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Employee coaching relationships: enhancing construct clarity and measurement

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While managers' coaching of their subordinates continues to grow in organisations, little empirical research exists to inform the practice. The current paper seeks to further our understanding of this type of coaching – which we refer to as employee coaching – by exploring the coaching relationship formed between the supervisor and subordinate. Past research has noted that the process and effectiveness of coaching are contingent on this relationship. The purpose of the current paper is twofold: to better define the constructs of employee coaching and the employee coaching relationship and to develop a measure of the perceived quality of the employee coaching relationship.

The practice of coaching has become increasingly prevalent and popular in organisational settings. Coaching within organisations can largely be divided into two camps: executive coaching and coaching in which the role of 'coach' is filled by an employee's direct supervisor.[1] The current paper refers to this type of coaching as *employee* coaching, as employees are on the receiving end of coaching – just as executives are on the receiving end of executive coaching. While this type of coaching continues to grow in applied settings, little empirical research exists to inform the practice. The current paper seeks to further our understanding of employee coaching by exploring the coaching relationship formed between the supervisor and subordinate. Both the process and perceived effectiveness of employee coaching are contingent on the relationship between the supervisor and subordinate. The purpose of this paper is threefold: 1) to enhance construct clarity by presenting a new definition of employee coaching; 2) to clearly define the employee coaching relationship; and 3) to develop a measure of the Perceived Quality of the Employee Coaching Relationship (PQECR) – a tool that can be used to provide important information to talent management professionals on subordinate perceptions of the coaching relationships they share with their supervisors. To date, research has failed to effectively examine employee coaching relationships or present tools for assessing those relationships; we believe that our attempts at doing so will fill an important void in the employee coaching literature and practice.

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Coaching: a taxonomy

Prior to approximately 1950, the mention of 'coaching' conjured up images of a baseball cap-wearing, whistle-blowing sports team coach. That simple, singular meaning first diverged when Mace (1950) prescribed coaching as an effective management tool for guiding and developing subordinates (Gegner, 1997). Despite Mace's best efforts, the concept of coaching in organisational settings did not take hold until the late 1970's, with the release of Fournies' (1978) 'how-to' book on coaching in organisations (Gegner, 1997). Coaching grew slowly in practice and the literature throughout the 1980s and early 1990s (Gegner, 1997), at which point it suddenly 'took off' as a new hot-topic in management practice. In these early days, however, the concept of 'coaching' was still rather anomalous, with the most common criticism being a lack of concept clarity and universally accepted definition (Ives, 2008).

Even today, as coaching has become commonplace in many organisations and has been written about in practice outlets, confusion persists on the true meaning and identity of coaching. For example, a simple mention of coaching could trigger images of – most commonly – a sports coach, as well as an executive coach, a coaching manager, a peer coach, a 'life' coach, or a romantic relationship coach, among many others. Our focus here us on the employee coaching relationships that exist between employees and their direct supervisors.[2] The nature of a supervisor/subordinate coaching relationship is very different than that of an executive coach and his/her coachee. Specifically, executives pursuing executive coaching are often involved (or are the sole decision makers) in selecting their coaches. In employee coaching, however, subordinates rarely, if ever, have a say in who their coaching managers are. Therefore, the nature of employee coaching relationships is unique in the broad spectrum of coaching practices. Thus, while we may draw on the executive coaching literature for some support, we are quick to point out that employee coaching and executive coaching are very different practices – particularly when it comes to the coaching relationship.

Defining employee coaching

Bennett (2006) argues that one obstacle to coaching research is the lack of agreement on a definition of coaching. We agree: definitions of employee coaching cover a broad spectrum of behaviors and foci, including but not limited to context, communication, feedback, development activity, and learning. For example, focusing predominantly on context, Evered and Selman (1989) define coaching as 'the managerial activity of creating, by communication only, the climate, environment, and context that empowers individuals and teams to generate results' (p. 18). Similarly, Graham, Wedman, and Garvin-Kester (1994) note that coaching 'means creating a climate of communication, mutual respect, ongoing observation, feedback, trust, and a focus on performance objectives' (p. 82).

Heslin, Latham, and VandeWalle (2006) draw on earlier work by London (2003) and Yukl (2002) in defining employee coaching as 'managers providing one-on-one feedback and insights aimed at guiding and inspiring improvements in [employees'] work performance' (p. 872). Relatedly, Hunt and Weintraub (2002) focus on the developmental aspects of employee coaching in their definition: 'an interaction

between two people, usually a manager and employee, aimed at helping the employee learn from the job in order to promote his or her development' (p. 5). Finally, Kinlaw (1996) offers a straightforward definition that is widely referenced in the employee coaching and performance management literature (London, 2002; Smither & Reilly, 2001): 'disciplined conversation, using concrete performance information, between a leader and an individual ... that results in the continuous improvement of performance' (p. 21).

In an effort to improve construct clarity and establish an all-encompassing definition of employee coaching, we drew from these various conceptualisations to create a new, more focused definition of employee coaching:

> *A developmental activity in which an employee works one-on-one with his/her direct manager to improve current job performance and enhance his/her capabilities for future roles and/or challenges, the success of which is based on an effective relationship between the employee and manager, as well as the use of objective information, such as feedback, performance data, or assessments.*

Ideally, employee coaching occurs as part of the organisation's ongoing performance management system (Gregory & Levy, 2009), which also includes performance appraisals, formal and informal feedback, goal setting, and development opportunities (Gregory & Levy, 2008). Interest in employee coaching continues to spread, a change that some researchers and practitioners attribute to the prevalence of executive coaching (Smither & Reilly, 2001). Despite its continued growth in organisations, minimal research has been conducted on employee coaching (Bowles, Cunningham, De La Rosa, & Picano, 2007; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007; Stober & Parry, 2005).

In the definition of employee coaching offered above, we call particular attention to the importance of the relationship between the supervisor and subordinate. As noted previously, this relationship is the focus of the current paper. We specifically define this employee coaching relationship as *a working partnership between an employee and his/her direct supervisor that is focused on addressing the performance and development needs of that employee.* We reiterate that this relationship occurs specifically between an employee and his or her formally appointed direct supervisor, thereby excluding other types of coaching relationships, such as executive or peer coaching, as well as formal and informal mentoring relationships.

The coaching relationship

London and Smither (2002) note that employee coaching is *not* a 'one-time, one-way' (p. 87) interaction, but an ongoing collaborative process. Because of the one-on-one, customised, and collaborative nature of coaching, the foci of employee coaching relationships can vary based on the individuals involved (Garman, Whitson, & Zlatoper, 2000). In other words, coaching managers may find that the nature or quality of their employee coaching relationships differ across individual subordinates (Ting & Riddle, 2006). Additionally, it is important to note that, in a typical dyad, the supervisor/subordinate relationship encompasses much more than just coaching. It also includes experiences from months or years of work together, past evaluations and performance reviews, positive and negative feedback exchanges, and other

elements of the supervisor and subordinate's history together. Thus, we want to be clear that the coaching relationship is simply a component of the existing supervisor/subordinate relationship.

A number of researchers have noted the value of the supervisor-subordinate relationship in employee coaching, yet little research has examined the role of this relationship in impacting the effectiveness of employee coaching. For example, Evered and Selman (1989) noted that employee coaching occurs in an 'action-oriented, results oriented, and person-oriented relationship' (p. 23) and that 'coaching is a dyad . . . [and] cannot be separated from the actions of the partners in the relationship' (p. 28). Similarly, Graham, Wedman, and Garvin-Kester (1993) suggested that one important element of successful employee coaching is the manager/employee relationship. These same authors later deemed a 'warm relationship' (p. 91) between the supervisor and subordinate one of eight important factors in good employee coaching (Graham et al., 1994). Finally, Gyllensten and Palmer (2007) noted that the relationship between the coach and coachee is 'one of the most essential aspects of coaching' and that this relationship is 'the basis upon which the coaching [is] built and without a relationship the coaching would not be as effective as it could be' (p. 173).

Some scholars have specifically called out the need to examine the coaching relationship through research. Gyllensten and Palmer (2007), for example, note that while the coaching relationship is the real 'vehicle' for change (p. 168), research-based investigations of the relationship are lacking. They also suggest investigating the factors that contribute to an effective coaching relationship. Additionally, in a recent review and agenda for future coaching research, Bennett (2006) identifies the coaching relationship as a specific area on which coaching research should focus. In their discussion of current challenges and future directions for coaching research, Stober & Parry (2005) note the need for theory development regarding the coaching relationship.

Some authors have suggested that an effective relationship is not only important, but a prerequisite to coaching success. Smither and Reilly (2001) note that the development of a productive relationship 'sets the stage for success' (p. 8) throughout the coaching relationship. In their recent review, Gyllensten and Palmer (2007) cited the coaching relationship as 'the basis upon which coaching [is] built' (p. 173). Similarly, Hunt and Weintraub (2002) suggest that the effectiveness of employee coaching depends on the 'nature of the relationship' (p. 51) between a supervisor and subordinate. Finally, Ting and Riddle (2006) suggest that a 'trusting relationship' (p. 36) is a precondition to effective coaching. Thus, we contend that an effective supervisor-subordinate relationship must be in place before effective coaching can occur.

In reviewing the extant research, a few themes emerge regarding important elements of the employee coaching relationship. Looking ahead, we draw on these themes to guide the development of our measure. One such theme is the importance of genuine care and interest. For example, Gegner (1997) indicated that the coaching relationship should include genuine care for and interest in the other person and an orientation toward help, improvement, and continuous learning for the subordinate. Additionally, Graham et al. (1994) discuss the importance of comfort with the relationship, which they suggest stems from a supervisor who is genuine and has effective interpersonal skills. Similarly, Kilburg (2001) notes the importance of

mutual respect, empathy, authenticity and genuineness for an effective relationship, while Ting and Riddle (2006) list rapport, commitment, and collaboration as key to an effective coaching relationship.

Several authors also discuss the critical role of effective communication for the employee coaching relationship (Graham et al., 1994; Orth, Wilkinson, & Benfari, 1987). Hunt and Weintraub (2002) note that an effective employee coaching relationship must entail such elements as commitment from both parties, encouragement for growth and learning, and generally 'good chemistry' (p. 10) between the supervisor and subordinate. These authors also note the unique nature of each relationship, such that supervisors may have different relationships with each of their subordinates. They also suggest that higher perceived similarity between the supervisor and subordinate may enhance the relationship.

Based on these and other examples from the literature, the current paper highlights five dimensions identified as critical elements of the employee coaching relationship. These five dimensions were selected because they arose as common themes for elements of effective coaching relationships throughout the literature. Other factors were identified as contributing to coaching relationships, but none as often or consistently as these. The first of these, presented in no particular order, is the distinctiveness of the relationship, or the extent to which the employee coaching relationship is tailored to the subordinate's needs. The second dimension, genuineness of the relationship, pertains to how genuine the subordinate perceives the supervisor and relationship to be. The third dimension, effective communication, pertains to how well the supervisor communicates with the subordinate, as well as how 'available' the subordinate perceives the supervisor to be. The fourth dimension is comfort with the relationship, which addresses the subordinate's level of comfort working with his/her supervisor and discussing his/her needs or goals with the supervisor. Finally, the fifth dimension, facilitating development, addresses the extent to which the coaching relationship facilitates learning and development for the subordinate. These dimensions will be used to guide the development of the PQECR scale, which is discussed in the section that follows. These dimensions are also listed in Table 1.

Method

The current study seeks to contribute to the employee coaching literature and the coaching manager's toolbox by developing a subordinate-rated measure of the quality of the supervisor-employee coaching relationship. We will refer to this measure as the PQECR scale. The five dimensions outlined above provided a framework that guided initial item development. Development of the PQECR scale included a number of steps, including initial item development, item refinement following subject matter expert (SME) review, and two phases of data collection. Each of these steps is discussed below.

Initial item development

Preliminary items for the PQECR scale were written to capture each of the five dimensions of employee coaching relationships listed above. A total of 29 initial

Table 1.   Five dimensions of the PQECR scale.

Dimension	Description
Distinctiveness of the Relationship	The extent to which the coaching relationship is tailored to the subordinate's needs.
Genuineness of the Relationship	How genuine the subordinate perceives the supervisor and relationship to be.
Effective Communication	How well the supervisor communicates with the subordinate, as well as how 'available' the subordinate perceives the supervisor to be.
Comfort with the Relationship	How comfortable the subordinate is working with his/her supervisor and discussing his/her needs or goals with the supervisor.
Facilitating Development	The extent to which the coaching relationship facilitates learning and development for the subordinate.

items were written, with at least five items per dimension. It should be noted that no reverse-worded items were written.

Subject matter expert review

Twenty five graduate students in Industrial/Organisational Psychology were recruited as SMEs for a preliminary review of the items. SMEs were provided with descriptions of the five dimensions of employee coaching relationships, as well as the 29 preliminary items. SMEs were asked to sort these randomly ordered items into the five dimensions of the coaching relationship. The purpose of this task was to examine content validity of the items with respect to their overarching dimensions. SMEs were also asked to provide their feedback on the comprehensibility and readability of items.

SMEs correctly sorted 22 of the items (76%) into their intended categories. Of the seven (24%) incorrectly sorted items, four were dropped entirely. A fifth item was re-categorised into a different dimension after SMEs overwhelmingly (95% of SMEs) sorted it into that dimension. Some items that were deemed 'awkward' or 'hard to understand' were reworded based on suggestions from SMEs. Two additional items were written based on SME suggestions. These changes based on SME feedback resulted in a revised pool of 27 items; these items were then used in an online study, which is discussed in the section that follows.

Data collection: phase one

Following revision of the initial items based on SME feedback, the remaining 27 PQECR items were completed by full-time working adults via an online survey. In the online survey participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the items. Responses were made on a five-point scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

Participants

Participants were recruited via online social networking tools (e.g., Facebook and LinkedIn) and through email communication. Specifically, the researcher emailed

requests for participants in the online study to various friends and colleagues, who, in turn passed the survey link onto other friends and associates. This means of recruiting participants was approved by our university's Institutional Review Board. Participants were instructed that the survey was completely anonymous and confidential. Participants were asked to provide some basic demographic data, such as industry, tenure, age, gender, and hours worked per week, but no other identifying information was collected. Participants were informed that they must meet two criteria to participate: 1) work a minimum of 40 hours per week; and 2) have a direct supervisor to whom they report at work. One strength of this approach is the diversity of organisations, jobs, etc. represented in the sample.

A total of 200 full-time working adults in the United States completed the online survey. Data from 42 of these 200 participants were eliminated from the final dataset because they failed to meet a particular criterion for inclusion (e.g., working a minimum of 40 hours per week or having a direct supervisor), thereby resulting in a final sample of 158 participants. Sixty-one percent of the participants were female. Five percent of participants were between the ages of 18 and 25, 53% of participants were between the ages of 26 and 35, 21% were between the ages of 36 and 45, 16% were between the ages of 46 and 55, and 5% were older than 55. The average number of hours worked per week was $M = 45.44$ ($sd = 8.22$). Average tenure at participants' current place of work was $M = 6.61$ ($sd = 6.82$) years and average tenure with participants' current supervisors was $M = 3.24$ ($sd = 3.16$) years. Participants reported working in a wide variety of industries and job titles. Sample industries include finance, retail, business consulting, tourism, non-profit, information technology, civil engineering, and print media, among others. Sample job titles included sales executive, software engineer, marketing coordinator, attorney, associate consultant, manager, and staff scientist.

Results

Because *a priori* expectations were made about items mapping onto particular dimensions, data were analysed with confirmatory factor analysis using Mplus version 5.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007). At least five items were written for each of the five dimensions. The goal for the final PQECR scale was to have approximately three items per dimension. Following preliminary tests of the model, individual items that had the lowest factor loadings or loaded negatively were discarded. Face validity of items was also taken into consideration, such that items that most clearly captured the dimension and also showed strong loadings were retained. After eliminating weaker items, a pool of 15 items (three per dimension) was retained for final model tests.

We conceptualise the PQECR as a latent construct with the dimensions acting as manifest indicators. In other words, the perceived quality of the employee coaching relationship is abstract and difficult to measure as a whole on its own (this is the nature of a latent construct). Therefore, we must examine specific components or behavioral manifestations of the PQECR (e.g., the dimensions) that do lend themselves to measurement. By using the statistical method of factor analysis, we are able to combine our measurement of those components to obtain a holistic picture of the PQECR. Thus, each of the five dimensions represents an important component of the overarching construct of the PQECR. With factor analysis, the individual scale items

that represent the five dimensions of the PQECR be split into five factors, which should demonstrate strong, positive loadings onto a single, higher-order factor, which represents the latent construct of PQECR. Therefore, a higher-order factor model was tested, which specified individual PQECR items loading on five lower-order factors, which, in turn, loaded onto the single, higher-order factor.

An initial test of this higher-order model revealed satisfactory model fit (CFI = .91, RMSEA = .11, SRMR = .23) and generally strong factor loadings for both the lower-order factors (see Table 2) and the single higher-order factor (see Table 3). However, the model also revealed an unexpected relationship. Specifically, the lower-order factor 'distinctiveness of the relationship' loaded negatively onto the higher-order factor, while each of the other four factors loaded positively. Additionally, the standardised loading estimate (StdXY) for this factor was considerably lower than the other four factors ($-.60$, compared to .89–1.0). In other words, four of the factors appear to be similarly and equally capturing the same concept (PQECR), while the fifth dimension ('distinctiveness') appears to represent something else, as indicated by the weak and negative relationship. Further analysis revealed negative and largely non-significant correlations between the distinctiveness factor and the other four factors (whereas the other four factors were highly and significantly correlated with one another). These negative relationships (with both the latent PQECR construct and the other factors) suggest that the distinctiveness factor is not an appropriate representation of the PQECR. Thus, we conclude that the distinctiveness dimension is not a true behavioral manifestation of the latent PQECR, but instead represents another construct altogether. We suspect that participants may have interpreted distinctiveness items[3] in terms of favoritism or being singled-out, as opposed to having a unique, tailored relationship with one's supervisor as intended. In an effort to obtain the best possible model to represent the PQECR, Factor 1 (distinctiveness) was dropped altogether.

Table 2.   Results of the confirmatory factor analysis – five lower-order factors.

Item	Factor 1 (Distinctiveness) StdXY	Factor 2 (Genuineness) StdXY	Factor 3 (Communication) StdXY	Factor 4 (Comfort) StdXY	Factor 5 (Facilitates) StdXY
Dist1	.956				
Dist4	.697				
Dist5	.531				
Gen1		.885			
Gen2		.86			
Gen4		.814			
Comm1			.822		
Comm2			.849		
Comm3			.859		
Comf1				.883	
Comf3				.810	
Comf4				.886	
Facil1					.790
Facil3					.915
Facil4					.857

Note: all factor loadings are significant at $p < .001$.

Table 3.   Results of the confirmatory factor analysis – higher-order factor.

	Factor 1 (Distinct.)	Factor 2 (Genuine)	Factor 3 (Comm.)	Factor 4 (Comfort)	Factor 5 (Facilitate)
Loading on Higher-order factor (StdXY)	− .609	1.00	.925	.970	.893

Note: all factor loadings are significant at $p < .001$.

Subsequent tests of the higher-order model (e.g., the four dimension-level factors mapping onto the overall factor of PQECR) with four lower-order factors demonstrated improved model fit. Fit for the final model was strong, with a CFI of .96, RMSEA of .10, and SRMR of .04. All three of these fit indices are more desirable that those obtained for the initial model, which included five lower-order factors, indicating that this model is a better fit to the data. Individual indicators again loaded strongly and significantly onto the four lower-order factors. No large, significant cross-loadings were included in the final model, though some individual indicators were permitted to correlate. Loadings of the four lower-order factors onto the single, higher-order factor were all strong and significant, ranging from .88 to 1.0. All loadings are included in Figure 1, which features the final PQECR model.

Evaluation of internal consistency

Internal consistency reliability was evaluated for the final 12 item PQECR scale. The overall internal consistency reliability for all twelve items was very strong, with a coefficient alpha of $\alpha = .95$. Though the scale is intended to be used as a whole, each of the four individual dimensions was also evaluated for exploratory purposes. These
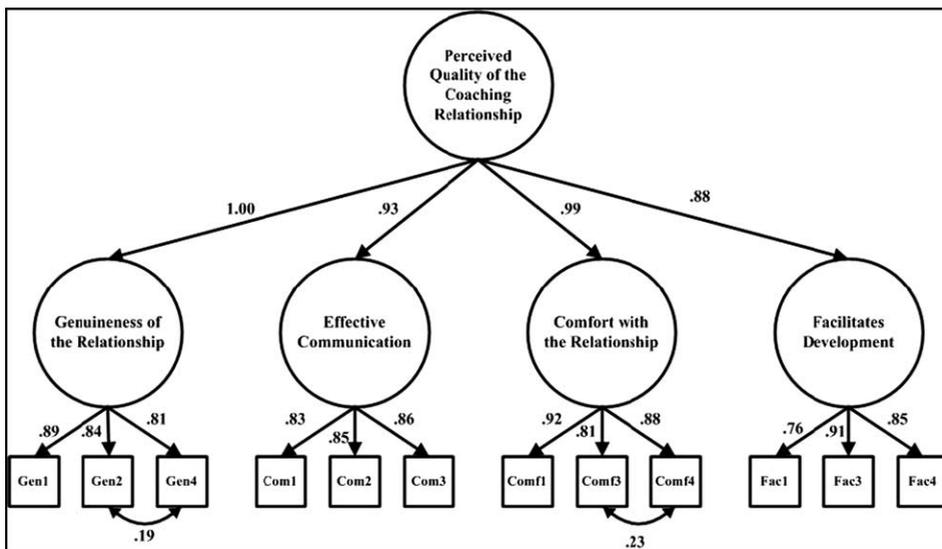

Figure 1.   The higher-order PQECR model based on phase one data collection.

coefficients were also high, ranging from $\alpha = .85$ to .91. Specifically, the coefficients for the five dimensions are as follows: 1) genuineness of the relationship: $\alpha = .88$; 2) effective communication: $\alpha = .85$; 3) comfort with the relationship: $\alpha = .91$; and 4) facilitating development: $\alpha = .87$.

The final 12 item scale is presented in Table 4. This final version of the PQECR scale will be further examined in phase two of data collection below.

Data collection: phase two

Data were collected from employees ($N = 556$) of a large (approximately 25,000 employees) Fortune 500 global manufacturing organisation via online survey. All participants were classified as 'professional grade' employees (e.g., no hourly, contingent, or temporary employee) and worked in a US location. In terms of demographics, 72% of the participants were male; 90% identified themselves as white or Caucasian, 4% as African-American, 2% as Latino, 1% as Asian, 1% as Native American, and 2% as 'other.' The average age of participants was $M = 45.2$ ($sd = 10.0$). Twenty eight percent of participants indicated that they had completed a college degree as their highest level of education, 20% had completed some college, 18% had received a high school degree, 14% had completed an Associate's degree, 14% had completed a graduate degree, 5% had completed some graduate school, and 1% had completed some high school. Participants' average tenure with the organisation was $M = 15.5$ years ($sd = 11.6$), average tenure in their current jobs was $M = 6.0$ years ($sd = 6.1$), and average tenure with their current supervisors was $M = 2.8$ years ($sd = 3.3$).

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the fit of the data to the expected higher-order factor model of the PQECR. As with phase one of data collection, a

Table 4.   The final PQECR scale.

Dimension	Items
Genuineness of the Relationship	1. My supervisor and I have mutual respect for one another.
	2. I believe that my supervisor truly cares about me.
	3. I believe my supervisor feels a sense of commitment to me.
Effective Communication	4. My supervisor is a good listener.
	5. My supervisor is easy to talk to.
	6. My supervisor is effective at communicating with me.
Comfort with the Relationship	7. I feel at ease talking with my supervisor about my job performance.
	8. I am content to discuss my concerns or troubles with my supervisor.
	9. I feel safe being open and honest with my supervisor.
Facilitating Development	10. My supervisor helps me to identify and build upon my strengths.
	11. My supervisor enables me to develop as an employee of our organisation.
	12. My supervisor engages in activities that help me to unlock my potential.

model was specified in which the 12 PQECR items loaded onto four lower-order factors, which, in turn, loaded onto a single higher-order factor representing the latent construct of the PQECR (see Figure 2 for a graphical representation). An initial test of this model demonstrated satisfactory model fit (CFI = .88, RMSEA = .17, SRMR = .06). Subsequent models were tested that incorporated correlations between items guided by model modification indices (MIs)[4] that were theoretically justifiable. While some items were allowed to correlate, there were no large, significant cross-loadings included in the model. The final model demonstrated a good fit (CFI = .96, RMSEA = .10, SRMR = .03) and strong, significant loadings for both the lower-order and higher-order factors. Thus, the factor structure for the PQECR identified in phase one of data collection was successfully replicated using phase two data from 559 participants. Loadings and item correlations are illustrated in Figure 2.

In sum, the final PQECR scale consists of 12 items, representing four dimensions: genuineness of the relationship, effective communication, comfort with the relationship, and facilitating development. The four dimensions serve as manifest indicators of the latent PQECR construct. The final scale can be found in Table 4.

Discussion

The purpose of the current paper was twofold: first, to clearly define the employee coaching relationship and, second, to develop a measure of the perceived quality of the employee coaching relationship (PQECR). The domain of employee coaching is in need of scientific rigor – both in terms of construct clarity and theory development. We believe that the current paper addresses both of these deficiencies and also provides researchers and practitioners with a new tool for studying and evaluating the quality of employee coaching relationships.
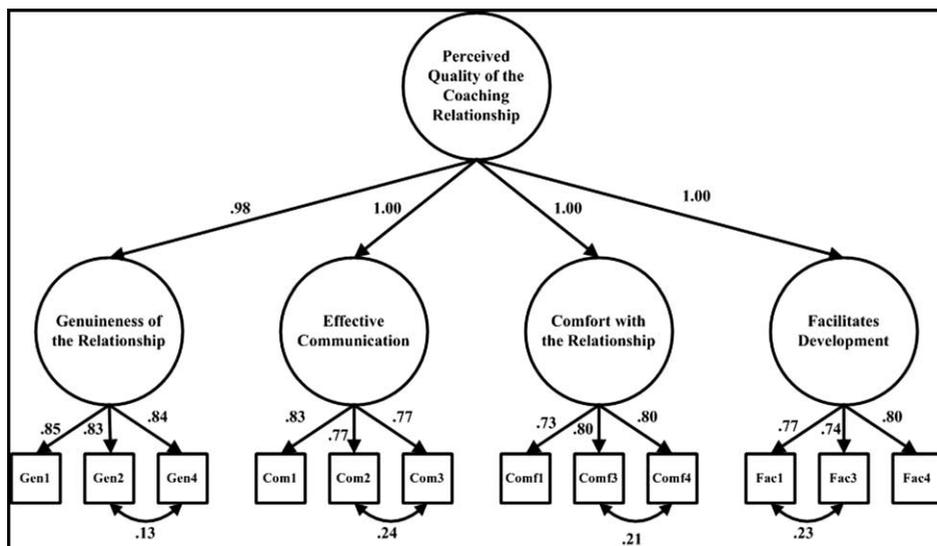

Figure 2.   Results of the PQECR CFA with phase two data.

Through a process of item refinement and data collection and analysis, a sound, 12 item measure reflecting four dimensions was developed. The final model of PQECR demonstrated a strong factor structure, and the scale showed high internal consistency reliability. The structure of the PQECR measure was replicated as expected in phase two of data collection, but future research should continue to evaluate the psychometric properties of the measure.

The elimination of the 'distinctiveness' dimension was unexpected, yet beneficial to the integrity of the measure. A review of the 'distinctiveness' items suggests that participants may have interpreted the meaning of the dimension differently than intended. Specifically, the distinctiveness dimension was intended to capture a 'tailoring' of the coaching relationship to individuals' needs. It is possible that participants instead interpreted the items negatively – as if they referred to being singled out by a supervisor, or experiencing or witnessing acts of favoritism.

The other four dimensions of the PQECR scale demonstrated a strong structure – including high item loadings on the four lower-order factors and high loadings on the single, higher-order factor. Though the five dimension structure was specified *a priori*, those dimensions were largely based on the small and developing literature that currently exists on employee coaching. As noted previously, one of the goals of this paper is to improve the rigor and quality of employee coaching research. The four dimension PQECR scale will make a more sound contribution to this research stream than a five dimension model with weaker structure.

Future research should also use the PQECR scale to further our understanding of employee coaching relationships and their role in *effective* coaching. In other words, we theorise that the coaching relationship lays the foundation for effective coaching – but cannot be confident in this theory until sufficient support has been uncovered through additional studies. Going a step further, future research should also examine the effect of the coaching relationship on actual coaching *outcomes* (e.g., behavior change, performance improvement, personal development). A supervisor and subordinate may have a high-quality coaching relationship that leads the supervisor to engage in active coaching behaviors, but if that coaching produces no fruitful outcomes or behavior change, it is of little or no value. As noted previously, investigations of the effects of employee coaching on performance are essential to the survival of coaching as a legitimate developmental activity.

Implications for practice

In terms of application, practitioners can use the PQECR to get a better understanding of how well the managers in their organisation are actually 'managing.' Although managing a group of direct reports consists of more than just talent management, coaching and development of subordinates is a critical part of managers' roles in many organisations. More and more, coaching and development of direct reports is becoming an expected management behavior – one that often appears on scorecards and year-end reviews. Without sufficient tools to measure and evaluate employee coaching, it is difficult to fully understand and improve upon managers' current coaching practices. HR professionals or consultants can turn to subordinate perceptions of their managers to determine whether or not those managers themselves need training and development on their talent management skills.

One specific recommendation for using the PQECR in practice is to involve a third party in the administration and interpretation of the scale. This role could be filled by an HR team member or other employee advocate or neutral party (e.g., a one-level-up manager, an external vendor or consultant). Our reasoning behind this recommendation is that employees may be less inclined to be entirely truthful in completing the scale if they know their manager will have direct access to their responses. The fear of punishment or retaliation could have a significant impact on individuals' willingness to provide feedback on the relationship.

We believe that the most important next step in examining employee coaching relationships is to use the PQECR scale to determine the individual difference and contextual variables that contribute to relationship quality. We are currently in the process of examining such relationships, with predicted influential variables including – among other things – supervisor characteristics (emotional intelligence, implicit person theory – *a la* Heslin et al., 2006) and behaviors (leadership style, extent to which they interact with subordinates), subordinate characteristics (feedback orientation, learning goal orientation), and contextual variables (feedback environment). Other researchers should also seek to develop our understanding of employee coaching relationships and how they relate to coaching outcomes, such as improvements in performance, enhanced self-awareness, and increased participation in developmental activities.

In sum, we believe that the current paper has contributed to the coaching literature by adding clarity to the concepts of employee coaching and, specifically, the employee coaching relationship. We hope that researchers will use and build from our work to further enhance our understanding of employee coaching. We also encourage practitioners to take our ideas, tools, and conclusions into their organisations to improve the state of employee coaching and managers' coaching capabilities.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Throughout the current paper, we conceptualise employee coaching as occurring between an employee and his/her direct line manager. It is certainly possible, however, that an employee coaching relationship could occur between an employee and an indirect, or 'dotted line' manager or even a team or project leader. However, we contend that employee coaching occurs in the context of a hierarchy – where the coaching manager or leader is in a supervisory role over the employee. Thus, peer coaching and related ctivities are not addressed in this paper and are considered distinct from our concept of employee coaching.
2. It is important to note that we draw on the executive coaching literature to derive some of our theories and ideas. We are quick to note that employee coaching and executive coaching are very different, but the lack of a strong employee coaching literature warrants exploration of related literature. Executive coaching boasts a much stronger literature than employee coaching and we hope to build the employee coaching literature from this foundation.

3. For the reader's reference, the three 'distinctiveness' items are as follows: 1) The guidance that my supervisor gives me is different from the guidance my coworkers receive from their supervisors; 2) I have noticed that the way my supervisor interacts with me is different than the way my coworkers' supervisors interact with them; and 3) The relationship I share with my supervisor is different from the relationships some of my coworkers share with their supervisors.
4. The final model specified 4 item correlations (comf3 with comf4, facil1 with facil3, comm2 with comm3, and gen2 with gen4). Two of these item correlations were also specified phase one data collection (gen2 with gen4 and comf3 with comf4).

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