

Approaches to Research on Executive and Organizational Coaching Outcomes

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As coaching's popularity has risen as a tool in executive and organizational development, questions of effectiveness and potential outcomes arise. Through research investigating coaching effectiveness and outcomes, different studies have fulfilled different research approaches of exploration, description, and explanation. This article discusses a range of coaching outcome research in terms of these approaches and concludes that many exploratory issues have been illuminated, a number of outcomes associated with coaching have been described, and there are a few studies that are moving in the direction of explaining what underlying causes give rise to positive outcomes in coaching. There are a number of challenges to designing and implementing rigorous methods that can definitively answer questions of effectiveness and outcomes due to coaching. Research on coaching outcomes is relatively new and while there are the beginnings of evidence for coaching effectiveness, much still needs to be done.

Introduction

Coaching has emerged as a popular development process in organizations, giving rise to the inevitable question of “is it really effective?” As organizations invest substantial resources to provide coaching, demonstrations of effectiveness and positive outcomes become more and more important. Researchers have begun to address the issue of coaching effectiveness through published studies; however, because of the scope and limitations of early research in coaching, there is evidence for coaching as an intervention but definitive answers regarding outcomes and effectiveness are not available as yet. To be able to critically evaluate the extent to which current research answer questions of effectiveness, it is useful to dissect the different approaches to research and the answers that can be deduced from them. Three types of approaches and their corresponding utilities and limitations are explored.

There are three main purposes or approaches to conducting research in social sciences: exploration, description, and explanation¹. When researching something relatively new, as in the emerging field of coaching, exploratory research is often the most productive place to start. Before one can answer more definitive questions, it is helpful to explore the subject both for feasibility and to help develop methodologies that will likely be fruitful. To date, a substantial amount of research falls in this category via case studies and qualitative research designs. Another approach to research lies in description: a description of a situation or context, of an experience, or of individuals or groups involved. Another large segment of coaching outcome research is of a descriptive nature, including methodologies such as surveys and qualitative designs such as phenomenology, thematic and content analysis, etc. A third approach to research is being able to answer “why” something occurs. Explanatory research, which takes descriptive or exploratory data and goes on to explain why, is a further step in social science research. Research can also fulfill more than one purpose but often primarily focuses on one.

As consumers of research, it can be very helpful to evaluate which type of research purpose or approach is being demonstrated. In discussing research on executive and organizational coaching outcomes, we will discuss which approach is being used in a variety of studies and what their strengths and limitations are for giving us different kinds of answers about coaching outcomes. This article does not purport to be a comprehensive review of the literature on executive and organizational coaching outcomes, but rather will discuss the development of coaching outcome research via available studies (for a comprehensive review of the executive coaching literature as a whole, see Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson²). We can assess the state of knowledge regarding coaching effectiveness by looking at what we have learned from different types of studies and what they can and cannot tell us about coaching outcomes and effectiveness.

Exploratory Coaching Outcome Studies

When first considering a study of coaching outcomes, it is important to consider what relevant variables or factors in coaching outcomes exist. One way coaching researchers have identified relevant variables is through the use of case studies. Kiel et al.³ identify a number of variables of importance to a positive outcome in the case of a senior sales and

marketing manager: the engagement and support of clients' supervisors; different styles of the coaching team; the support mechanisms in the coaching process; and the relationship between coach and client. Tobias⁴ delineates the importance of engaging the organizational system rather than focusing only on the individual as illustrated by the effectiveness of a coaching engagement with a derailing executive. Peterson⁵ uses the case of a female executive to point to five strategic constructs needed for effective individual coaching: building partnership, promoting commitment, increasing skills, encouraging persistence, and shaping the environment. Orenstein⁶ uses three case studies to argue that there are a number of levels of variables which must be taken into account for effective executive coaching: the unconscious in both individual and group/organizational level; the interactional level between the individual and organization; organizational dynamics; and the use of self as tool by the executive coach. Case studies such as these fulfill an exploratory purpose in coaching research when they point out relevant constructs for future study.

Empirical research often raises more questions than it answers and thus can serve an exploratory purpose also. Many of the studies to be discussed as descriptive or explanatory also indicate directions for future research. Topics identified as promising for further study include individual differences in readiness for change, effects of coaching related to coach styles, identifying specific criteria of behavior change⁷, and coach characteristics^{8,9}. In addition, a number of studies suggest the need for comparative studies: one-on-one coaching compared to web/online coaching and electronic conferencing¹⁰; individual interventions (e.g., training, coaching) versus combined interventions (e.g., coaching plus training)¹¹. Studies regarding the importance of specific elements of executive coaching are also indicated^{12,13}. In summary, coaching outcome research can be exploratory in functioning to identify relevant variables and suggest fruitful directions for further research. Exploratory approaches cannot, however, demonstrate outcomes caused by coaching as they do not have methodological controls to allow for causation, generalizability, or replicability.

Descriptive Coaching Outcome Studies

As another means of developing a new area in research, descriptions of situations and events can add to our knowledge of what we observe. In terms of coaching outcomes, many of the studies in the literature reflect the purpose of describing the process of coaching and delineating outcomes. They vary widely in the rigor of research methods and what conclusions can be drawn regarding coaching outcomes.

Descriptive Approaches using Case Studies

The case studies discussed above also fulfill a descriptive purpose by illustrating positive coaching outcomes and the models used to achieve them. Tobias¹⁴ describes a successful coaching engagement with a 44 year old male executive. The importance of taking into account systems and contextual factors in the organization in addition to looking at the individual is stressed as relevant to effective executive coaching. Likewise, Kiel et al.¹⁵ stresses a systems-oriented approach in a positive outcome from a coaching case. A description of how coaching's impact on the individual can positively influence the organization is given. Richard¹⁶ discusses the effectiveness of using a multimodal therapy model with an executive coaching client and the benefits of this integrative approach in gathering data and working with multiple aspects of the client's experience. Diedrich¹⁷ illustrates the importance of an iterative, integrated approach to feedback and data-gathering in allowing for development and growth through coaching in a troubled, male executive.

While using these and other case studies is useful in illustrating how a model can be used effectively, case studies themselves are weak in establishing evidence that coaching as a process is effective. The major limitations of case studies include a lack of generalizability and the inability to establish cause and effect. However, case studies can provide very useful information: illustrations of theoretical methods that can lead to further investigations of process; identification of important variables or factors; and identification of unhypothesized outcomes. So while case studies are limited in their ability to demonstrate coaching effectiveness, they are valuable sources of information and hypotheses for future studies.

Descriptive Approaches using Qualitative Methods

Qualitative studies such as phenomenological investigations and thematic analysis are also sources of descriptive data regarding coaching outcomes. Wales¹⁸ used a phenomenological approach to describe what outcomes could be identified in the experience of a group of bank managers who received coaching. Three groups of key benefits from coaching were identified: internal development outcomes (increased self-awareness and confidence), external development outcomes (improved leadership and management, assertiveness, understanding of difference, stress management, and work/life balance) mediated by increase communication skills.

Bush¹⁹ used phenomenological methods to investigate what constituted effective coaching. In retrospective semi-structured interviews, executives who had received coaching were asked about what made the coaching effective. Six themes constituting an experience of effective coaching were delineated: 1) a client committed to coaching; 2) personal characteristics of the coach (e.g., frankness, respect for the client, positive and caring attitude, responsiveness, etc.); 3) a structured coaching process focused on the client's development; 4) inclusion of others in the client's process; 5) rapport and relationship with the coach; and 6) results that benefited the client, whether personal or professional. This study gives rich descriptions of coaching experience, illustrating the descriptive approach to research by focusing on what elements are important in effective coaching.

Another study by Thach²⁰ used action research and thematic analysis methods to describe the impact of executive coaching and 360-feedback on leadership effectiveness. Executive coaching, along with 360-feedback, was provided to 281 executives in a telecommunications firm and gathered data suggesting that leadership effectiveness was enhanced by the program. However, the study's findings are difficult to evaluate because the methods of analysis, how leadership effectiveness was defined, and measures were inadequately described. This illustrates one of the shortcomings common in literature published on coaching outcomes. Explicit descriptions of how outcomes are operationalized are critical in order for consumers of research findings to evaluate the

importance, relevance, and validity of findings. For coaching research to mature, the level of rigor in describing and publishing research also needs to mature.

Descriptive Approaches using Interviews and Surveys

Interview and survey studies have also been published that describe coaching outcomes. Wasylyshyn²¹ describes findings on coaching outcomes that are also interesting but not causal in a survey of 87 executive coaching clients she coached over a span of 16 years. By self-report of the clients, indicators of coaching success were sustained behavior change, increased self-awareness and understanding, and more effective leadership. Wasylyshyn also points out that the findings underscore the importance of motivation for change and learning in successful coaching engagements.

Another study of a descriptive nature is an evaluation of the CompassPoint Executive Coaching Project²². Coaching was provided to 24 nonprofit executive directors and through pre and post-coaching assessments by self-report, a number of positive outcomes were found: improved leadership and management skills; improved vision for the organization and alignment with staff and Board members; increased confidence; and increased work/life balance. Semi-structured interviews also found that coaching had helped reduce stress and burnout and had either improved anticipated tenure on the job or helped clients decide that a job change was needed. While the procedure followed is well-described, there is little data reported on how these variables were measured, what analyses were used, and the actual statistical results. Again, these studies give important information about how clients perceived the impact of coaching but do not rigorously demonstrate coaching effectiveness. As descriptive studies on coaching mature, it is critical that researchers explicitly describe their methods, operational definitions of variables, and analyses. In this way we will develop more and better measures of coaching outcomes and will develop further methodologies for use in demonstrating coaching effectiveness.

Hall, Otazo, and Hollenbeck²³ interviewed more than 75 executives in Fortune 100 companies and 15 executive coaches regarding not just outcomes of coaching but also what often actually happens in coaching engagements. In terms of identified outcomes,

task-related gains were found relating to short term performance (increases in management effectiveness such as staff assignments, staff development, conducting meetings, etc.) and long term adaptability (increased flexibility and a wider repertoire of behaviors, and increased observation before action). Personal gains noted were attitude changes (increased patience, confidence in dealing with superiors, etc.) and identity shifts (more personal, increased self-knowledge, self-confidence, and validation of views).

McGovern et al.²⁴ reported positive outcomes based on post-coaching interviews with 100 executives. A high percentage of participants (86%) and stakeholders (74% of immediate supervisors or HR personnel) reported being very satisfied or extremely satisfied with the coaching they (or the executive client) received. Participants reported positive effects of coaching on goal achievement (73% of goals achieved very effectively or extremely effectively) while stakeholders also saw increased goal achievement, albeit less dramatically (54% of goals achieved very or extremely effectively). McGovern et al. also reported tangible organizational outcomes of increased productivity, quality, organizational strength, and customer service and intangible outcomes of improved relationships with direct reports, peers, and stakeholders; improved teamwork; increased job satisfaction; and reduced conflict. These outcomes were assessed qualitatively. The study goes on to report an ROI of coaching nearly 5.7 times the investment. Estimates of ROI are outcomes of coaching that stakeholders, clients, and coaches alike all desire, and this study gives the executive clients' estimates of impact. Much more needs to be done to evaluate ROI from other views, such as stakeholders. It is also important to remember that these are estimates, rather than actual monetary amounts demonstrating the impact of coaching.

A mixed, quantitative and qualitative master's thesis field study was conducted by Gegner and described in Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson's literature review²⁵. Gegner reported on outcomes from 48 executives using a quantitative measure to rate effectiveness of the coaching along with follow-up interviews with 25 of the 48 executives. Executives reported sustained behavior change in awareness and responsibility as a result of coaching. However, this finding must be viewed with caution as the data is by self-report and is not considered longitudinally. Eighty-four percent of

the 25 executives interviewed in the follow-up viewed their experience as positive while all reported gains in self-knowledge or new skills as most valuable outcomes.

Descriptive Approaches using Pre-experimental Designs

Other types of descriptive outcome studies include what Campbell and Stanley²⁶ term “pre-experimental research designs.” Again, because these designs lack control groups, results cannot establish causality, but they are one step further in helping identify and describe outcomes. Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman²⁷ used an action research model with a one-group pretest-posttest design (that is, lacking a control group). Training followed by executive coaching was given to managers in a public sector agency with a productivity index assessed pre and post intervention. Findings showed that both the training alone and training plus coaching resulted in increased productivity and that when the training was augmented with coaching, productivity was increased by almost four times the level found with training alone. While these findings are dramatic and show observed change (versus self-report), it is important to remember that a pre-experimental design lacks the ability to show that it was the interventions themselves which account for the positive outcome in productivity.

Another field study using a one-group pretest-posttest design looked at the outcomes of using 360-degree feedback with systematic coaching in a small manufacturing company²⁸. Twenty managers and 67 workers participated in a 360-degree feedback program rating managers on a managerial profile. The managers were given 360-degree feedback along with coaching aimed at enhancing self-awareness regarding discrepancies between self-ratings and others’ ratings. Other measures included self and employee job satisfaction attitudes. The results showed that after 360-degree feedback alone, managers’ self ratings were significantly higher than others’ ratings, consistent with other research reported. When ratings were again assessed after coaching, the discrepancies disappeared, not by lowering managers’ self-ratings, but rather the discrepancies were reduced by increases in the ratings of the managers by others. In addition, job satisfaction attitudes for both managers and employees improved following the feedback plus coaching intervention. The authors state that by using coaching to enhance self-awareness after receiving feedback, managers were able to make changes that were observable by

others and influenced their attitudes. Again, while this study is a forward step by describing positive outcomes, making a significant contribution in developing a useful measure, and using valid statistical methods, the lack of a control group leaves us without a definitive statement regarding coaching's effects.

In summary, descriptive studies such as case studies, interview studies, and survey research can uncover some of the ingredients in coaching processes that impact effectiveness and can illustrate outcomes. However, they cannot definitively demonstrate coaching effectiveness. Such studies are important in that they tell us what clients observe about their experience of coaching and methods coaches use. To go beyond describing outcomes associated with coaching to explaining why coaching is effective, other types of outcome studies such as experiments and quasi-experiments are required.

Explanatory Coaching Outcome Studies

Where descriptive outcome studies can answer questions of what outcomes are associated with coaching, who they involve, when, where and how; explanatory outcome studies answer questions of why coaching is effective (what the underlying causes are) or why certain outcomes are found. Studies on coaching that fulfill this purpose of research are less common at this point in time. The priority of the coaching community regarding outcomes thus far has mostly been focused on describing coaching effectiveness rather than developing explanations of the outcomes. However, there are a few studies that use more rigorous methods in terms of control groups and pretest and posttest measurements.

Hernez-Broome²⁹ used a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest group design incorporating a coached group and a control group. This study was quasi-experimental in that participants self-selected coaching or no coaching, rather than being randomly assigned. Both groups underwent the Center for Creative Leadership's Leadership Development Program that includes a half-day session with a coach at the end of the program. Twenty-two participants (the coached group) elected to pursue follow-on coaching while 21 participants (the control group) did not. Groups were matched on gender and, where possible, positions in their organizations. Data were collected via structured interviews before follow-on coaching (or around the same time for the control group) and then again

after the completion of coaching regarding specific behavioral objectives. After the intervention, both groups were also asked to rate whether their objectives had been met on a 1 to 7 point scale. Results showed that those in the coaching group were more focused in their behavioral objectives, more successful in achieving their goals, and their new learning and behavior was more closely tied to leadership roles than the control group.

Another quasi-experimental study by Smither et al.³⁰ examined the impact of coaching on multisource feedback over time. Multisource feedback data were collected at two times for 1,202 senior managers, 404 of which had received coaching and 798 of which had not. Like the Hernez-Broome study³¹, participants were not randomly assigned to coaching or control groups. Smither, et al. found that those who worked with an executive coach were more likely to set specific goals, solicit ideas for improvement from their supervisors, and improved more in terms of direct report and supervisor ratings (albeit with a small effect size) than managers who did not receive coaching. While the Hernez-Broome study and Smither et al. study results are stronger evidence for coaching effects, it is still impossible to rule out the possibility that findings were a result of differences between those who chose coaching, rather than coaching itself, and those who did not choose to participate in coaching. True experiments that not only utilize pretest and posttest designs with control groups but also randomly assign participants to intervention groups are required to definitively answer questions of whether outcomes are actually a result of the coaching process.

Another type of explanatory research looks to illuminate mechanisms involved in effective coaching. There are the beginnings of research delving into explaining what underlying causes might be involved. Laske³² utilized structured interviews to assess changes in 6 executives receiving coaching. Laske uses a developmental view to explain why and how coaching can have either transformational or behavioral change effects. According to the research, transformation as a result of coaching hinges on the developmental level of the executive and the developmental level of the coach. Coaching might influence behavioral learning, but it is unlikely to result in transformation unless the executive is developmentally ready and the coach is at a developmental level that can

support and provide a container for developmental shifts. Without transformation in terms of developmental advance, Laske states that behavioral learning will not be sustainable.

In investigating coaching outcomes in a retrospective regression analysis study, Dunn & Stober³³ found that changes in life satisfaction could be statistically predicted by changes in self-efficacy in a group of 72 clients receiving coaching. The participants were not exclusively organizational or executive coaching clients. And due to the retrospective and survey nature of the study, increases in life satisfaction and self-efficacy cannot be construed to be a result of coaching. But the study does point to possible explanations for one mechanism of coaching in that changes in self-efficacy accounted for some of the variation in changes in life satisfaction. Further study is needed to replicate these findings using more rigorous methods and sampling.

Another study demonstrating an explanatory approach is reported by Grant³⁴. While this study is of life coaching, rather than executive or organizational coaching, its focus on looking not only on outcome but on underlying mechanisms is applicable. Twenty individuals received the group coaching sessions and were quantitatively assessed pre- and post-coaching for self-reflection and insight, goal attainment, mental health, and quality of life. Participation in the coaching program was associated with statistically significant gains in goal attainment, mental health (as measure by reductions in perceived feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress), and quality of life. Increased levels of insight were also found after coaching while self-reflection was decreased. Grant proposes that self-reflection was a form of self-focused rumination that interfered with positive gains and that coaching can be helpful in moving people through excessive self-reflection towards greater insight in the self-regulatory cycle.

In summary, studies that seek to serve an explanatory purpose for coaching outcomes will become increasingly important as studies that more rigorously demonstrate coaching effectiveness and outcomes give rise to questions of why specific outcomes are found. But before these types of studies come to the fore, there are a number of challenges that will need to be met in studying outcomes of coaching in organizations.

Challenges to Outcome Studies in Organizations

One of the greatest challenges to executing research in organizations lies in the tension between organizational needs and research design. As has been discussed above, many studies are forced to compromise the ability to evaluate cause and effect relationships, whether qualitatively or quantitatively, by the participant pools available. It is very difficult in organizations to gain the ability to form comparison or control groups, much less randomly assign participants to different groups. Without these research design controls, the most comprehensive study cannot speak to outcomes or effects specifically due to coaching. Another set of challenges related to conducting research in organizations, outcome research or other, is that of participant attrition and changes required in procedures. Personnel are transferred, quit, and are fired or promoted, resulting in loss of participants in a study. Changes required in organizations often happen at a pace that outstrips data collection in research, resulting in changes to research procedures that threaten standardization. Thus it is not surprising that tightly designed and controlled research is rare in coaching.

Measurement issues are another challenge to conducting quality research on coaching in organizations. Obtaining self report data is difficult enough given some of the organizational needs that overwhelm design as described above. Using outside/other ratings, as in 360-degree feedback, helps but is subject to some of the same organizational issues. And outside ratings are still subjective to a degree. Measures that assess observable behaviors are needed (e.g., changes in use of positive statements with direct report), but are time, labor, and cost intensive. Reliable and valid measures of important constructs involved in coaching engagements still need to be developed, such as measures of readiness for change. There is much work to be done to design coaching-specific measures.

In summary, the three research approaches of exploration, description, and explanation, apply to studies of coaching outcomes and effectiveness. Exploratory research gives us information about emerging areas of study such as coaching, helps identify relevant variables, and indicates topics for future research. Descriptive research can map the territory of coaching outcome research by describing what outcomes are associated with

coaching, what ingredients are associated with effective coaching, and who is involved and when. Explanatory research is the pinnacle of demonstrating that coaching causes certain outcomes and can also demonstrate the underlying causes for outcomes. Research on coaching has given us many exploratory avenues and descriptions of what can be associated with coaching are evident in the literature, although more remains to be done. Coaching research is still in its infancy regarding explaining causation in coaching outcomes and there are significant challenges to be met in designing and executing explanatory studies. In order for coaching as a process of human change and development to take its place as a practice based in evidence, researchers must continue to strive to further develop our knowledge base.

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