

An HR perspective on executive coaching for organisational learning

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Abstract

The qualitative research study on which this article is based is an enquiry into the meaning and essences of the executive coaching-organizational learning phenomenon, as a social construct of the lived experiences and perceptions of HR professionals. The findings suggest a need to place executive coaching within an organization's systems, with performance measures aligned to business strategies, and for stakeholders to validate and build capacity around executive coaching. The results of the research study provide guidance to human resource professionals, poised to advance a coaching culture that benefits organization performance and leadership development.

Keywords: Coaching, Organizational Performance, Leadership, Social Constructivism, Organizational Learning

Introduction

In recent decades, executive coaching has become an intervention for building organizational capability and a growing trend in organizational leadership development programmes. Organizations spend in excess of 2 billion dollars a year, globally, on external executive coaching services (HDA, 2010; Ridler, 2008). Understanding the influence of coaching on organizational performance is essential if coaching is to continue to flourish in the international business market as an alternative or addition to other forms of executive training (Feldman and Lankau, 2005; MacKie, 2007). The general problem is that without an evidence-based approach to demonstrate how or why organizations perceive coaching to be a contributor to organizational and leadership performance, organizations may fail to learn about performance improvement solutions and the validity of investing in this form of leadership development (Addison and Haig, 2009; Ellis, 2005; McCormick, 2007).

Leadership development has seen a shift in approach from traditional, corporate based training to experiential, action learning models that are process rather than content orientated, supporting continual learning and organizational adaptation (Brawley, 2007; Mintzberg, 2009). The rise of corporate attention on executive coaching as an influence on organizational capability (Dagley, 2006; Ledgerwood, 2003; McDermott, Levenson, and Newton, 2007) has resulted in the growth of coaching as an integral part of leadership development programs (CIPD, 2009). In the United Kingdom (UK), 82% of organizations use coaching as a leadership development intervention (CIPD, 2010), with organizations in the UK making more use of external coaches than the average organization globally (CIPD-DDI, 2008). A success of executive coaching is the

capacity to bridge the individual dimension of personal learning development and professional development in the service of the organization and performance (Leedham, 2005).

For human resource (HR) professionals, one of the largest groups of coaching purchasers, the limitations of evidence-based research can impede decision-making and judgment in the selection of coaching for leadership development and as a contributor to performance within the organization (CIPD, 2008; Dagley, 2006). The study focused on how HR professionals' perceive the relationship of executive coaching to organizational learning and performance. The reality of the lived experience of HR professionals is socially and culturally constructed; meaning arises from the interaction and a notion of organizational leadership and performance is constructed (Samra-Fredericks, 2008).

The main objectives of the study were to explore:

1. the strategic deployment of coaching for organizational learning
2. HR perceptions on the purpose of coaching
3. what influences the effectiveness of coaching interventions for leadership – organisational development
4. the role of HR in demonstrating return on investment and the purchasing decisions made for building organizational capacity.

This article aims to provide an insight into the meaning and essences of the executive coaching–organizational learning phenomenon, as a social construct of the lived experiences and perceptions of HR professionals. First, the major theoretical concepts, professional and leadership issues, and perceptions surrounding coaching in the business context for organizational learning–performance are discussed in the literature review; this illustrates the perspectives that inform the coaching debate and paradigms. Second, the research background to the qualitative study is outlined. Third, the findings are presented in four subsections: strategic deployment, the purpose of coaching, the influence of organisational culture and organisational design, and the role of HR in the procurement and management of coaching services. The article ends with recommendations and conclusions that HR professionals, responsible for the procurement and management of coaching, may wish to take account to enhance organizational learning and performance.

Literature review

Coaching is a growing proposition for organizational and leadership learning, despite ambiguity about the definition, methodology, and efficacy of coaching. Concurrence regarding the purpose or goals of coaching is illusive (Gray, 2006). Organizations are looking for leadership and organizational benefits through the coaching process. Organizational culture and design is shaped by the actions, decision-making and attentions of senior leaders (Schein, 2010). The way in which senior executives construct the “reality” of the organization is influenced by learning and the transfer of knowledge (Leonard-Barton and Swap, 2005; Weick, 2000).

Definitions of coaching vary in emphasis according to the underlying philosophy of approach, the contextual focus and the purpose of coaching. According to Baek-Kyoo (2005), a common purpose of coaching may involve behavioural change, self-awareness, learning, and organizational performance. Central to most definitions, coaching can be described as a form of organizationally-related development that may include professional and personal skills, defined

within a formal coaching agreement between a senior, professional manager (the client) and a coach who uses techniques to facilitate self-directed learning for professional growth and the enhancement of organizational performance.

The interrelationship between performance and coaching is highlighted in the framing of *coaching* as a process that enables performance to improve, through the occurrence of learning and development (Parsloe and Wray, 2000). Executive coaching is collaborative and change oriented (Natale and Diamante, 2005) and relates to managerial-executive level development for performance and professional growth. The working definition of executive coaching for the study was: “a collaborative, solutions-focused, results-oriented and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of performance, self-directed learning and the personal growth of individuals” (Green and Grant, 2003, cited in Webb, 2006, p. 3).

The emergence of executive coaching as a new leadership paradigm has been accompanied by limited research, on coaching effectiveness as an integrated leadership development process, in contrast to the prevalence of coaching practice research. While the rapid growth of executive coaching may be interpreted as evidence of coaching effectiveness, an increase in coaching procurement is insufficient to understanding the factors that influence the success of executive coaching on organizational learning-performance (Bougae, 2005; MacKie, 2007). How the executive coaching process is managed within the organization, and whether it is deemed an integrated leadership development intervention, may affect the outcome (CIPD, 2010; McDermott, Levenson and Newton, 2007). How executive coaching is positioned, for what purpose and, how it is deployed impacts on the learning environment (Aquilina, 2005; Clutterbuck and Meggison, 2005; Jarvis, Lane and Fillery-Travis, 2005).

For HR professionals procuring the services of external coaches, the challenge is to align the coaching process with the business objectives and integrate coaching into organizational processes (Turner, 2006). Research by Fahay (2007) into executive coaching and organizational change suggested “combining integrative executive coaching with a systemic approach to OD is a powerful, whole system, intervention strategy that rapidly appears to accelerate the organizational learning and change process” (p. 144). The extent to which an organization empowers leaders and managers during the learning process can contribute to the success of coaching on organizational learning and performance.

McDermott et al. (2007) surveyed 55 companies on how they managed and measured coaching, and found there was an absence of organizational learning regarding coaching. Research by the CIPD, UK (2008) into coaching trends, using a sample of 729 HR members, found that only 25% of organizations had coaching formally written into a learning and development strategy; coaching was perceived to be a stand-alone process. In 2010 HR professionals highlighted that only one third formally evaluated coaching identified the major organisational change for organisational learning, in the next five years, would be a “greater integration between coaching, organisational development and performance management to drive organisational change” (CIPD, 2010, p.2).

Changes in the meaning of organizational leadership and the concepts of management practice derive from a collection of shared beliefs, periodically challenged by writers and practitioners and resulting in paradigm shifts. How leaders construct meaning from within the

array of leadership paradigms that influence expectation and belief is characterized by self-consciousness, reflection and social context (Sarup, 1993). How persuasive the arguments are is determinant upon the leader-manager's capacity to change because of learning and new perspectives. The significance of coaching literature to leadership and organizational development lies in knowledge transfer with HR professionals, leaders, and practitioners gaining insight and understanding of the contribution executive coaching makes to building organizational learning capability.

Research background

The research design adopted Moustakas' (1994) approach, in providing a systematic structure for data analysis and synthesis. The design chosen for the study included conducting semi-structured interviews (30 – 60 minutes in length), using open-ended questions that encouraged individual HR participants to articulate experience from a personal perspective and illuminate meaning from the lived experience phenomenon. Each interview was audio-recorded using a digital-voice recorder, and lasted between 30-60 minutes. The raw data were transcribed verbatim for each participant and text data loaded into QSR International NVivo©8 analysis software program for coding, merging, and analysis. The merged document was read and bracketed to reduce bias (Moustakas, 1994; Poggenpoel, 2005). The format supports an open-ended facilitation of creative engagement, in which the role of conversation and open dialogue is instrumental to understanding (Gadamer, 1996 cited in Langdridge, 2007).

The research study involved qualitative interviews with 17 HR professionals responsible for selecting executive coaching services and employed in both public and private sector companies, operating nationally or internationally, while located within the United Kingdom and Western Europe. The rationale for the study was to explore the phenomenon of executive coaching as an influence on the organizational climate of learning and performance. The reality of the factors influencing the success of executive coaching is an approximation (Guba, 1990, cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) socially constructed within a framework that is rarely value free. The phenomenological approach is relational and what is known is based on the participants' subjective experience, such as perception, interpretation, conception, construction, and reflection (Merleau-Ponty, 2003).

From an HR perspective, the reality of what factors influence the success of coaching for organizational learning-performance is shaped by how HR professionals construct their experience and “in the configurations of meaning and organizational life that inform their reality constituting activity” (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000, cited in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p.174). In seeking to define the value of coaching to organizational learning, participants sought to make sense and reason from what they perceived and experienced, using a framework of cultural norms and understandings about the coaching phenomenon. The findings of the research offer insight into the interactional nature of the coaching phenomenon and the subjectivity of what constitutes the reality of executive coaching – leadership development process relationship.

Identification of cultural factors, the presence of a systemic approach to organizational learning and, factors influencing the success of the coaching intervention, provided the essences of the phenomenon. Past research (Hawkins, 2008; McDermott, Levenson and Newton, 2007; Sparrow, 2008) identified a number of a number of interventions to advance organizational

learning from coaching—organizational outcomes, which included: (a) a strategic plan that incorporates all coaching approaches in a corporate leadership model, (b) sharing of organizational information and identification of emergent systemic trends, through regular coach-mentor meetings; (d) involve business leaders, as well as HR, in determining measures for ROI; (e) coaching supervision to ensure quality assurance, and, (f) targeting spending on coaching in areas where the return will be high. Aspects of these interventions were found in the lived experiences and social constructions of HR professionals who participated in the study.

Findings

The findings focus, firstly, on the strategic deployment and purpose of executive coaching where participants cited that a systematic approach to the development and deployment of the coaching process contributed to demonstrable change.

Secondly, the nature of the coaching – learning performance alliance is defined by the appropriateness of how coaching is positioned and for what purpose. Thirdly, there was reference to the influence of organizational culture and design on coaching as a contributor to organizational performance and learning. Finally, the role of HR in the procurement and management of coaching services was deemed influential to the organizational climate of learning and performance.

1. Strategic deployment

Participants in the study reported executive coaching as a strategically deployed intervention, targeted at senior leaders and high potential candidates for future senior management roles. Influences on the deployment of executive coaching as a leadership strategy were found to include, the culture of the organization, perceptions of benefits, and integration of leadership development. Where executive coaching was used on an ad hoc basis, rather than as a strategic deployment, participants perceived this to be a reflection of organizational culture, influenced by the business goals and the purpose of coaching.

There was evidence within the study findings, that aligned with past research outcomes (Gray, 2006; McKinsey, 2007), of organizations adopting a holistic perspective on the contribution of executive coaching to the emergent needs of leadership development, through the strategic deployment of coaching and the positioning of executive coaching as a tailored intervention. Research by the CIPD, U.K. (2008) found 25% of organizations formally included executive coaching in learning and development strategy. Findings from the study identified a similar response (23.5%). When linked with findings on the strategic deployment of executive coaching (an outlier response of 71%), the analysis might suggest that executive coaching in organizations is seen as a stand-alone activity; if so, such an interpretation would differ from the comparative figure of 25%, identified in previous research by the CIPD (2008).

Formalizing expectations for the coaching intervention, through a contracting process, symbolizes organizational investment in the individual for professional and performance growth and organizational capability. The basis on which coaching is integrated into the strategic planning process requires clarification at the onset, to facilitate the means by which coaching brings sense-making activity to the surface and allows leaders to influence attitudinal, behavioural and performance paradigms. For the coaching process to yield results, alignment to organizational

goals and leadership strategy, set within contractual arrangements, is a prerequisite for effective change, productivity and growth.

Participants indicated effective executive coaching was aligned to the contracted outcomes, agreed at the start of the process between the coachee, coach and the organizational sponsor, in which key objectives, organizational expectations, success criteria and confidentiality protocols were established. The findings mirror past research which found formalizing expectations for the coaching intervention, through the contracting process, was symbolic of organizational investment in the individual, and responsive to building leadership capability (Connor and Pokora, 2007; Cottell, 2007). The success of coaching is influenced by an understanding of the organizational systems dynamics, knowledge of the coaches' skills and experience and, a repertoire of coaching technique.

The nature of the coaching – learning alliance is defined by the interrelationship of the wider organizational system, the appropriateness of the coaching purpose and how executive coaching is deployed. Where executives move within organizational structures, alignment within HR strategies and a systematic approach across divisions and countries, was deemed by participants in the study, to be significant to the success of executive coaching for organizational performance. For organizations to make a step change in performance, the research suggests the coaching process needs to be systematic in setting goals, expectations and evaluation from conception to implementation to outcome.

2. *The purpose of coaching*

The findings indicated the mutual inclusiveness of the coaching – mentoring continuum to organizational development and learning, supported previous research on the relationship of mentoring and coaching. Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005) found that organizations establish a coaching – mentoring culture of definitions and practices, based on individual perspectives, interests and cultural beliefs. Past research has found that where a mature learning culture exists, an internal model of coaching can be effective when aligned with existing leadership activities (Aquilina, 2005).

Participants stated that internal coaching-mentoring was a feature of leadership development at differing levels in the organization, reflecting of a strategic approach to build a coaching culture within the organization. The findings of the study, while highlighting the existence of both internal and external coach-mentors made no distinction in terms of outcome. Ambiguity in defining mentoring and executive coaching is reflected in the inter-changeability of language used within the findings and literature. If differences exist between mentoring and coaching, other than the inter-changeability of the language, the research findings may reflect such differences in terms of contractual and performance issues. Participants identified the less formal nature of mentoring and the performance focus of the coaching contract, for alignment with business objectives.

The experience of participants was of executive coaching being time-bound and focusing on leadership behaviours, specific performance issues, and people development skills, in contrast to mentoring which was perceived as an open-ended relationship. Feldman and Lankau (2005), in researching executive coaching, stated that external coaches, with a focus on performance-orientated goals would result in the deployment of shorter-term coaching relationships: Findings

from the present study supported this view. Participants identified a preference for a 6-month cycle for coaching interventions, based on budgetary implications and expectations of learner – organizational performance.

For organizations, the value in mentoring and coaching lies in the mutually supportive enhancement of the quality of the sense-making and decision-making capabilities of leaders. The significance of the current findings demonstrates effective organizational learning and development requires an integrated approach, in which coaching and or mentoring are situated in the context and culture of the organization, and the internal and external resources that a coach or mentor brings, enabling learning to occur (Shaw and Linnecar, 2007).

A multi-disciplinary team of coaches, differentiated by contrasting and complementary skills and experience, offers organizational flexibility and learning. The value in mentoring and coaching exists in the mutually supportive enhancement of the quality of the decision-making capabilities of leaders. The nature of the coaching – learning alliance is defined by the appropriateness of how coaching is positioned to meet the emergent needs of leaders, in relation to organizational context, internally and externally. The research suggests that HR professionals responsible for the procurement and management of executive coaching may wish to take account of the implicit models and resources executive coaches bring, to enhance organizational learning and performance.

3. The influence of organizational culture and organizational design

An open culture and support from within the organization was considered by of participants to be a critical factor in the success of executive coaching. Research has shown that organizational culture, namely shared values and norms, establishes the environment for learning and impacts on organizational performance (Jones, 2009). Kilburg and Diedrich (2007) identified coaching may not be effective as a learning intervention without a supportive organizational environment. The findings of the study indicate organizations are at varying stages in the creation of a coaching culture, with few having fully embedded strategies.

The challenge for HR professionals is to have a systematic approach to goal setting, expectation and evaluation, while allowing for flexibility in addressing contextual-cultural issues, in alignment with business objectives. The organizational design processes for the procurement and management of executive coaching, as described by respondents, highlighted the varying maturity levels of organizational culture and the learning climate. Where senior executives had experienced coaching, and made coaching a visible entity, coaching was more likely to be integrated, as a formal dimension, within leadership development strategy.

In shaping the values and norms of organizational culture to provide an open and supportive climate, senior leaders are encouraged to role model the benefits of effective coaching and communicate the value of the coaching – learning process in providing opportunity for growth, rather than remedial activity. For leaders and HR professionals, a key communication would be sharing organizational learning from the coaching outcome, through the transfer of knowledge and the creation of learning dialogue.

Executive coaching is one element of a holistic approach to organizational learning. Managing coaching in a systemic way, ensuring a strong working alliance between the individual,

the coach and the organization, will support the delivery of a mature, learning organization. Developing a good understanding at all levels of what constitutes effective leadership, learning and, personal and organizational growth will influence organizational climate and strategic choice. Organizational design for the successful integration of coaching strategy may include: (a) centralized procurement of coaching services, to coordinate activities and ensure a focus on organizational goals; (b) appropriately trained coaches using relevant methodology, (c) coaching supervisions, and (d) feedback of learning by the coach to the organization.

4. *The role of HR in the procurement and management of coaching services*

Participants identified HR, rather than the individual, as responsible for the evaluative processes and determining the value of developmental or behavioural benefits. Centralized procurement of coaching services, to coordinate activities and ensure a focus on organizational goals, was significant to the findings in comparison to past research outcomes, which found decentralization of executive coaching led to a lack of knowledge in management processes (McDermott, Levenson and Newton, 2007). Reference to the role of HR in matching the individual or context to an appropriate coach, within a framework of clearly defined goals, was identified by 41% of respondents as a requirement for successful outcomes.

Finding measurable ways of determining the effectiveness and benefit of executive coaching to organizational was perceived important in influencing organizational climate and strategic choice, for the future use of executive coaching. The study revealed no universal acceptance of criteria for measuring the effectiveness of coaching as an integrated leadership development process. The range of observable, measureable and intuitive evaluations, such as follow-up conversations, 360°, survey data gathering or observations, cited by participants in the study, have similarities to the findings of Yeo (2003), who highlighted the complexity of tangible and intangible measures, influenced by organizational context and culture. One third of the participants stated the organization did not undertake any formal evaluation, with decision on coaching arising from a *belief* (italics added) that executive coaching was beneficial and played a role in organizational learning-performance. This reflected similar findings by the CIPD (2010) which identified that around a third of cross-sector companies, from a sample size of 724, formally evaluated coaching and when evaluation did occur it was post-intervention. Although coaching has been documented in academic and practitioner literature for over 20 years as a leadership intervention strategy, the study reinforced the low level of maturity in the strategic development of executive coaching for organizational learning-performance.

Recommendations

Executive coaching is one element of a holistic approach to organizational learning and is best served when placed within the organisation's performance model (see *figure 1*). Effective organizational learning and development requires an integrated approach, in which coaching and or mentoring are situated in the context and culture of the organization, and the internal and external resources that a coach or mentor brings, enabling learning to occur. Levels of maturity within organizational life are representative of culture and the systems that are used for organizing (Scott and Davis, 2007). The systems and processes of the organisation in which HR professionals review, learn and adapt leadership development programmes, influences the organisational maturity of the learning culture. The coaching-organisational learning alliance between organisational objectives, leader needs and coach skills credibility can be more closely aligned

through the strategic deployment of coaching and a broad range of performance measurements which includes a formal sharing and transfer of learning. Centralized procurement of coaching - internal and external - may facilitate quality assurance and contribute to an integrated approach to learning within the organisation.



Figure 1. Executive coaching – organizational model (Walker-Fraser, 2009, p. 133)

Summary of recommendations:

1. Organizations could benefit from the research implications when developing a strategic approach to leadership development that places executive coaching as an integral part of organizational learning. Understanding the assumptions, rationale, and processes used in deploying and determining the success of executive coaching, will allow organizational leaders to demonstrate the same level of maturity, adopted for other leadership development strategies.
2. The basis on which coaching is integrated into the strategic planning process requires clarification at the onset, to facilitate the means by which coaching brings sense-making activity to the surface and allows leaders to influence attitudinal, behavioural and performance paradigms. For the coaching process to yield results,

- alignment to organizational goals and leadership strategy, set within contractual arrangements, is a prerequisite for effective change, productivity and growth.
3. In shaping the values and norms of organizational culture to provide an open and supportive climate, senior leaders are encouraged to role model the benefits of effective coaching and communicate the value of the coaching – learning process in providing opportunity for growth, rather than remedial activity. For leaders and HR professionals, a key communication would be sharing organizational learning from the coaching outcome, through the transfer of knowledge and the creation of learning dialogue.
 4. In seeking to determine the value of developmental benefits, informal and formal measures, and stakeholder perceptions, HR professionals would be well served by the adoption of a balanced and systematic approach to an evaluation of the executive coaching – organizational relationship. In conveying return on investment for stakeholders, creating a culture of qualitative and quantitative performance measures may broaden leaders understanding of organisational performance metrics and facilitate an integrated approach to learning.
 5. As organizations reach higher levels of maturity in the use of coaching intervention, the demands on HR professionals will be to engage in the discovery, application and integration of new knowledge (Griffiths and Campbell, 2009) and, ensure a systemic approach with robust evaluation metrics to building a learning organization.

Conclusion

The study has highlighted the difficulties faced by HR professionals in meeting the needs of stakeholders for an evidence-based evaluation that demonstrates executive coaching contributes to organizational learning-performance. As organizations become more mature in establishing a coaching culture within the framework of leadership and learning strategy, decision makers can demonstrate the efficacy of coaching – performance relationship through a systematic and integrated approach. Understanding the assumptions, rationale, and processes used in deploying and determining the success of executive coaching, will allow HR professionals to demonstrate the same level of maturity, adopted for other leadership development strategies. The transferability of learning evaluation methodology to all forms of leadership development activity offers scope for the integration of executive coaching, as part of HR strategy, with a balanced scorecard of organizational outcomes and measures that validates a broader definition of return on investment.

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