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Executive and Employee Coaching: Research and Best Practices for Practitioners

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Abstract

It is increasingly common for organizational performance management strategies to include one-on-one coaching engagements. In one variation, called executive coaching, this engagement is between an executive-level employee and an external coaching agent. In another variation, called employee coaching, the engagement is between an employee and supervisor. Both types of coaching have the potential to substantially improve performance, and as such it is not surprising that both are seen favorably by human resource professionals and employees alike.

While employee and executive coaching are popular and widely used in practice, scholarly investigation into coaching is still in its infancy. The purpose of the present paper is to clarify accepted definitions, review available scientific evidence, and offer recommendations for overcoming challenges associated with of each type of coaching.

Background - Executive Coaching

Executive coaching is a one-on-one relationship in which a (typically external) coach works with an executive-level employee in order to facilitate behavioral change by increasing self-awareness (Joo, 2005). Areas of performance targeted for improvements vary widely, ranging from interpersonal communication to strategic thinking or influencing organizational culture change (ICF Global Coaching Study, 2012). In contrast to counseling, which is remedial and focused on general life topics, executive coaching is future-focused, developmental, and oriented toward work-specific topics (Peterson, 2002).

Overall, available scholarly investigations into executive coaching suggest that the practice can be effective, under certain circumstances. For example, practice-based research has indicated that by the end of coaching engagements, half of all coachees report increased self-awareness, eight in ten report transfer of skills they have learned (Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman, 1997), nearly a third report performance improvements, and a quarter report "personal growth" (Gegner, 1997). Further, human resource professionals report considerable confidence in the practice of executive coaching (a 2009 survey found that 87% believe the value of coaching to be "somewhat high" or "high"; Sherpa Coaching LLC, 2009).

Background – Employee Coaching

Just as executive coaching is comprised of a one-on-one relationship, so is employee coaching. Although an employee's coach may be a peer or informal mentor, the most common employee coaching involves a supervisor coaching a subordinate. Similar to its executive counterpart, employee coaching is a developmental activity aimed at improving current job performance or enhancing capabilities for future challenges or roles (Gregory & Levy, 2010).

A key difference between employee and executive coaching is the power differential between the coach and coachee. In employee coaching relationships, a supervisor-as-coach typically has influence over reward allocations, promotion opportunities, and specific work assignments given to the coachee. Practitioners should bear in mind that this power differential can exert influences on the quality or nature of the coaching relationship.

Considerable evidence exists for the effectiveness of employee coaching, and for specific factors that influence it. For example, Heslin, VandeWalle, and Latham (2006) found that the degree to which a manager believed that an employee was capable of change predicted the quality of coaching provided, which predicted subsequent employee performance improvements.

Implications for Practice

Executive Coaching – Recommendations for Practitioners

Although the definition of executive coaching is well agreed-upon, the debates over predicting and measuring coaching effectiveness are somewhat more complicated. In the sections below, readers may find helpful tips for overcoming two of the challenges commonly voiced by practitioners seeking to leverage executive coaching.

Challenge #1: Finding an Appropriate Executive Coach

The International Coaching Federation reports that there are approximately 15,800 coaches in the United States (Turkkan, 2014). (Sherman & Freas, 2004).

Although there are organizations that certify coaches (e.g., the International Coaching Federation, the Gestalt Institute), considerable variation exists in requirements across groups. Practitioners should not blindly accept certification as an indication of coach quality, but rather should take care to critically examine the requirements met to obtain the certification.

Beyond certifications, it is wise for practitioners to examine a potential coach's education and work history. Here, "work history" refers to both personal experience in roles similar to the individual in need of coaching, and to experience coaching others in similar roles. A coach's experiences should be examined holistically and in light of

the coachee's specific developmental needs. The benefits of selecting a coach with an education and work history directly related to developmental needs is twofold. First, a coach who is a subject matter expert in a particular area will likely be able to offer more depth and breadth of credible insight into development than a coach who is not. Second, a coach with whom a coachee personally identifies with is more able to easily build a strong relationship than a coach whose personal history is less relatable.

> Practitioners should not blindly accept certification as an indication of coach quality...

Challenge #2: Measuring Executive Coaching Outcomes

Due to the highly individualized nature of executive coaching, it can be difficult to measure the impact that a coach has had on an executive (Judge & Cowell, 1997). Beyond the challenges associated with measuring changes to an executive's day-to-day performance, many executive coaching advocates believe the practice can have "trickle-down" effects extending beyond the executive and onto the larger organization (Kaufman & Coutou, 2009). This combination of factors make measurement of the impact of coaching challenging at best.

For some executives, coaching ROI may be best measured in changes that occur to relevant performance metrics. In order to measure performance *change*, practitioners must measure performance metrics they believe will be influence by coaching (for example, performance on a particular set of competencies measured on annual performance reviews) prior to initiation of the coaching relationship. These measures should then be repeated at the conclusion of the coaching relationship in order to evaluate changes which may have occurred.

For executives with narrower or harder-to-measure developmental needs, practitioners may need to be more creative in the measurement of coaching outcomes. For example, if a lack of development in a particular area is all that is holding an individual back from a promotion, achievement of that promotion might be evidence of coaching "success."

Practitioners should be cautious of drawing conclusions regarding coaching success or failure simply from the level of satisfaction a coachee reports with the process or outcomes. Expectations can play a powerful role in how much benefit a person believes a treatment will offer him/her, which can lead to self-reported performance improvements that are actually little more than a placebo effect. It is well documented that individuals for whom coaching is "sponsored" by their organization are given the perception that they have high developmental potential or are being groomed for a particular promotion (Turkkan, 2014), increasing the likelihood of placebo effects.

Employee Coaching – Recommendations for Practitioners

Unlike its executive counterpart, employee coaching research yields a number of practical recommendations for practitioners looking to implement employee coaching programs. Below are recommendations for overcoming challenges commonly associated with the implementation of employee coaching systems.

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Challenge #1: Facilitating the Development of Quality Coaching

Relationships

A major impediment to the development of successful employee coaching relationships is the challenge of transforming existing supervisory relationships into a deeper, more complex coaching relationships.

Gregory and Levy (2011) identified several precursors to perceptions of coaching relationship quality. These include the degree to which a coach offers flexibility in his or her approach to development on the basis of a coachee needs, the ability of the coach to create a positive feedback environment (i.e., a work context that encourages high quality and frequent feedback: Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004), and the extent to which the coach is perceived as trustworthy (Gregory & Levy, 2011).

As previously discussed, a power differential exists between employee-coachees and supervisor-coaches that is not present in executive/coach relationships. This power differential must be considered carefully when designing or evaluating the effectiveness of employee coaching programs. In some cases, a salient power differential may increase coachee perceptions of accountability for reaching performance goals, while in other cases threats of penalties for failure to improve may decrease coachee engagement (Silverman, Pogson, & Cober, 2005).

Challenge #2: Measuring Employee Coaching Outcomes

Similar to executive coaching engagements, employee coaching engagements are typically very individualized and outcomes can be challenging to measure. In addition to following the recommendations cited in the previous section addressing the measurement of executive coaching outcomes (i.e., measuring performance before and after coaching, seeking identification of "hard" indicators of performance improvement), practitioners should consider how large-scale employee coaching initiatives can impact the culture of larger work groups or even the larger organization. Measuring variables such as trust and feedback environment both before and after implementation of

employee coaching programs can be used to help identify areas within the organization where the programs have the greatest impact on employee perceptions of supervisors, management, or overall organizational climate for development.

Next Steps

Both employee and executive coaching are widespread in practice. Existing scholarly literature suggests that each type of coaching has the potential to be a valuable tool to assist with individual development. However, given the tenuous research base supporting each (and the potential for harm if the engagement goes awry), it is strongly advised that practitioners exercise caution in the implementation of coaching programs. If hiring external executive coaches, care should be used in evaluating both coach credentials and interpersonal fit with the coachee. When possible, practitioners should seek to identify concrete areas in which performance changes that occur as a result of coaching can be measured. In the case of widely implemented employee coaching programs, practitioners may find it valuable to also monitor changes to cultural-level factors such as feedback environment.

As a final note, coaching research (particularly relating to employee coaching) is a quickly growing area of scholarly investigation. Practitioners are encouraged to keep a pulse on developments in coaching literature in order to inform practices involving this potentially invaluable developmental tool.

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