by Ely et al.,⁴ the client, coach, client-coach relationship and coaching methodology are all considered. In terms of the academic field, this research, which is still in the early conceptual stages, aims to provide empirical evidence regarding the business impact of executive coaching based on around 100 (planned) coaching engagements.

Summary of Literature Review

The International Coaching Federation (ICF), the leading global organisation advancing the coaching profession with over 17'000 members worldwide, defines coaching as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. This is a very broad definition and can therefore be applied to many different types of domains of coaching, e.g. business coaching, executive coaching, career coaching, life coaching, etc. The focus in this research is exclusively on executive coaching, as defined above, with a specific focus on the leadership aspect of executive coaching, also referred to as leadership coaching. This is defined as a relationship between a client and a coach that facilitates the client becoming a more effective leader.⁵ It is estimated that leadership coaching is to be employed as part of more than 70% of programmes within organisations with formal leadership development initiatives.⁶ For the purpose of this paper the terms 'executive coaching' and 'leadership coaching' will be used interchangeably based on the definitions above and the rationale that leadership coaching is both similar, i.e. executives in organisations are associated to be the leaders, and complementary to executive coaching, and the focus is on improving the leadership competencies of executives. This is significant and further supported by the research of Zenger and Folkman in which they found conclusive evidence that leaders with poor leadership skills generate poor results. Their research is equally clear about the fact that good leaders tend to produce good results for their organisations.⁷ In addition, they pointed out that a key skill for all successful leaders is to continuously improve themselves and their research pointed out the importance of continuous self-improvement in order for leaders to become exceptional. When discussing "how individuals improve themselves", Zenger and Folkman offer 25 suggestions - amongst which, "find a coach" is the fourth suggestion.

In order to illustrate the growth in the body of literature regarding coaching, a simple search on 'leadership coaching' on EBSCO Host delivered 658 Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journal articles, of which a little more than 50% appear in Business literature and a little less than 50% in Journals in Psychology and related fields. 548, i.e. 84% of these were published between 2000 and 2010 (to date November 12, 2010) and 76% (414) were published in the last five years alone.

In terms of further definitions, the 'client', sometimes also referred to as the 'coachee', is defined in this project as a leader in an organisation with management responsibility for people, setting the direction for their department and being responsible for the results delivered by their department, who is formally involved in a relationship with a leadership coach for the specific purpose of becoming a more effective leader. The 'leadership coach', sometimes also referred to as 'coach' or 'executive coach', is a trained professional who has a formal one-to-one relationship with the client for the purpose of improving his or her leadership effectiveness.⁸

There are few empirical studies which link coaching to improved results.⁹ Most recently Ely et al. examined the evaluation methodologies of 49 executive coaching studies and presented an integrated framework of coaching evaluation.¹⁰ De Meuse et al. identified 22 studies during their meta-analysis of the research evaluating the effectiveness of executive coaching, of which only 6 were deemed to be empirical studies according to the criteria they defined.¹¹

There are two types of coaching evaluations: summative, which focuses on measuring the outcome of an intervention; and formative, which assesses areas for improvement and is process-oriented. Regarding executive coaching it is interesting to note that both types of evaluations are used and that there is an argument that a combination of the two is required to get a meaningful insight.¹²

The following provides a summary, from a historical perspective and in chronological order, of the various attempts that have been made to measure the impact of coaching interventions as well as recommendations for future research:

- While comparing training-only and training-with-coaching it was found that training increased productivity by 22.4% whereas coaching increased productivity by 88% in a public agency¹³ - a summative evaluation;
- This was followed in 2002 by a publication on leadership effectiveness: "The results suggest that the combination of multi-rater feedback and individual coaching do increase leadership effectiveness up to 60% - according to direct report and peer post-survey feedback"¹⁴ - a summative evaluation;
- The question of using 360° assessment instruments during coaching was further addressed in 2003 when Luthans & Peterson found that a way to improve the effectiveness of 360s may be to combine them with coaching focused on enhanced self-awareness and behavioural management. They described that two important lessons can be derived from the results of this study. First, for 360 programmes to have a positive impact, the target managers may need systematic coaching along with the 360-degree feedback in order to gain self-awareness and have a positive impact on self- and others' work satisfaction, organisational commitment, and intention to turnover. Further, they found specifically that archivally gathered organisational performance (i.e., sales revenue, unit-level production quality, and customer satisfaction ratings) significantly increased from right before the feedback-coaching (Time 1) to the three-month period following the feedback coaching (Time 2).¹⁵ - a formative evaluation;

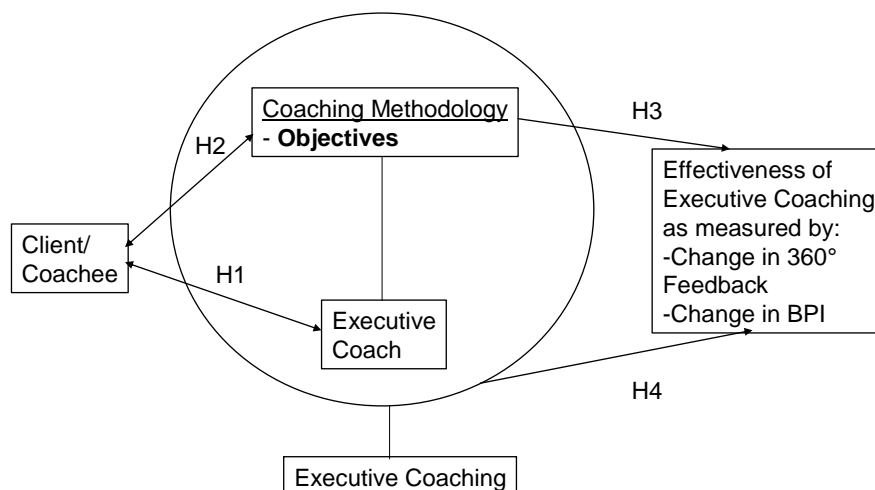
- In 2005, Feldman & Lankau wrote “Future research on criteria needs to consider not only *using more outcomes of coaching but also more appropriate outcomes for the types of coaching provided and the types of client samples*. Another issue relevant to coaching outcomes that needs greater research is the additive or interactive effects of coaching with other developmental activities”¹⁶ - a combination of both summative and formative evaluations;
- After having completed a quasi-experimental study on the effects on coaching, in which they found that “the coached group scored significantly higher than the control group on two variables”¹⁷, Evers, Brouwers & Tomic propose that a “Future examination in which measurement at Time 2 would be followed by measurement at Time 3, some four months later, in order to *examine the long term effects of coaching*”¹⁸ - a summative evaluation;
- In 2009 Levenson concluded that “the measurement challenge is figuring out which behaviours matter for business success, and under which circumstances coaching improves those behaviours and, ultimately, positively impacts the business”¹⁹;
- De Meuse et al. concluded in their paper in 2009 that “as our meta-analysis indicated, there is an inconsistent relationship between executive coaching and coaching outcomes. Researchers should systematically investigate how coaching effectiveness is moderated by the purpose, content, and type of coaching”²⁰;
- Finally, Ely et al. described that “future evaluation studies need to examine changes in outcomes (e.g., pre to post performance), as well as the effects of different aspects of coaching (i.e., client, coach, client-coach relationship, and coaching processes) on coaching outcomes. This will be particularly valuable in understanding the relative contribution of specific elements of the coaching process to overall effectiveness”²¹. Their review also suggests three main areas for the advancement of future research on leadership coaching—collection of multi-source data, consideration of multi-level effects, and formative evaluations of the client, coach, client-coach relationship, and coaching process.²²

Various research projects have suggested that coaching is effective. Some studies have suggested how to establish this and some have indicated why, but to date an integrated insight into the question of the effectiveness of executive/leadership coaching has not yet been reported. In this research project the integrated evaluation framework as provided by Ely et al. will be combined with the suggestions from De Meuse et al. as well as the body of knowledge surrounding the use of 360° assessment instruments to attempt to provide an integrated approach to the question of effective executive coaching.

Research model and Hypotheses

The model of research developed so far for this project is depicted in the following conceptual framework:

Conceptual Framework



The dependent variable, 'effectiveness of executive coaching', will be measured by a combination of the change in a pre- and post-assessment of 360° feedback and the change in the pre- and post-evaluation of business results for the respective clients. The coaching is deemed to have been effective if there has been a positive change in the 360° feedback as well as improvement in business results. The coaching is deemed to have been ineffective if there has been no change or even deterioration in the 360° feedback and business results. The client/coachee, the executive coach and the coaching methodology will be the independent variables.

The conceptual framework shows the relationship between the client/coachee and the coach. This refers to this most critical aspect of coaching and is characterised as the rapport, collaboration, commitment, trust and confidentiality between the coachee and the coach;²³ it is also referred to as the chemistry between both parties. A study by the International Coach Federation showed that "personal rapport" (83%) and "personal compatibility" (80%) were the highest ranking variables in Importance of Coach Attributes²⁴

From this model the following hypotheses have been derived:

- 1- The relationship between the client and the coach will impact the effectiveness of the coaching (H1),
- 2- The achievement of coaching objectives, which are directly linked to the objectives of the organisation, are a key criterion to establish coaching effectiveness (H2),

- 3- Different coaching methodologies will have different impacts on coaching effectiveness (H3),
- 4- The effectiveness of executive coaching can be measured empirically by combining the results of a pre- and post- measurement 360° feedback instrument with pre- and post-measurement of a business performance index (H4).

The Methodology

The proposed methodology for conducting this research is a combination of a qualitative and quantitative approach and it will include the following:

- 10 Executive Coaches with 10 Clients each, which will ensure a sufficient number of data-points to make an empirical contribution.
- A questionnaire, which needs to be built and tested, describing the methodologies employed by the 10 coaches, the results of which will lead to a better understanding of the coaching processes as employed by the different coaches and is expected to assist in the data analysis of the coaching effectiveness outcomes.
- A 360° assessment instrument called The Leadership Circle Profile™ (TLCP), a scientifically validated instrument²⁵ which will assist in providing pre- and post-coaching data comparing a self-assessment with the feedback from others and showing areas of change.
- A Business Performance Index (BPI) tool, as an attachment to TLCP, which will provide data regarding how the performance of the organisations the different clients are responsible for is rated²⁶; again, there will be pre- and post-coaching data available.
- A six-month executive coaching programme. Coaching programmes are usually delivered in blocks of time starting with six months and it is also believed that this is the minimum amount of time required for significant change to take effect.
- A questionnaire, which needs to be built and tested, to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the coaching both from the client's and coach's point of view, of which the answers will enable a better insight into the relationship between the coach and the client, and the possible effect this has on the coaching itself.

Establishment and Analysis of Methodologies

The ten executive coaches, who each will be asked to work with 10 leaders for this research project, will be surveyed regarding the methodologies they apply during their executive coaching interventions. This will result in a total sample of 100 leaders and coaching engagements.

To control as much as possible for the impact of the background of the coaches themselves, it has been established that each coach will be:

1. holders of the University of Georgetown's Leadership Coaching programme,
2. certified in The Leadership Circle Profile™ (TLCP), a 360° feedback instrument, and
3. accredited by ICF (the International Coach Federation).

These will enhance the probability of common methodologies, since all coaches followed the same education, and establish a solid basis with only one common tool. The ICF accreditation will further contribute to getting closer to standardisation, because all coaches will have been subject to the same requirements to pass their accreditation as it relates to the coaching competencies as defined by ICF as well as being in compliance with the same code of ethics.

The leaders (clients/coachees) will need to fulfil the criteria of being managers who have management responsibility for people, setting the direction for their department and being responsible for the results delivered by their department.

From the results of the methodology surveys an analysis will be done regarding the patterns in coaching methodologies to control for the impact of different methodologies. These will be clustered and used at a later stage to correlate them with the results of the actual coaching.

Coaching

Next, each executive coach will work with their 10 clients according to the following framework:

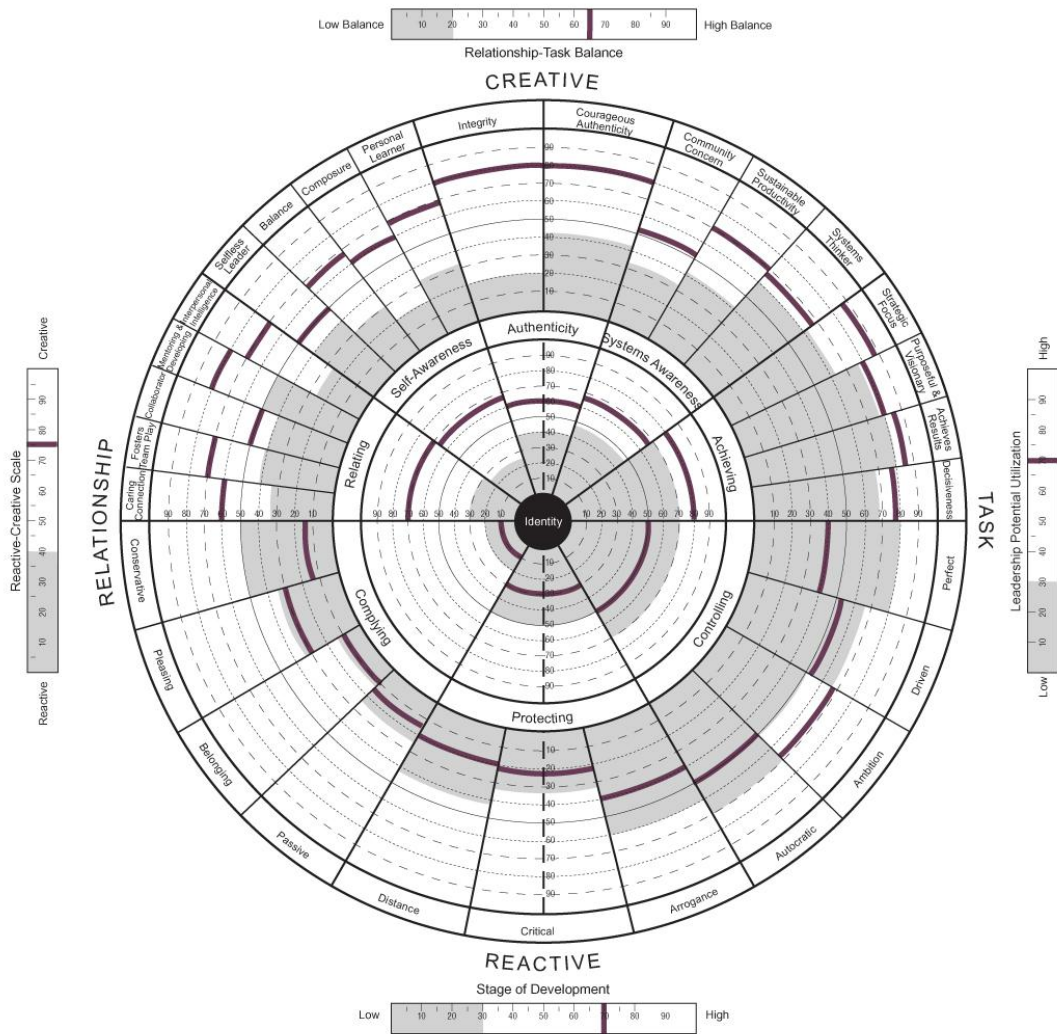
1. The client, his/her boss and a sample of peers, direct reports and others who are deemed to be able to provide valuable input, will complete the TLCP (360° feedback) in combination with a set of questions which will indicate an assessment of the client's results (this will be referred to as BPI (Business Performance Index),
2. In parallel the coach will interview the client's boss to get their input into the specific objectives they have for the coaching,
3. Upon receipt of the TLCP-report the coach will do a debrief with the client and establish together with the client a maximum of 3 objectives for the coaching,
4. The coaching programme will commence on the basis of 2 sessions per month, lasting one to 2 hours per session, for a period of 6 months,
5. At the 2, 4, and 6-months interval the coach will facilitate a 3-way conversation with the client and the client's boss for a check-in on progress,
6. Upon completion of the 6-months coaching program the 360, i.e. TLCP, will be repeated with the same group of people as mentioned under 1,
7. The coach will complete a final (for the purposes of this research) debrief with the client upon the availability of the TLCP-report,
8. The client will be requested to complete a qualitative evaluation of the coaching programme, as will the coach be requested to evaluate the client.

Tools

The following tools will be used for this research project:

- A survey to collect data on the coaching methodologies employed - this survey will have to be developed.
- The Leadership Circle Profile™ (TLCP), which "is a true breakthrough among 360 degree feedback instruments. It is the first to connect a well researched battery of competencies with the deep motivations and underlying habits of thought. It reveals

the relationship between patterns of action and the internal assumptions that drive behaviour. Ultimately, TLCP goes to the source of behaviour to get greater leverage on change. Furthermore, unlike most profiles which take hours to interpret, TLCP integrates all this information in a 360 degree feedback instrument that brings the key issues to the surface instantly.²⁷ TLCP measures key leadership competencies (Creative - top-half) and assesses belief systems and assumptions (Reactive - bottom-half). An example of what a TLCP looks like is:



The 360° feedback will have to be completed by the coachees, their boss, their boss' boss, 3 peers, 3 direct reports and 2 other people they were free to choose, thus 10 people excluding the coachee.

- BPI: in addition to the 360° feedback, individual performance data related to the clients will be collected using a tool as supplied by The Leadership Circle called the Business Performance Index (BPI). After a 360 feedback-provider has completed his/her on-line assessment of a given manager, a page comes up on his/her screen asking him/her to switch focus—from evaluating the manager's behaviour to evaluating the performance of the business unit that the manager leads. Evaluators are asked to compare the business performance of the part of the organisation that the person being evaluated manages to the performance of similar organisations. There are six categories for evaluating business performance: Sales/Revenue Growth, Market Share, Profitability/ROA, Quality of Products and Services, New Product Development, and Overall Performance.²⁸
- Record keeping - each coach will be required to keep a record of when they met their clients, for how long, the coaching objectives and any significant events that may occur.
- Coaching evaluation - a questionnaire will be developed to evaluate each individual coaching program both by the client as well as by the respective coach.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the data collection phase, which is envisaged to last 9 months, the following data will have been collected for 100 coaching programmes:

- coaching methodologies,
- pre-coaching 360° feedback linked with the Business Performance Index,
- coaching objectives,
- post-coaching 360° feedback linked with the Business Performance Index,
- qualitative evaluations of the coaching programs by both the clients and the coaches.

The data is expected to provide the following basis for analysis and correlation:

- 1) The clients:
 - a. 100 client-profiles with specific objectives for the respective coaching engagements which will provide an insight into the types of clients and the reasons for engaging a coach,
 - b. Results regarding the achievement of the coaching objectives for 100 clients, which can be correlated to the 360- and BPI-results as well as the respective coaches,
- 2) The coaches:
 - a. An inventory of 10 coaching methodologies of similar coaches which can possibly be used to correlate to outcomes of the coaching,
 - b. If applicable and appropriate, a comparison can be made between the usual methodology of the coaches and the methodology used for this research; correlations to coaching outcome and client satisfaction could be made as well.
- 3) Client-coach relationship:

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- a. The coaching evaluation will provide data, both from a client as well as a coach's perspective regarding the coaching engagement and the relationship between client and coach,
 - b. This data will be correlated to the coaching methodology and outcomes.
- 4) Coaching process:
- a. Pre- and post-coaching 360°-data which will provide an insight to what changed during the coaching,
 - b. Pre- and post business performance data which will indicate what changed and how this correlates with the 360° data.

Conclusion

The aim of this research is to contribute to the further professionalisation of executive coaching, gaining a better insight into how effective executive coaching can be and what can lead to these outcomes.

While describing this project once, someone asked the question "does it matter if coaching is effective or not, and who cares?" This is a valid question for coaching in general. However, when it comes to business/organisational coaching and, more specifically, executive/leadership coaching the reality of today is that companies and organisations either already want to or will want to know. The learning from this project will hopefully, first, assist leaders and managers to have a reference, i.e. there is empirical evidence, and, second, provide an applicable approach to preparing for and then evaluating executive coaching in terms of effectiveness both for the individual as well as for the organisation as a whole.

After three years of being an Executive Coach and having spent 25 years in business, this research contributes to my own personal development because it will assist me to take a rigorous, academic approach to better understanding this field, provide an opportunity to become an expert and lay the foundation for marketing the results of this research in support of business development.

The next steps for this project are to complete the final outline of the research plan, envisaged for June 2011; to conduct the fieldwork, planned to begin in August 2011; and to run for approximately nine months; then to complete the analysis and final dissertation, expected to take anywhere from six to twelve months; and finally start publishing the results. The limitations of the research will be the elapsed time of the coaching and the size of the sample. Possible obstacles could be finding the coaches and clients to participate in this study.

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