

Coaching Psychology: Are we there yet with the evidence base?

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Abstract

Coaching as an organizational practice has been gaining popularity in the past couple of decades, although its grounding in academic psychology has not followed accordingly. There has been an increase in theoretical elaborations with the aim of mapping the principles, operating models and tools and techniques in coaching psychology. One of the repeating themes in research about coaching psychology has been a need for expanding the evidence base. The aim of this paper is to review scholarly literature on coaching outcomes and coaching process. More specifically, the answers to the following questions are raised: (1) does coaching work; (2) how does it work: what are the specific aspects of the coaching process that bring most value. To answer these questions quantitative studies of coaching effectiveness as well as qualitative process studies were examined. Overview of systematic reviews and meta-analyses points to generally positive coaching outcomes, but also to a need for more studies of coaching effectiveness. Findings of the process research point to the general interest in the turning points in coaching. Both in individual and group coaching moments of learning and moments of action were found to be key aspects of the coaching process, while supporting team goal setting and creating measures of team success were singled out as crucial aspects of the team coaching process.

Keywords: coaching, coaching psychology, coaching outcomes, coaching process.

Coaching as an organizational practice has been gaining popularity in the past couple of decades, although its grounding in academic psychology has not followed accordingly. There has been an increase in theoretical elaborations with the aim of mapping the principles, operating models and tools and techniques in coaching psychology. One of the repeating themes in research about coaching psychology has been a need for expanding the evidence base. The aim of this paper is to review scholarly literature on coaching outcomes and coaching process. More specifically, the answers to the following questions are raised: (1) does coaching work; (2) how does it work: what are the specific aspects of the coaching process that bring most value to the coachee. To answer these questions quantitative studies were examined, pointing to areas in which coaching interventions are perceived as effective. Moreover, qualitative studies were examined to offer insights into the mechanics of the coaching process.

What is this thing called coaching and is there any psychology in it?

Some of the definitions refer to coaching as “a personal development process, that includes the enhancement of self-awareness and the capacity to learn and build on that learning” (Vaughan Smith, 2007:31), “the art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another” (Downey, 1999:15), “a transactional and reconstructive process in which the person adds to her/his own repertoire of actions” (Usher et al, 1997:143). What is common to these definitions is their reference to change in the context of learning, rather than in the context of mental health interventions. As opposed to psychotherapy, coaching is diagnosis-free, the coach partners with the coachee who is seen as healthy, resourceful, and capable of moving themselves forward into the future (Vaughan Smith, 2007).

By the 2000s numerous coaching models have been established, many of which were based on the psychological models of counseling and psychotherapy. Coaching psychology was defined as enhancing well being and performance in personal life and work domains underpinned by models of coaching grounded in established adult learning or psychological approaches (Palmer & Whybrow, 2006). The most recent comprehensive publication on coaching psychology introduces behavioural and cognitive coaching, person-centred coaching, gestalt coaching, coaching with personal construct psychology, narrative coaching, solution-focused coaching, systemic coaching and psychodynamic coaching (Whybrow & Palmer, 2019). It seems obvious that despite the influences from a broad interdisciplinary field (e.g. adult learning, management,

philosophy), psychological underpinnings remain the foundations of the discipline. According to Passmore (2010) coaching psychology should not only ground coaching in psychological approaches. Instead, coaching psychology should be referred to as the scientific study of behaviour, cognition and emotion within coaching to deepen our understanding and enhance our practice within coaching (Passmore & Theeboom, 2015).

What is the evidence-base in coaching

The term *evidence base practice and management* can be defined as improving the process of decision making by collecting and critically analyzing evidence and integrating it to make a practical decision or solve a problem (Briner & Rousseau, 2011). What is implicit in the definition is the integration of practitioner's expertise and external evidence from research, especially systematic reviews. The movement towards evidence base practice was fueled by a claim in 1990s that only about 15% of medical interventions were supported by solid scientific evidence (Smith, 1991). When it comes to the field of work and organizational psychology, Briner & Rousseau (2011) suggest that it is not strongly evidence-based due to the following reasons: (1) there are very few systematic reviews; (2) the latest research findings are not easily accessible to practitioners; (3) demand for evidence-based practice from clients and customers is not very high; (4) practice decisions are rarely integrative, combining practitioners' expertise, evaluation of best available research evidence, the local context and perspectives of those who may be affected by intervention decisions; (5) initial training and professional development focus on developing an evidence-based approach only to a limited extent, in favour of traditional academic training. Two key lines of improving the evidence-based practice in work and organizational psychology are seen as improving the practice-oriented evidence and systematic reviews orientation.

When it comes to coaching psychology, Lai & Palmer (2019) suggest that evidence-base is even more challenging due to the complexity of relevant stakeholders, goal setting and external factors. These authors draw on a comparison of two systematic reviews on coaching psychology covering the periods of 1995-2010 and 2011-2016 to conclude that the number of studies has considerably increased, including the number of experimental design studies. In a more recent systematic review, Athanosopolou & Dopson (2018) conclude that coaching outcome research is highly heterogeneous in terms of goals of the intervention, making the comparison across studies difficult. However, after almost two decades of coaching psychology research there are several

systematic reviews and meta-analyses that perhaps allow for preliminary answers regarding coaching effectiveness.

Does coaching work?

Although this question may seem as clear and simple, the answer varies. On one hand, some systematic reviews and meta-analyses point to generally positive coaching outcomes (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Blackman et al., 2016; Theeboom et al., 2013), while others conclude that although findings lean towards positive effects, we just do not know that yet (Grover & Furnham, 2016). Overview of systematic reviews and meta-analysis of studies on coaching effectiveness is displayed in Table 1.

In general, positive coaching outcomes at individual level were identified in domains of self-efficacy, goal attainment, adaptability and leadership behaviors, but also coping and resilience. Perhaps the most consistent findings were in the domain of self-efficacy and goal attainment, which is not surprising having in mind that coaching as a practice indirectly contributes to learning how to formulate goals and make incremental steps in fulfilling them. Organizational levels outcomes were noted in areas of improved leadership, increased productivity and job satisfaction, reduced turnover intentions and as support mechanism for other learning and development intervention. These findings were relatively consistent across different types of research designs in the reviewed studies.

Despite the overall positive trends on coaching outcomes, there seems to be high level of variability between the effect sizes. For example, even negative outcomes were found among coaches with low levels of pre-intervention motivation (Bozer et al., 2013). Therefore, there seems to be a need for more data in order to make definitive judgment on each of the outcomes investigated. In order to confirm coaching effectiveness in future, more studies with experimental rigour and large enough samples would be required (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011).

These findings may sound promising, especially because the outcomes that were singled out in coaching effectiveness studies are among the top issues of employee and organizational development. If coaching may facilitate progress in employee self-efficacy and goal attainment, while improving leadership organization wide, than it may be an intervention of choice for some of the key challenges of modern workplaces. Effectiveness studies further help make a distinction between what is realistic and what belongs to the domain of “hype”.

Table 1. Overview of systematic reviews and meta-analysis of coaching outcomes studies.

Author/s	Number of studies reviewed	Goals of the review	Research design	Evidence of positive coaching outcomes	Overall findings & Implications
Theeboom et al. (2013)	N=18	Meta-analysis of effectiveness of coaching within an organizational context.	RCT (8); QEF (6); WSD (4). ¹ Measures: self-report (12); other-report (6)	Performance and skills (g = 0.60, 95% CI, 0.04–0.60, p = 0.036); Well-being (g = 0.46, 95% CI, 0.28–0.62, p < 0.001); Coping (g = 0.43, 95% CI, 0.25–0.61, p < 0.001); Work attitudes (g = 0.54, 95% CI, 0.34–0.73, p < 0.001); Goal-directed self-regulation (g = 0.74, 95% CI, 0.42 – 1.06, p < 0.001).	“The point estimate of the overall weighted effect size was significant (g = 0.66, 95% CI, 0.39–0.93, p = 0.000), suggesting that coaching, in general, has a significant positive effect across the range of outcome measures we examined.” (p. 10)
Jones et al. (2015)	N=17	Meta-analysis synthesizing the	Within-subjects (14) and between-	Affective (10); Skill based (10); Results (3)	“Our analyses indicated that coaching had positive effects on

¹ RCT- randomized control trial; QEF-Quasi-experimental field study; WSD-within subjects design.

		existing research on the effectiveness of workplace coaching	subjects designs (3)		organizational outcomes overall (d = 0.36), and on specific forms of outcome criteria (skill-based d = 0.28; affective d = 0.51; individual-level results d = 1.24)”(p. 249)
Blackman et al. (2016)	N=111	Systematic review of the empirical evidence into business coaching effectiveness	Case studies (54), QES (34), Comparisons to other developmental interventions (23) Measures: self-reports	Coachee outcomes work life balance; social competencies; self-awareness and assertiveness; developing relationships/networks; adapting to change; setting and achieving goals; role clarity; changing behaviors Employer outcomes: increased productivity; support mechanism for other training programs; improvements to communication;	“All of the reviewed studies reported that the target coaching program was seen by most participants as effective in some way” (p. 469)

				effectiveness of organizations or teams	
Grover & Furnham (2016)	N=52	Systematic review of the academic and practitioner literature pertaining to the effectiveness of business and executive coaching as a developmental intervention for organisations.	Pre & post design (30); retrospective (16); control group (24); longitudinal (5). Measures: self-report (40); other-report (24); multi-source (12); objective (3)	Individual outcomes (32): Self-efficacy; Wellbeing and resilience; Goal attainment Organizational outcomes (18): Leadership and manager behavior; Reduced turnover intentions; Increased satisfaction and commitment	“considerable variation among the coaching outcomes and coaching mechanism explored” (p. 23) “Unfortunately, it is clear there is not enough data to make a definitive judgment about the effectiveness of coaching on each of the outcomes investigated” (p. 23) “However, the results above do lean towards coaching being an effective intervention that helps individuals in terms of their self-efficacy, goal attainment and organisations in terms of their leadership but it also benefits organisations indirectly through the individual” (p. 23)

Burt & Talati (2017)	N=11	Meta-analysis of coaching outcomes.	RCT	Attitudes (g=0.78) Coping (g=0.68) Self-regulation (g=0.43) Well-being (g=0.41)	“The results showed that overall coaching has a moderate significant positive effect on coachees, $\hat{p} = 0.42$, which indicated that coaching is effective for individuals” (p. 17)
Athanasopoulou & Dopson (2018)	N=84	Systematic review of executive coaching outcome studies	ROI (2); meta-analysis (5); experimental studies (15) Mixed methods (37); Qualitative studies (16); Survey (17); Case study (44)	Individual outcomes: Reduced stress; Work satisfaction; Time management; Adaptability; Goal setting; Leadership skills; Communication; Work performance Organizational outcomes: Productivity; Coaching culture; Leadership effectiveness; Work satisfaction.	““We found more than 70 positive outcomes... We came across only 16 studies that report either negative or not-fully positive outcomes”(p. 69) ““We also checked whether the experimental/quasi-experimental/RCS studies, which are at the top of the design robustness order, report more often negative outcomes. Only three experimental/quasi-experimental studies report negative or moderate (i.e. not clearly positive, often unintended) outcomes.” (p.69)

What do we know about the coaching process?

Another type of a question that also contributes to improving the evidence base in coaching concerns the mechanisms of the coaching process. There is a wide consensus that this type of questions is best addressed in qualitative studies (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; de Haan, 2019; Fillery-Travis & Corrie, 2019). Currently there is only one systematic review of qualitative research of coaching (de Haan, 2019). This review included 101 qualitative studies, out of which 37 process studies. As de Haan (2019) points out, process research seeks to map out and investigate process aspects of coaching (e.g. the interaction patterns, active ingredients as perceived by various stakeholders) and is based on interviews or recordings of conversations, usually analysed by grounded theory approach. This type of research identifies themes and categories that point to the meaningful aspects of the coaching process.

One line of research in the reviewed process studies deals with critical moments in the coaching process. Critical moments were defined as perceptions of change in response to coaching (de Haan et al., 2010). The coding scheme that was inductively developed in these studies included four broad categories (de Haan, 2019): (1) moments of learning (insights/reflection) ; (2) moments of relational change (positive/negative); (3) moments of significant action (coach/coachee led); (4) moments of significant emotional experience (joy/anxiety/doubt). According to de Haan (2019), results of these studies revealed that coachees mainly referred to moments of learning and insight as critical, while coaches saw doubts and emotional experiences as critical. Sponsors of the coaching process attached greatest importance to new initiatives and behavioural changes (de Haan & Nieß, 2015). Aspects of the coaching process that were most helpful in other reviewed studies, which were not based on the critical moments framework, pointed to the role of listening, helpful ideas, feedback and challenge by the coach (de Haan, 2019).

Not included in this systematic review of qualitative process research is a subfield of micro-analysis of the coaching process (Bachkirova et al., 2015; Myers & Bachkirova, 2018) and qualitative analyses of the team coaching (Carr & Peters, 2012) and group coaching process (Pavlović, 2012). Micro-analytic studies were aimed at development and use of an instrument for mapping the coaching process. Key themes identified in these studies included the following: (1) focus on the coachee; (2) connection and positivity; (3) fluidity of process; (4) collaboration vs. expert-mode (Bachkirova et al., 2015). As these authors conclude, a typical coaching session is about firmly being in the service of the coachee; the role of the coach is to ask questions and work

within the coachee's frame of reference; high value is given to understanding, connection and warmth, as well as a sense of hope and positivity; coaching session is supposed to be fluid and absorbing, not fast paced or highly structured; coaching process was seen as collaborative as opposed to a more expert interventions (e.g. counseling, psychotherapy or consulting). In further studies Myers & Bachkirova (2018) presented an empirically derived model of the coaching process. This model mapped four types of coaching based on the process analysis: client-led, process-led, performance management and dialogic.

In a study of team coaching process Carr & Peters (2012) found that meaningful aspects of the process included working agreements and enabling team participation. Working agreements included collaborative setting up expectations and structure for team meetings, defining team norms and measures of team coaching success. Team participation relied on creating psychological safety, inviting honesty and disclosure during the team coaching process (Carr & Peters, 2012; 2013). These findings to some extent resonate with the findings of quantitative studies of coaching outcomes, which also emphasize importance of goal attainment and self-efficacy. Finally, in a study of group coaching (Pavlović, 2012) two key aspects of the process were identified: innovative moments of reconceptualization and innovative moments of performing change. These i-moments were facilitated by the use of group feedback, supporting the language of agency and use of simulations for practicing new behaviours.

Overall, findings of the coaching process research point to the general interest in the turning points, critical moments and innovative moments. Both in individual and group coaching moments of learning and moments of action were found to be key aspects of the coaching process, while supporting team goal setting and creating measures of team success were singled out as crucial aspects of the team coaching process.

Implications for practice and future research

Based on the overview of systematic reviews and meta-analysis of coaching effectiveness, there seems to be a general tendency of identifying positive outcomes of coaching. Outcomes identified across studies include improvements in self-efficacy, goal attainment, leadership behavior, organizational commitment and productivity. All these outcomes are among the high priority issues in employee and organizational development. For practitioners and decision makers these findings may clarify what to expect of coaching, as well as in which areas we can expect best

outcomes. We can also conclude that more research of coaching effectiveness is needed to support what we already know and to further explore outcomes and limitation of coaching interventions.

Based on the qualitative studies, key aspects of the coaching process can be singled out. Across studies there seems to be a general tendency towards learning and action moments as key to the coaching process. Specifics of the team and group coaching process were also singled out. For practitioners and decision makers these studies clarify how coaching works and what are the different styles of the coaching process. It can be argued that the process studies further clarify what is different about coaching when compared to other types of psychological interventions, such as psychotherapy, counseling, training or consulting. In combination with the coaching effectiveness studies, these findings may inform decision making, setting clear expectations and avoiding mismatch between the developmental need and the choice of intervention.

To further improve the evidence base in coaching, several directions can be identified. First, more systematic reviews of more well designed studies are needed, as well as more qualitative studies that provide further insights into the coaching process. Communicating research findings in ways that motivate practitioners and decision makers to read and use them could help overcome the seemingly low demand for evidence based coaching among the practitioners. Teaching practitioners and decision makers during initial training and professional development on how to integrate the research evidence on coaching with the local context may also improve the current status of coaching in practice. To answer the question from the title of the paper: perhaps we are not already there with the evidence base in coaching, but we seem to be further than expected and further than widely recognized.

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