

Executive Coaching: A Conceptual Framework From an Integrative Review of Practice and Research

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Executive coaching has become increasingly popular despite limited empirical evidence about its impact and wide disagreement about necessary or desired professional qualifications. This article examines the practice of executive coaching, investigating the useful underlying theories by reviewing previous research. It also provides a conceptual framework of executive coaching, integrating the literature on executive coaching and related areas such as mentoring, career success, 360-degree feedback, and training and development. The significance of this article lies in its integration of the extant literature on executive coaching and the development of a conceptual framework of executive coaching and related propositions derived from the literature. The article discusses the implications for future research and for human resource development.

Keywords: *executive coaching; management development; leadership development*

In their recent article in *Harvard Business Review*, Sherman and Freas (2004) stated that executive coaching is “Like the Wild West of yesteryear, the frontier [executive coaching] is chaotic, largely unexplored, and fraught with risk, yet immensely promising” (pp. 82-83). During the past decade, consultation focused on managers and senior leaders in organizations has increasingly been referred to as *executive coaching* (Kilburg, 1996). The fact that executive coaching is growing at a rapid pace has been well documented in recent years (Bacon & Spear, 2003; Diedrich, 2001; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Kilburg, 1996).

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Berglas (2002) stated that there were more than 10,000 professional coaches in the United States, and this figure was expected to exceed 50,000 by 2007. The growth in executive coaching is not just a United States but a global phenomenon. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the largest professional body in the management and development of people in the United Kingdom, expected a similar picture to emerge over the next 5 years in the United Kingdom (Jarvis, 2004). According to the International Coach Federation (ICF), its membership has soared from about 1,500 in 1999 to more than 8,200 members as of the end of February 2005. Members have vastly different profiles: psychotherapists, former executives, athletes, lawyers, business academics, and management consultants. Most of them work either freelance or for boutique consultancies, offshoots of larger consultancies, and training organizations. The coaching market is worth around \$1 billion worldwide, a number that Harvard Business School expects will double in the next 2 years ("Corporate Therapy," 2003).

The growing popularity of executive coaching is a response to workplace demands. Today, executives may expect emotional intelligence and soft skills from managers and colleagues. According to Sherman and Freas (2004), executives of flatter, leaner, faster-moving organizations are recognizing a subtler set of competencies: the communication and interpersonal skills necessary for influencing employees, adaptability to rapid change, and respect for people of diverse backgrounds.

Problem Statement

Executive coaching is one of the areas that the practice is way ahead of theory. While executive coaching has become an established practice, however, it still is ill-defined (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Kilburg, 1996; Orenstein, 2002; Sherman & Freas, 2004). Although executive coaching has been proposed as an intervention to help executives improve their performance and ultimately the performance of the overall organization, whether or not it does what it proposes remains unknown due to the lack of empirical evidence for what happens, why it happens, and what makes it effective or ineffective (Bacon & Spear, 2003; Kilburg, 1996).

In terms of HRD, coaching has rapidly become a significant part of many organizations' learning and development strategy. Lack of transfer in learning and lack of sustained behavioral change pointed toward the need for more individualized, more engaged, more context-specific learning (Bacon & Spear, 2003). Learning, development, behavioral change, performance, leadership, career success, and organizational commitment are the issues related with executive coaching. These are all in the domain of HRD. However, not a single article about executive coaching has been found in the HRD journals yet; although there are some articles about the *manager as a*

coach. Thus, little attention has been paid to the emerging practice of executive coaching by HRD scholars and no efforts for theory building to guide future research have been made yet.

The purpose of this article is to examine the practice of executive coaching, investigating the useful underlying theories by reviewing previous research. It also aims to provide a conceptual framework of executive coaching, integrating the extant literature on executive coaching and related areas such as mentoring, career success, 360-degree feedback, and training and development. This article is divided into five parts. The first part provides research method and a brief summary of the literature on executive coaching. The second part summarizes the definitions, objectives, and approaches to executive coaching. The third part investigates the existing research, including qualitative and quantitative research. The fourth part provides a conceptual framework of executive coaching. The final part discusses future research areas of executive coaching, implications of HRD, and conclusions. In short, the first half is a literature review, and the second half offers a conceptual framework.

Method

This article focuses on published research on executive coaching in the workplace. Articles for this review were identified through searches of *Business Source Premier*, *PsychArticles*, *Interscience*, and *Science Direct* databases (through June 2005), using the key words *executive coaching* and *coaching*. The researcher reviewed the reference list of each article to identify additional citations that were not revealed by other search means. The majority of the research on executive coaching in the workplace has been published within the past 10 years. However, it should be noted that most articles are from practice journals such as *Harvard Business Review* and *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice & Research*. A special issue of *Consulting Psychology Journal* was dedicated to executive coaching in 1996. Book chapters on executive coaching also have been published, and discussions of the topic have been included in recent chapters on behavior change, leadership development, and developmental relationships. Books on the general topic of coaching in the workplace and on executive coaching have recently appeared (Bacon & Spear, 2003; Fitzgerald & Berger, 2002; Kilburg, 2000).

Coaching has traditionally been viewed as a way to correct poor performance and to link individual effectiveness with organizational performance (Ellinger, Ellinger, & Keller, 2003). There should be a distinction between the *manager as a coach* and executive coaching. In manager as a coach, the manager plays a role as a coach, whereas the executive is being coached by professional (mostly external) coach, in executive coaching. Whereas the literature about manager as a coach has been identified as a way of motivat-

ing, developing, and retaining employees in organizations (Evered & Selman, 1989; Orth, Wilkinson, & Benfari, 1987), executive coaching, a relatively new practice in coaching fields, emphasizes self-awareness and learning by the one-on-one relationship between the coach and the executive. Thus, even if there is increasing number of articles about *manager as a coach* or managerial and/or supervisory coaching that focuses on the added role of managers, they are not included in this review, due to the difference of the focus.

A total of 78 articles from academic and practice journals and magazines were searched and read completely in reviewing the executive coaching literature. As a result, the researcher could categorize the literature by the type of journal (practice versus academic), research methodology (qualitative versus quantitative), definition and purpose, and focus of coaching (coaching versus counseling). It is noted that the categorization was based solely on the researcher's judgment. To categorize the literature that was conducted for this study, 71% were found in practice journals, whereas 15% in academic journals, and 14% in magazines. Regarding the contents of the articles, about 40% of articles were written on the basis of therapy or clinical psychology, whereas the rest were from management and HRD perspectives. In general, what does exist falls into three categories: (a) definition and designation of the practice, (b) description of specific executive coaching methodologies by practitioners in the field, and (c) case studies of executive coaching. Out of 78 articles on executive coaching, only 11 were research articles, including 6 quantitative studies and 5 qualitative studies. Among 6 quantitative studies, only 1 study was based on correlational study using inferential statistics. This shows that little empirical research has been conducted on this practice (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Kilburg, 1996, 1997, 2001; Orenstein, 2002; Sherman & Freas, 2004), even if there are a number of case studies portraying successful instances of executive coaching (e.g., Diedrich, 1996; Kiel, Rimmer, Williams, & Doyle, 1996; Peterson, 1996; Tobias, 1996).

The Practice of Executive Coaching

As Kets de Vries (2005) stated, "It isn't always clear whether the client is the person being coached or someone else in the organization—perhaps someone higher up the management ladder or someone in the human resources department" (p. 74). Before going into detail, therefore, it is helpful to define basic terms: coach, coachee, and client. *Coach* refers to the one who provides one-on-one coaching. *Coachee* refers to the one who gets the professional service; namely, it is the executive. Finally, in this article, *client* refers to the stakeholders, including more senior executives and/or HR representatives. The following includes a brief history of executive coaching, along with definitions and purposes, and approaches of executive coaching.

History of Executive Coaching

It is not clear when exactly executive coaching first began (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). According to Witherspoon and White (1996), the word *coach* was first used in English in the 1500s.

(Coach) refers to a particular kind of carriage. Hence, the root meaning of the verb *to coach* is to convey a valued person from where one was to where one wants to be—a solid meaning for coaching executives today! (Witherspoon & White, 1996, p. 124)

Harris (1999) maintained that a few professionals used a blend of organization development (OD) and psychological techniques in working with executives, even before the term was coined. According to Tobias (1996), the term, *executive coaching*, came into the business world in the late 1980s. He also argued that coaching is “simply a repackaging of certain practices that were once subsumed under the more general terms consulting or counseling” (p. 87). Sherman and Freas (2004) stated “Most executive coaching is intellectually indebted to a small number of disciplines, including consulting, management, organization development, and psychology” (p. 85).

McCauley and Hezlett (2001) argued that executive coaching was initially developed to rescue talented individuals who are in danger of stalling their careers or losing their jobs because of a particular defect in their performance. It would “encompass the diamond in the rough who needs to soften the rough edges” (Tobias, 1996, p. 87). The other group of individuals who may participate in coaching are high potential executives and managers who need additional development for advancing up the corporate ladder (McCauley & Hezlett, 2001). Recently, some organizations began to provide executive coaching as an executive perquisite.

Definitions and Purposes of Executive Coaching

Table 1 presents various definitions of executive coaching based on different perspectives. Executive coaching involves practical, goal-focused forms of one-on-one learning and behavioral change (Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999; Peterson, 1996). Definitions in Table 1 range from specific to comprehensive. For instance, some defined executive coaching specifically limiting it to individual level (Peterson, 1996; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; McCauley & Hezlett, 2001; Orenstein, 2003); others preferred a broader definition, extending it to the organizational level (Bacon & Spear, 2003; Hall et al., 1999; ICF, 2003; Kilburg, 1996).

Although most definitions state that executive coaching is based on a one-on-one relationship, Kets de Vries (2005) stressed the coaching in groups as the preferred tool for behavior change. He argued that coaching in

TABLE 1: Definitions and Purposes of Executive Coaching

Author(s)	Year	Definition and Purpose
Peterson	1996	Coaching is the process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective (p. 78).
Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson Orenstein	2001 2002	Coaching is a form of a systematic feedback intervention aimed at enhancing professional skills, interpersonal awareness, and personal effectiveness. Executive coaching is referred to as a "one-on-one intervention with a senior manager for the purpose of improving or enhancing management skills" (p. 356).
McCauley and Hezlett	2001	Executive coaching involves a series of one-on-one interactions between a manager or executive and an external coach in order to further the professional development of the manager (p. 321).
Bacon and Spear	2003	Coaching in business contexts can generally be defined as an informed dialogue whose purpose is the facilitation of new skills, possibilities, and insights in the interest of individual learning and organizational advancement (p. xvi).
Hall, Otazo, and Hollenbeck	1999	Coaching is meant to be a practical, goal-focused form of personal, one-on-one learning for busy executives and may be used to improve performance or executive behavior; enhancing a career or prevent derailment, and work through organizational issues or change initiatives (p. 40).
Kilburg	1996	Executive coaching is a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioral techniques and methods to assist the client to achieve a mutually identified set of goals, to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction, and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client's organization within a formally defined coaching agreement (p. 142).
International Coaching Federation (ICF)	2003	Professional coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, businesses, or organizations. Through the process of coaching, clients deepen their learning, improve their performance, and enhance their quality of life.

a group setting has “the highest payoff: high-performance organizations; results-oriented and accountable people; boundaryless organizations; and true knowledge management” (p. 75).

According to Sherman and Freas (2004), the purpose of executive coaching is to produce *learning*, *behavioral change*, and *growth* in the coachee for the economic benefit of the client that employs the coachee. Although there is a slight difference, the common purpose of executive coaching could be reduced to behavioral change, self-awareness, learning, and ultimately career success and organizational performance.

Reviewing all the definitions of previous literature, in this article, executive coaching is defined as a process of a one-on-one relationship between a professional coach and an executive (coachee) for the purpose of enhancing coachee’s behavioral change through self-awareness and learning, and thus ultimately for the success of individual and organization. This definition will be the basis of the conceptual framework that will be presented later.

Coaching Approach: Counseling Versus Consulting

It seems that *counseling* and *consulting* occupy opposite ends of a continuum of coaching approach. Some (Hart, Blattner, & Leipsic, 2000; Hodgetts, 2002; Kets de Vries, 2005) divided the coaching approach into two: *therapy* and *coaching*; others (Bacon & Spear, 2003) preferred the term, the *coach as a director* and the *coach as a psych-therapist*. Thus, although there are slight differences in nuance, in most articles, the terms *therapy*, *counseling*, and *remedial* are used interchangeably, whereas the words *coaching*, *consulting*, and *developmental* have the same connotations. In this article, however, the terms *counseling* and *consulting* will be used.

Counseling approach and consulting approach share certain features. Both aim at behavioral change, both help individuals enhance self-awareness and learning, and both are conducted by professionals who establish strong alliances of trust with their clients (Hodgetts, 2002). Yet, in certain important and essential ways, counseling approach and consulting approach are different and should not be confused (Hodgetts, 2002). Hart et al. (2000) compared and contrasted consulting with counseling through the review of the thoughts and concerns expressed by 30 professionals who practice consulting (coaching), counseling (therapy), or both. Major distinctions between the two are described in Table 2.

According to Bacon and Spear (2003), the most rigorous forms of psychological therapy are *psychiatric treatment* and *psychoanalysis*, followed by *psychological counseling*. Highly trained, licensed professionals can perform those practices. Berglas (2002), who is an executive coach with a background in psychology, argued that “in an alarming number of situations, executive coaches who lack rigorous psychological training do more harm than good. . . . When an executive’s problems stem from undetected or

TABLE 2: Comparison of Counseling Approach and Consulting Approach

	<i>Counseling (Therapy) Approach</i>	<i>Consulting (Coaching) Approach</i>
Primary purpose	Remedial Helping those who are damaged or in crisis Self-awareness through self-reflection and wellness	Developmental Increasing capacity and reaching goals Result oriented, action based, and outwardly defined
Background	Clinical and/or counseling psychology Focus on <i>past</i> Knowledge about pathology is important in order to recognize danger signal.	Management, I/O psychology, human resource development Focus on <i>present</i> and <i>future</i> Having business savvy is important.
Relationship and activities	Traditional <i>expert-client</i> Less defined, wandering process of uncovering and discovery Listening is important.	Flexible and collaborative More structured and task focused, involving concrete action plans Listening is not enough.

NOTE: Modified from Hart, Blattner, and Leipsic (2000).

ignored psychological difficulties, coaching can actually make a bad situation worse” (p. 87). Arnaud (2003) also spoke of *psychoanalytic* coaching, inspired by psychoanalysis. Although Kilburg’s (2000) definition seems to be one of the most comprehensive ones, his background is therapeutic and clinical experience, emphasizing his *psychodynamic* theory. Kilburg (1997) contended that executive coaching deals with issues of character and of unconscious psychological conflict in individuals and in the groups and organizations that they affect, striving for improved self-awareness of the coachee as the goal. Thus, those who believe in this approach tend to have backgrounds in clinical or counseling psychology.

On the contrary, Goldsmith, whose approach to coaching is pragmatic and antipsychological, argued that coaches are supposed to care about executives’ future behaviors rather than their past, their feelings, and/or their inner psyches (Bacon & Spear, 2003). Sherman and Freas (2004) also warned that there are many self-styled executive coaches who know little about business and/or coaching. Executive coaching provides executives with the opportunity to develop their leadership skills along with interpersonal skills, and become more skillful in leading teams of people through organizational upheaval and business transformation (Niemes, 2002). Many of those supporting this approach have backgrounds in management, HR management and/or development, or industrial and/or organizational psychology. The methodology of consulting approach consists of defining competencies, identifying the style and social motives of the individual,

and providing ongoing feedback and coaching for individual performance (Diedrich, 1996; Orenstein, 2002).

In summary, this controversial debate between counseling and consulting is likely to continue for a while. As Wasylyshin (2003) stated, however, talented executive coaches need to be grounded in both business and psychology. Regarding business, psychologists who have no experience in business roles must accumulate their business knowledge over time and through the experiences in different companies and industries, and by immersing themselves in the business literature, as well as pertinent training experiences. With regard to psychology, there are certain general psychological skills essential for effective coaches, including interpersonal effectiveness, listening, empathy for widely differing groups, patience, adaptability, analytical problem solving, creativity, and humor (Wasylyshin, 2003).

Research on Executive Coaching

Findings of Research on Executive Coaching

As mentioned earlier, much of the research on executive coaching are case studies based on interviews and observation in coach's perspective. There are only a handful of empirical studies that were written by practitioners rather than researchers. With regard to quantitative studies, among six studies, only one was based on correlational study using inferential statistics. The rest of them were analyzed using descriptive statistics for only one party, either coachees or coaches. Table 3 summarizes the research literature reviewed in this article.

Some of the research reviewed here is flawed as a result of limited information regarding their methodologies and samples that in turn limits the applicability and generalizability of the studies. It should be noted that none of them were based on the dyadic analysis that would produce higher quality findings about the coach-coachee dyad relationship. In short, except for Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas, and Kucine's (2003) study, most of them have potential limitations in research quality, due to small sample sizes and weak statistical methods employed. These studies will be reexamined in the conceptual framework.

Review of Related Literature

Because the research on executive coaching is in its infancy, the literature from related areas such as mentoring, career success, 360-degree feedback, and training and development had to be reviewed. Among others, mentoring is the closest area with coaching. Thus, the literature review about mentoring will be summarized and the comparison between mentoring and execu-

TABLE 3: Summary of Research Literature on Executive Coaching

	<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Methodology</i>	<i>Major Findings</i>
Coach and/or coachee characteristics	Judge and Cowell (1997)	Quantitative-descriptive (60 coaches)	Coaches come from a wide range of educational backgrounds, with undergraduate degrees ranging from drama to psychology. Roughly 90% had a master's degree, 45% doctoral degrees, 80% were male, and the average work experience was 24 years. The majority used 360-degree assessments by interviewing people close to the executives. The most common requests for coaching were to help (a) modify the coachee's interaction style, (b) deal more effectively with change, and (c) build trusting relationships.
	Orenstein (2002)	Qualitative—3 case studies	Executive coaching must be viewed as a process that focuses on more than the individual and more than what is conscious. Coaches need training that emphasizes self-awareness and self-reflection, and should be able to use oneself as a finely calibrated instrument, to select and implement appropriate interventions, and to monitor individual and organizational change.

(continued)

TABLE 3 (continued)

	Author(s)	Methodology	Major Findings
	Garman et al. (2000)	Quantitative—content analysis of 72 articles	Although 82% of the articles viewed described executive coaching favorably, psychologists were not viewed as uniquely valuable service providers (only one third viewed psychologists favorably). Two possible sources of dissatisfaction with psychologists are as follows: (a) some clinical psychologists are entering the field without appropriate retraining and (b) some coachees perceive that psychologists use extensive assessment in executive coaching simply to increase billable hours.
	Laske (1999)	Qualitative	The developmental level of the coachee and coach are important for facilitating transformational change. To experience transformative effects of coaching, coachee must be developmentally ready to experience them. Coaching may have transformative effect, but the developmental level of the coach must also be such that it allows the coach to co-generate these effects in the coaching relationship.
Coaching process	Wasylyshyn (2003)	Quantitative—descriptive ($n = 87$)	Talented executive coaches must be grounded in both business and psychology. Top criteria for successful coaching (as cited by coaches) were as follows: sustained behavior change (63%), increased self-awareness (48%), more effective leadership (45%), credibility of coach (29%), and company satisfaction (31%).

Witherspoon and White (1996)	Qualitative— 4 case studies	The process and focus of coaching should be varied by the situation and needs of coachees: to learn specific skills, to improve performance, or to prepare for advancement in business or professional life.
Hall et al. (1999)	Qualitative (interview with 75 executives and 15 coaches)	Honesty, challenging feedback, and helpful suggestions were factors contributing to coaching effectiveness. External coaches were most appropriate under conditions requiring extreme confidentiality, when the varied experience of the coach is beneficial, or when “speaking the unspeakable” is necessary, whereas internal coaches were appropriate when possessing inside knowledge of company procedures and politics is helpful.
Coaching outcomes	Olivero et al. (1997)	Executive coaching as a follow-up to a training program was shown to increase productivity by 88% in public-sector managers, which was a significantly greater gain compared with training alone.
Luthans and Peterson (2003)	Quantitative— descriptive (20 managers and 67 workers)	360-degree feedback, combined with coaching aimed at enhancing self-awareness, may lead to improved self and employee attitudes and eventually even improved organizational performance.
Smither et al. (2003)	Quantitative— correlational (<i>n</i> = 1,361)	Executives who worked with coaches (compared to those who did not), set more specific goals, were more likely to share their feedback and solicit ideas from supervisors (but not peers or subordinates), and had improved performance ratings (based on multisource feedback).

TABLE 4: Comparison Between Mentoring and Executive Coaching

	<i>Mentoring</i>	<i>Executive Coaching</i>
Purpose	Diverse from socialization to management development	Improving performance through self-awareness and learning
Coach	Internal senior manager	External professional
Coachee	Diverse from lower level employee to high potential	Mostly executive and higher level manager
Process	Less structured and lack of mentor expertise	Systematic and structured
Focus	People centered	Issue and/or problem centered
Duration	Can last for a long time	Short-term

NOTE: Modified from Jarvis (2004).

tive coaching will be presented in this section. Because it is used as the basis for developing the conceptual framework, the literature on 360-degree feedback, career success, and training and development is reviewed later in the conceptual framework section.

Mullen (1994) defined mentoring as a one-on-one relationship between a less experienced (i.e., protégé) and a more experienced person (i.e., mentor), and is intended to advance the personal and professional growth of the less experienced individual. Mentors perform five specific career development functions—exposure, protection, coaching, sponsorship, and challenging assignments (Kram, 1983; Kram & Isabella, 1985). The general goal of these functions is to help protégés progress in their careers. The four psychosocial functions of a mentor are counseling, friendship, role modeling, and acceptance/confirmation (Kram, 1983; Kram & Isabella, 1985). Thus, some argue that coaching has been proposed as one particular mentoring role, along with sponsorship, protection, challenging assignments, and exposure to senior-management thinking (Day, 2001).

There are a great deal of similarities between coaching and mentoring because both involve a one-to-one relationship that provides an opportunity for individuals to reflect, learn, and develop. However, when comparing coaching with the mentoring, there are some key differences (Jarvis, 2004). At this point, it would be beneficial to compare and contrast executive coaching with mentoring. Table 4 summarizes the comparison between the two practices.

First, executive coaches are external professionals, whereas mentors are internal members who are in a higher position. Especially when it comes to confidentiality, external coaches separated from political issues are preferred. It is believed that external coaches are most appropriate under conditions requiring extreme confidentiality, when the varied business experience of the coach is beneficial, or when *speaking the unspeakable* is necessary (Hall et al., 1999). Second, the primary purpose of executive

coaching is self-awareness and learning to improve performance, whereas the purpose of mentoring varies widely from socialization of newcomers to management development. Third, executive coaching provides systematic approaches, including a personality inventory, interviews, 360-degree feedback, and action planning; whereas mentoring has less systematic tools. Formal mentoring programs have potential problems of lack of mentor expertise (i.e., lack of interpersonal or technical competence) and general dysfunctionality (i.e., mentor had a negative attitude and/or personal problems) (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000). Fourth, mentoring is people focused, whereas coaching is issue focused. Mentoring takes a longer-term and broader view of the person, whereas executive coaching is short-term and focused on specific areas or issues. Thus, in spite of the superficial similarity, there are many differences between the two.

A Conceptual Framework for Executive Coaching

As Lynham (2000) mentioned, because theory building has only recently been introduced to HRD scholars, there are a number of voids in this body of knowledge: (a) the lack of explicit philosophical assumptions and framework to guide the task of theory building, (b) the absence of well-researched and tested methods of theory building, and (c) the lack of shared and common understanding of the core concepts of theory and theory building in HRD. Executive coaching is not an exception. This article suggests a conceptual framework and propositions as a preliminary attempt to build theory for executive coaching.

Van de Ven (2000) suggested a systematic research process, proposing that there are four steps in conducting a theory research study: (a) diagnose the problem or situation as it exists in the real-world, (b) select a conceptual model and research question to deal with this problem or situation, (c) build a theory and design research to examine the research question, and (d) conduct the research and analyze the findings to produce a solution. This study covers the first two steps. Problem diagnosis has already discussed earlier in this article. What follows is the presentation of an executive-coaching conceptual model and propositions.

The conceptual framework is the basis of creating propositions relevant to the following three questions. First, what are the antecedents of positive outcomes in executive coaching? Second, what is the process through which executive coaching leads to positive outcomes? Third, what outcomes might executive coaching achieve? The conceptual framework, presented next, was developed from a review of the literature on mentoring, career success, 360-degree feedback, and training and development. This literature is discussed in the following section because it was used as the basis for developing the conceptual framework. Figure 1, the results of this effort, presents a

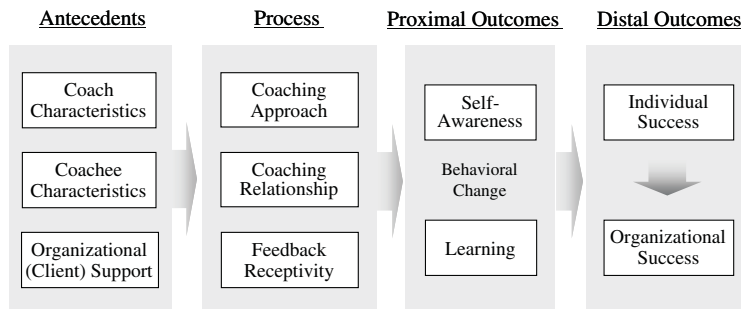


FIGURE 1: A Conceptual Framework for Successful Executive Coaching

conceptual framework of executive coaching in order to help further understand executive coaching and to guide future research.

The antecedents are the characteristics of coach and coachee and organizational support. Coaching approach, coaching relationship, and feedback receptivity are the important constructs of coaching process. Finally, two outcomes of executive coaching are proximal and distal outcomes. Proximal outcomes refer to behavioral change that includes self-awareness and learning. Distal outcomes, which are the ultimate purposes of executive coaching, consist of individual success and organizational success. It is noted that this conceptual framework is inspired partly by Wanberg, Welsh, and Hezlett's (2003) conceptual-process model of formal mentoring in that it focuses on the dyad relationship and distinguishes the proximal and distal outcomes.

Antecedents

As Sherman and Freas (2004) stressed, the triangular relationship among coach, coachee, and client (organization, higher executive, and/or HR) is critical for the success of executive coaching. This triangular relationship is the basis of the antecedents of effective executive coaching: coach characteristics, coachee characteristics, and organizational support.

Coach characteristics. Important coach characteristics include coaching experience and academic background. No universal credential seems to exist to identify competent coaches. However, the role of coach in successful executive coaching cannot be overemphasized. It is believed that the most important qualifications for a coach are character and insight, distilled as much from the coach's personal experience as from formal training. Those characteristics are integrity, confidence, experience, and high developmental level.

First, as Sherman and Freas (2004) put, coaching is best practiced by coaches who have an acute perception, sound judgment, and the ability to resolve con-

flicts effectively with integrity. Second, when the coach has knowledge and credibility, coaches have confidence in the coaching (Bacon & Spear, 2003). Third, the richer and deeper one's experience, the more likely one is to have seen similar issues before, and one will remember how one helped previous coaches with those issues (Bacon & Spear, 2003). Last, effective coaching requires the right attitudes about coaching and the right temperament. Coaching may have transformative effect, but the developmental level of the coach must also be such that it allows the coach to co-generate these effects in the coaching relationship (Laske, 1999).

Proposition 1a: Coach's integrity, confidence, experience, and high developmental status will have a positive impact on coaching process (coaching relationship, coaching approach, and feedback receptivity) and coaching outcomes (proximal and distal).

Judge and Cowell (1997) found that coaches come from a wide range of educational backgrounds, with undergraduate degrees ranging from drama to psychology. As Smither et al. (2003) stated, there is a need for evidence to support whether the effects of coaching are related to the coach's style. It is considered that the background of executive coaches (e.g., counseling psychology) may be well suited for some situations (e.g., helping a senior manager overcome an aggressive or demeaning interpersonal style) but not for others (e.g., helping a senior executive integrate organizational cultures during a merger or acquisition). Thus, depending on the background of the coaches, the approach of executive coaching can be directed differently. As discussed earlier, the primary purpose of the counseling approach is to help those who are damaged or in crisis, while the consulting approach is to increase executive capacity and achieve goals.

Proposition 1b: The academic background of a coach will define the coaching approach (counseling or consulting), and thus affect coaching process and outcomes.

Coachee characteristics. Strumpf (2002) maintains that there are five general types of coachee. Most executives fall into one of the following categories: (a) high potential, (b) valuable but at risk of derailing, (c) newly hired or newly promoted, (d) expatriate, and (e) diamond in the rough. To experience transformative effects of coaching, coachee must be developmentally ready to experience them (Laske, 1999). Colquitt, LePine, and Noe (2000) also found that individual characteristics had direct and indirect relationships with training motivation, learning levels, transfer of learning, and job performance.

Because it is important to qualify the executive to be coached, a more systematic approach to evaluating the candidate's readiness and suitability for coaching is necessary. Regardless of the situation, clients and coaches should make sure that coaching is something the executive really wants—and that the executive's efforts to change and grow will be appreciated. Important coachee characteristics include personality factors and motiva-

tion factors. In this conceptual model, *proactivity* is an important personal-ity factor, whereas *goal orientation* is a relevant motivation factor.

The review of career success literature highlighted proactivity as an important coachee characteristic. Bateman and Crant (1993) defined proactivity as an individual characteristic described as a belief in one's ability to overcome constraints by situational forces and the ability to affect changes in the environment. Proactive individuals look for opportunities, show initiative, take action, and are persistent in successfully implementing change. The results of Seibert, Kraimer, and Crant's (2001) study suggested that executives with "specific proactive behaviors that can create conditions leading to extrinsic and intrinsic career success" (p. 866) tend to actively engage in career planning and seek career-related feedback and they are likely to achieve an extrinsically rewarding and intrinsically satisfying career.

The successful outcome of coaching depends in part on the coachee's openness to feedback and willingness to change (Bacon & Spear, 2003; Hodgetts, 2002). Otherwise, it will risk wasting a great deal of time and money. Clearly, executives who lack proactivity are not good coaching candidates, because no matter how much quality coaching they receive, they are unlikely to change (Bacon & Spear, 2003).

Proposition 2a: Coachee's proactivity will have a positive relationship with one's coach and will have a positive impact on feedback receptivity and coaching outcomes.

Goal orientation is a motivational variable expected to affect the allocation of effort during learning (Fisher & Ford, 1998). Goal orientation can be summarized into two categories: learning (task or mastery) orientation and performance (ego and/or social) orientation. *Learning (Mastery) orientation* refers to a desire to increase one's competence by developing new skills and mastering new situations. Those with learning orientations have adaptive response patterns, thus leading to positive outcomes. According to incremental theory, ability is a malleable attribute and can be developed (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Fisher & Ford, 1998). On the contrary, *performance orientation* refers to a desire to demonstrate one's competence to others and to receive positive evaluations from others. Ability is a fixed, uncontrollable, personal attribute and therefore extra effort indicates low ability (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Fisher & Ford, 1998). In summary, the coachee's goal orientation would affect the effort used in executive coaching.

Proposition 2b: Coachees with learning orientation will have higher feedback receptivity and more positive coaching outcomes than those with performance orientation.

Organizational (client) support. For executive coaching to draw keen attention from busy executives, it needs high-level support and close links to business imperatives. The more supportive the organization is, the more likely it is that coachees will be open to and accepting of coaching help (Bacon & Spear, 2003). Therefore, like organization development interventions, it would be better to launch any coaching program only if it has won a strong support from top management, to be more specific, from the CEO (Sherman & Freas, 2004). Unless coaching is applied in a planned and strategic way, it is a waste of time and money that dilutes the value of a development opportunity.

HR is in the best position to provide the stewardship necessary to ensure effectiveness, integrity, and accountability in the use of executive coaching (Knudson, 2002). HR engagement includes overseeing the whole coaching process, consulting with all parties involved regarding the requirements for a successful outcome, ensuring alignment with business needs, managing the coaches, communicating logistic requirements, ensuring explicit contracting and clarity regarding roles, and keeping track of goals and expensed incurred (Knudson, 2002). In addition, how to integrate coaching with other initiatives and systems, such as compensation, evaluation, and job assignment is important (Tansky & Cohen, 2001).

Proposition 3: A higher level of organizational support from top management and HR will have a positive impact on the overall coaching process and eventually on the outcomes of executive coaching.

Coaching Process

The executive coaching process is central to the conceptual framework. Based on related literature such as mentoring, career success, 360-degree feedback, and training and development, the important constructs in the process are coaching approach, the relationship between the coach and the coachee, and the feedback receptivity of the coachee.

Coaching approach. The most important questions for the successful coaching are as follows: What kind of coaching does the coachee want (directive or nondirective)? What would be most helpful to the coachee: advice, counsel, teaching, feedback, a sounding board (Bacon & Spear, 2003)? In other words, the process and focus of coaching should be varied by the situation and needs of coachees: to learn specific skills, to improve performance, or to prepare for advancement in business or professional life (Witherspoon & White, 1996).

Counseling (remedial) approach and consulting (developmental) approach are the two ends of the continuum of executive coaching. Coach's educational background tends to define the scope or approach of coaching. Organizations use coaching for both remedial and developmental purposes. In remedial situations, coaching focuses on bringing some aspect of an individual's performance

up to acceptable standards (Hodgetts, 2002). In contrast, developmental coaching emphasizes preparation for a new or expanded role or job that requires additional skills and competencies. Thus, counseling approach emphasizes self-awareness, whereas consulting approach focuses on learning.

Proposition 4: Counseling (remedial) approach will have a positive impact on self-awareness, whereas consulting (developmental) approach will have a positive impact on learning.

Coaching relationship. Selecting executive coaches and matching them to individuals is critical in coaching effectiveness (Bacon & Spear, 2003; Kilburg, 1996, 2001). The interaction of the characteristics of two individuals is particularly critical in determining the characteristics of relationship (Wanberg et al., 2003). Hodgetts (2002) maintained that personal chemistry between coaches and coachees and such factors as gender, socioeconomic background, and life experiences are also important considerations in making effective coaching matches. Therefore, a good match and relationship between the coachee and coach is a critical factor for enhancing self-awareness, learning, and thus behavioral change.

Proposition 5: A well-matched and good relationship between the coach and the coachee will have a positive impact on other coaching process and coaching outcomes.

Feedback receptivity. According to Judge and Cowell's (1997) study, the majority of executive coaches used 360-degree assessments by interviewing people close to the executives. The most common requests for coaching were to help (a) modify the coachee's interaction style, (b) deal more effectively with change, and (c) build trusting relationships.

Therefore, another important area is individual differences in receptivity to coaching and feedback. A well-managed 360-degree assessment can identify particular behaviors with great precision and link them to corporate goals, values, and leadership models (Luthans & Peterson, 2004; Thach, 2002). As a result of interviews with 75 executives and 15 coaches, Hall et al. (1999) concluded that honesty, challenging feedback, and helpful suggestions were factors contributing to coaching effectiveness. Brett and Atwater (2001) found that self-other rating discrepancy was negatively related with perceived accuracy of feedback and perceived usefulness of feedback, whereas favorability of the rating was positively related with reaction to feedback and with perceived usefulness of feedback. Another study found that 360-degree feedback, combined with coaching aimed at enhancing self-awareness, may lead to improved self and employee attitudes and eventually even improved organizational performance (Luthans & Peterson, 2003). In short, how receptive the coachee is to feedback is critical to proximal and distal outcome variables.

Proposition 6: Feedback receptivity of the coachee will have a positive impact on behavioral change through self-awareness and learning, and eventually on individual and organizational success.

Proximal Outcomes

Some practitioners might focus more on self-awareness (counseling), whereas others on learning (consulting), depending on coaching approach. However, the destination is the same—behavioral change of the executives in terms of immediate or proximal outcomes.

Self-awareness. Sherman and Freas (2004) demonstrated the importance of self-awareness, explaining why executive coaching has received the spotlight in the business arena for the past 10 years or so.

It is remarkable how many smart, highly motivated, and apparently responsible people rarely pause to contemplate their own behaviors. Often more inclined to move on than to reflect deeply, executives may reach the top ranks without addressing their limitations. Coaching gets them to slow down, gain awareness, and notice the effects of their words and actions. That enables coaches to perceive choices rather than simply react to events; ultimately, coaching can empower them to assume responsibility for their impact on the world. (Sherman & Freas, 2004, p. 85)

Those who use the counseling approach tend to emphasize self-awareness and self-reflection in executive coaching (Kilburg, 1997; Orenstein, 2002), using the metaphor of a *window* and *mirror* (Sherman & Freas, 2004). The purpose of executive coaching is to provide them with more time to look into the mirror instead of looking through the window.

Proposition 7: Increased self-awareness that lead to behavioral change will have a positive impact on individual success, especially on psychological satisfaction.

Learning. Coaching does not end with self-awareness. Executive coaching can be a strategic learning tool of organization. Wanberg et al. (2003), in their mentoring study, suggested three of the areas of protégé change (cognitive, skill-base, and affective learning) that were derived from Kraiger, Ford, and Salas's (1993) classification of learning outcomes that stem from training intervention. Among these, learning in executive coaching would be focused on cognitive and affective learning. Cognitive learning represents enhancements in declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, strategic or tacit knowledge, knowledge organization, or cognitive strategies that may occur as a result of the coaching relationship. Affective learning would be attitudinal (e.g., changes in values, improved tolerance for diversity, or reconciliation of work-life balance issues) or motivational (e.g., changes in the coachee's motivational disposition, self-efficacy, or goal-setting).

It is the active learning that transfers essential leadership and managerial skills such as visioning, communication, interpersonal relationship, and action planning skills (Sherman & Freas, 2004). Executive coaching, especially in consulting approach, aims to help leaders adapt to new responsibilities, reduce destructive behaviors, enhance teamwork, align individuals to collective goals, and support organizational changes. For those with a consulting approach, therefore, learning could be an immediate outcome of executive coaching.

Proposition 8: Learning that lead to behavioral change will have a positive impact on individual success, especially on performance and career satisfaction.

Distal Outcomes

Distal outcomes are divided into individual success and organizational success. Individual success includes individual performance, compensation, promotion, job satisfaction and commitment, and psychological wellness, whereas organizational success includes organizational performance, talent retention, and organizational transformation.

Individual success. Individual benefits from executive coaching may be enhanced problem solving, managerial and interpersonal skills and ability, better relationships, greater confidence, adaptability to change, work-life balance, and reduced stress levels (Jarvis, 2004). Smither et al.'s (2003) found that executives who worked with coaches (compared to those who did not) set more specific goals, were more likely to share their feedback and solicit ideas from supervisors (but not peers or subordinates), and had improved performance ratings (based on multisource feedback).

Career success can serve as a proxy for individual success. According to the recent descriptive study of Wasylyshyn (2003), the vast majority of executive coaching engagements focused on behavior changes that executives wished to make for continued career success. Career success is defined as the real or perceived achievements individuals have accumulated as a result of their work experiences (Boudreau, Boswell, & Judge, 2001; Judge, Higgins, Thoreson, & Barrick, 1999; Siebert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001). Career success reflects the accumulated interaction between a variety of individual, organizational, and societal norms, behaviors, and work practices. The career success literature differentiates between objective or extrinsic career success (represented by more observable career achievement indices, such as promotions and compensation level) and subjective or intrinsic career success (represented by reports of job satisfaction, career satisfaction and commitment, and work-life balance) (Wanberg et al., 2003). Thus, those who feel subjective and objective success will contribute to organizational success.

Proposition 9: Objective (extrinsic) and subjective (intrinsic) individual success will have a positive impact on organizational success.

Organizational success. Organizational success is expected to be generated from the proximal and distal outcomes (Wanberg et al., 2003). For instance, executive coaching as a follow-up to a training program was shown to increase productivity by 88% in public-sector managers, which was a significantly greater gain compared with training alone (Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman, 1997). These organizational outcomes can be as diverse as improved productivity, quality, customer service, and shareholder value, increased commitment and satisfaction (retention), better transfer, and support for training and development and OD efforts (Jarvis, 2004).

In summary, the conceptual framework represents a preliminary attempt to portray the relationships among the factors related to executive coaching. One contribution of this model is its integration of useful theory and research from related literatures, such as mentoring, career success, 360-degree feedback, and training and development. Given the limited research on executive coaching, this framework will hopefully stimulate more empirical research in this area.

Implications for Future Research

Regarding future research areas, Smither et al. (2003) pointed out that research should examine how the impact of executive coaching is shaped by a variety of factors such as its purpose, length, organizational context, and individual differences among coaches and among those being coached. As mentioned at the end of the conceptual framework, research on the antecedents, process, and outcomes of executive coaching would enhance the theoretical understanding of executive development, feedback processes, and behavior change. However, it is noted that the suggested conceptual framework is far from complete and there are several caveats. First, criteria and instruments for assessing the constructs and evaluating the coaching effectiveness need to be developed. Second, it would be difficult to test this framework because of the multitude of variables. It would require a number of related studies, including longitudinal studies and the coach-coachee dyad analysis. Third, there could be important variables missing in this framework. It should be refined as the practice and research of executive coaching improve and develop over time.

Here are some additional suggestions for future research. First, future research on executive coaching need to be clear about the coaching approach: counseling and consulting. These two approaches can have different purposes and place emphasis on different aspects of the coaching relationship. Second, because executive coaching is still in its infancy and most case studies were based on the perspective of coaches, interpretive research using a phenomenological approach that examines the perspectives of executives being coached could add significantly to knowledge about executive coaching. Third, coach-coachee dyad analysis should be examined in future

research. Most research has collected data from only one member of the coach and/or coachee dyad. Analysis of dyads would allow the researchers to delve into a deeper understanding of coach and/or coachee relationships and would help to decrease concerns about mono-method bias (Wanberg et al., 2003). Last, future research should examine the impact of executive coaching relationships through longitudinal studies because coaching can be considered a cause as well as a consequence. In other words, a time lag exists between time 1 (when coaching occurs) and time 2 (when outcomes are produced). Thus, longitudinal studies that cover at least 6 months would help to evaluate the distal outcomes of executive coaching.

Implications for HRD

The use of executive coaching has grown drastically as organizations have discovered the benefits of providing high potential executives and managers with individual coaching to address specific skill deficits, enhance performance, or help them grow into expanded leadership roles (Hodgetts, 2002). Witherspoon and White (1998) identified the four coaching areas in executive coaching: learning, development, performance, and leadership agenda. Because they are all in the territory of HRD, HRD researchers should pay more attention to executive coaching.

As discussed earlier, there is a gray area between coaching approach and counseling approach. As Wasylyshin (2003) pointed out, it is most ideal that executive coaches have knowledge and experience in both management and psychology. However, some even warn that they would leave the door open for coaches, especially those with clinical training and backgrounds, to practice therapy at the company's expense, with potentially negative consequences (Hodgetts, 2002). Garman, Whiston, and Zlatoper (2000) found that although 82% of the articles viewed described executive coaching favorably, psychologists who might lack management knowledge and experience were not viewed as uniquely valuable service providers (only one third viewed psychologists favorably). Niemes (2002) maintained that the primary emphasis in a business setting should be developmental rather than corrective or remedial action.

In this vein, for HRD professionals, executive coaching could be focused more on the developmental (consulting) purpose of executive coaching rather than the remedial (counseling) purpose. According to Sherman and Freas (2004), the purpose of executive coaching is to produce learning, behavioral change, and growth in the coachee. An effective coach with an HRD background should help a coachee achieve agreed-upon goals, whereas also transferring the knowledge and skills needed to sustain ongoing development. Therefore, coaches do not have to be licensed psychologists, but they need to be trained and certified in coaching (Bacon & Spear, 2003).

However, executive coaches must know the ethical issues and the warning signs when deeper psychological issues exist such as chronic depression and should be able to refer their clients to competent professionals when they cannot provide help themselves (Bacon & Spear, 2003; Sherman & Freas, 2004). In summary, HRD scholars should pay more attention to executive coaching as an area for further research. HRD practitioners need to focus more on developmental purpose, while understanding ethical and psychological issues.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to explore the practice of executive coaching, investigating the underlying theories, and to provide a conceptual framework of executive coaching. The significance of this article lies in its integration of the extant literature on executive coaching and the development of a conceptual framework of executive coaching and related propositions derived from the literature.

Is executive coaching a mere *fad*? The answer to this question appears to be “No.” Executive coaching has become increasingly popular despite limited empirical evidence about its impact. There has been little agreement about which executive coaching approach should be followed and there has been wide disagreement about necessary or desired professional qualifications for coaches. The problem is not the practice per se, but the lack of research and theory to advance the field. It is hoped that the conceptual framework and propositions will stimulate further research on executive coaching with *rigor* and *relevance* (Marsick, 1990). Finally, the question about how to evaluate the effectiveness and outcome of executive coaching should be addressed head on. Otherwise, it might come and go as many other management fads have.

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