

Factors Determining Effectiveness of Executive Coaching

A systematic review of the literature from 2000 to 2015

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Abstract

Executive coaching has been discussed in recent years but there is a serious lack of studies measuring its added value. Therefore, there is some merit in doing a systematic review of the literature with the overall objective of making an inventory of scientific knowledge from 2000 to 2015 related to executive coaching and in particular about the key variables of its effectiveness.

The objectives of this paper are: to identify and explain the various factors determining the effectiveness of executive coaching and analyze and synthesize the literature on the subject of the study. In addition, this paper wishes to propose a conceptual framework based on the factors determining the effectiveness of executive coaching identified by scientific research which will encourage further research and ease the selection of a coach by organizations and clients but also foster skills development for coaches.

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive world, the market economy encourages companies to seek maximum optimization of their resources. Human resource management is not an exception and organizations must develop action plans to deal with those issues. Executive coaching is especially used as an employee development strategy [1]. A new trend from the United States, executive coaching emerged in the early 2000s and has substantially grown since its introduction. Since that time, various types of coaching have been introduced (e.g. life coaching, sports coaching, etc.).

Executive coaching is defined as follows: “a formal one-on-one relationship, in which the coachee and coach collaborate to assess and understand the coachee and his or her leadership developmental tasks, to challenge current constraints while exploring new possibilities, and to ensure accountability and support for reaching goals and sustaining development” [2]. According to Guay [3], executive coaching is a “functional relationship oriented towards the task at hand, the short-term needs” in which the ultimate goal is the improvement of skills directly related to the function. Many reasons are given to justify the attractiveness of this practice compared to other methods of development (training, mentoring): personalized relationships and offered on an individual basis, an approach leading to a relevant or useful training, immediate transferability of learning and approach helping to overcome the barriers to change [4].

Research Problem and Objectives

It is in a perpetual quest to improve the effectiveness of human resource that the popularity of executive coaching increased. Moreover, a survey conducted in the US showed that nearly 70% of those interviewed said they had met a coach in their companies in the two preceding years [5]. Furthermore, the growing fame of executive coaching from businesses was estimated at close to 8% between 2010 and 2013 by the International Coach Federation, which is one of the largest associations of the profession [6].

At the same time, this growth demand caused an increased in offer for executive coaching and the number of coaches has almost doubled in five years and reached 24,635 members worldwide in 2014 [7]. According to the International Coach Federation [7], coaching represented a total amount of over \$2 billion US in 2012. Finally, regarding the average hourly rate of coaches, it was estimated between \$500 and \$725 dollars [8]. This can be one of the reasons behind the frenzy surrounding executive coaching.

However, this craze is challenged by antagonists, such as Amadiou [9], who point out the lack of serious studies measuring the added value of executive coaching. He also raises an important point about the level of return on investment of such an approach given the high cost of consulting a coach. In addition, some authors such as Gray and Goregaokar [1] underline the extent of the problem and state that there remains a lack of available scientific literature relating to the impact of executive coaching and more specifically involving the study of the factors contributing to the success of the process.

Today, there is a real imbalance between the reputation of executive coaching and the state of knowledge in scientific research about the factors determining the effectiveness of executive coaching. Therefore, a systematic review methodology is used to carry out this research and the overall objectives of the study are to identify and explain the various factors determining the effectiveness of executive coaching. Then, the research will also propose a conceptual framework based on those factors.

Methodology

For different reasons, the method of systematic review is adopted to identify the literature relating to the factors determining the effectiveness of executive coaching. First, it offers several advantages to researchers [10]: 1) identification and mobilization of key scientific knowledge on the topic, 2) reduction of biases by identifying all studies on the research question, and 3) reducing the potential role of chance in the identification, selection and synthesis of the results of the literature on the subject [e.g. 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17]. Finally, the last argument which is significant is the fact that this method is currently considered as the most valid and reliable to identify and synthesize existing knowledge due to its replicability [14].

Research Question

This systematic review of the literature aims at answering the following research question: What are the factors determining the effectiveness of executive coaching?

Population Definition

The sample is made up of scientific studies listed both in the area of management and psychology because of the multidisciplinary nature of the concept of executive coaching. The research process is limited to scientific papers published between 2000 and 2015 due to relevance of the results but also so that the scope of the study is neither too broad nor too close. Moreover, the choice of 2000 as the starting year is explained by the fact that it was during this period that executive coaching appeared. Indeed, coaching popularity started growing at the beginning of this millennium but has not been well studied scientifically. Finally, only scientific papers represent a reliable source to study the subject because they follow a very precise elaboration procedure, which meets the quality and validity requirements.

Sampling Techniques

First, the inclusion and exclusion criteria determine which studies are used. Therefore, they must be clearly defined as they directly affect the results. To be included in the review, the studies had to: 1) focus on executive coaching, 2) be linked to the field of management or psychology, and 3) be published between 2000 and 2015. The exclusion criteria consisted of: 1) studies that covered other forms of coaching (life, sports, as part of a course) and 2) focused on informal coaching (managers or supervisors). Furthermore, the research is carried out using the following research strategy: 1) research databases, located at the library of Université Laval (www.bibl.ulaval.ca), were used such as ABI / Inform Proquest and EBSCO Business Source and PsycNET (using the following keyword chains "executive coaching" OR "coaching" . 2) another strategy used is manual research of references mentioned in the articles found and publications specific to the issue in question which would not be indexed correctly in the electronic databases, and 3) discussions with experts and researchers in executive coaching were also used.

Data Collection Technique

To achieve the systematic review, the selected data collection technique used is the selection of previously identified studies and the extraction of information. In sum, a first selection was made from the titles and abstracts of articles and a second, more elaborate sort was performed, after reading the article [18]. Moreover, this selection was carried out by a single examiner in the following two points: verify the inclusion and exclusion criteria and the level of scientific evidence (internal and external validity) and discussions with experts and researchers for additional data. Thus, information was extracted, organized and codified. Finally, the data were synthesized to be able to present the results in tables and a conceptual framework.

Data Collection Instrument

In order to collect data, the instrument used is a MS Excel document specially prepared for the different objectives of this study [10]. Therefore, the information mentioned was as follows: the references of the document, the type of document (article or report), the type of research (qualitative, quantitative or mixed), the method analysis, the body or the area covered by the study, the nature of coaching (individual or group), the steps of the coaching process, the definitions that the authors have given to executive coaching and key references mentioned by the authors, categories, impacts and key references associated with each determinant of the effectiveness of executive coaching.

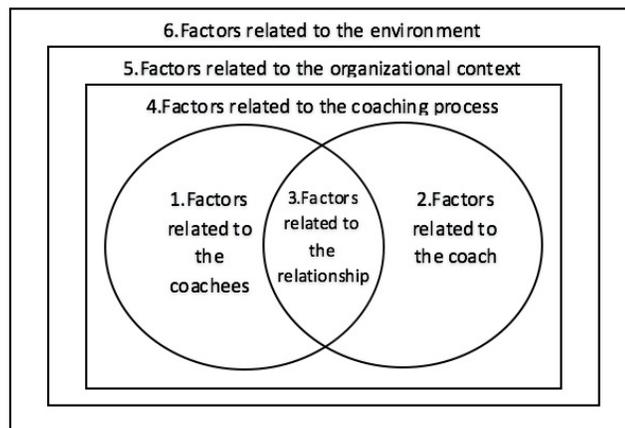
Data Analysis Method

The content of the selected articles was part of an in-depth analysis. An inventory of the different factors determining the effectiveness of executive coaching was performed and a ranking of those factors in different categories was also done (see *Tables 1 to 4*). Therefore, a conceptual framework is also proposed to integrate all the information in a clear and easy understand way (see *Figure 1*).

Results

This section presents the results using an integrative conceptual framework (figure 1) to identify and position the categories of factors determining the effectiveness of coaching. Thus, the following categories are proposed: factors related to the coachee, the coach's factors, factors related to the relationship, the coaching process, the organizational context and finally, factors related to the environment (outside the organization).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of categories of factors determining the effectiveness of executive coaching



Tables 1 to 4 present with more details, the 68 factors determining the effectiveness of executive coaching included in each categories presented in the conceptual framework. These tables also provide a brief description of each factor and references associated to them.

Table 1. Presentation of factors related to coachees

Categories	Factors	Description of factors	References
Factors related to coachees	Needs and motivation	Needs and motivation of the coachee to learn and change	[19, 20, 21, 22, 23]
	Participation	Personal effort of the coachee	[20,24]
	Engagement	The level of commitment of the coachee in the coaching process	[25]
	Self-awareness	Coachee's recognition of his own strenghts, weakness and needs	[25]
	Self-esteem	Positive assessment that the coachee has himself	[25]
	Superior engagement	The engagement of the supervisor in the process influences the coachee's implication	[20, 21, 22,26, 27]
	Cognitive flexibility	Ability to consider several options to solve a problem	[21, 28]
	Feedback receptivity	Openness to feedback	[20, 24]
	Accountability	Be responsible for its own development	[25]

	Placebo effect	Hope of the coachee regarding his learning ability	[20, 24, 29, 30]
	Timely moment	Appropriate time for the coachee to achieve a coaching process	[25]
	Position	The position held by the coachee in the company	[25]
	Power granted	The client grants to the coach the power to lead the process	[25]
	Age	This factor can influence the desire and willingness to change	[21, 25]
	Gender	This factor can influence the desire and willingness to change	[21, 25]

Table 2. Presentation of factors related to coaches

Categories	Factors	Description of factors	References
Factors related to coaches	Communication skills	Verbal and non-verbal communication	[19, 31, 32, 33, 34]
	Managerial skills to motivate	Ability of the coach to motivate the coachee to change	[33, 35]
	Ability to transmit and generate trust	Coach's ability to create a secure environment that reassures the coachee	[33, 35, 36, 37]
	Ability to communicate feedback	Coach's ability to communicate feedback to the coachee	[27]
	Knowledge	Techniques and theory used by the coach	[25, 30]
	Academic background	A psychology academic background could help coaches to be more effective	[21, 38, 39]
	Other experiences	Managerial, work-related or life experience	[25]
	Executive coaching experiences	The coach has already practiced the profession in the past	[25]
	Professional humility	The coach is the facilitator but the client still the major actor in the process	[25]
	Empowering the coachee	Coach's ability to empower the coachee	[25]
	Certification	Being a certified coach	[25]
	Vocation	Have the vocation and a genuine interest in understanding the human	[25]
	Profound knowledge of human nature	This knowledge is gained through experience and training	[25]
	Engagement	Engagement of the coach to the client and the company	[25]
	Be aware of the organization's specificities	The coach takes into account the organization and its policies	[25]
	Reputation	The reputation of the coach	[25]
Age	This factor can influence the credibility of the coach and the trust accorded by the coachee	[21, 25]	
Gender	This factor can influence the credibility of the coach and the trust accorded by the coachee	[21, 25]	

Table 3. Presentation of factors related to the process: relational process (coach-coachee) and coaching process

Categories	Factors	Description of factors	References
Factors related to the relation coach-coachee	Working alliance	Quality of the relationship between coach and coachee and their collaboration	[27, 28, 30, 31, 34, 39, 40]
	Authenticity of the relation	An authentic relationship is characterized by transparency , honesty and lack of hypocrisy	[25,41]
	Compatibility between the coach and coachee	Affinity between coach and coachee	[36, 42]
	Confidentiality	Confidentiality of the coaching relationship	[25, 41]
	Trust	Trust shared between coach and coachee	[25,41]
	Empathy	Ability of both parties to perceive what the other feels	[25, 32, 41]
Mutual respect	The respect between coach and coachee is unconditional and	[25,41]	

	Interpersonal behaviors Professionalism	mutual Friendly behaviors Characterized by a balance between distance and proximity	[42] [25]
Factors related to coaching process	Feedback to the coachee	Helps motivate , involve and engage the coachee in the process	[20, 23, 25, 27, 28, 35,43, 44]
	Setting and achieving clear goals Continuous challenges	Clarifies the purpose of the process The sub-objectives encourage the coachee to implement new actions and be more involved in the process	[20, 25, 33] [19, 25, 33, 35, 43, 45]
	Rythm of the intervention Continual measurement	Duration, frequency and amount of sessions Results are continuously measured during the process	[25, 46] [25]
	Evaluation of progress at the end of the process	Evaluation of progress that the coachee has made after the final conclusion (e.g. 360 ° feedback)	[25]
	Evaluation of the coach Evaluation and presentation of results Modality	Coach assessment Evaluation and presentation of results of the process to the organization (corporative client) The conditions and location that the process takes place and the way the meetings held (face -to-face video conferencing , telephone)	[25] [25] [25]
	Diagnosis	Diagnosis of the initial situation of the coachee (e.g. 360 ° feedback , MBTI)	[25]
	Continuous contact and continuous working	Continuous contact between coach and coachee and the ongoing work between sessions	[25]
	Continuous support Group processes	Support sessions once process is over Group processes (team coaching, outdoor dynamics, different areas vs similar areas) can complete the individual process	[25] [25]

Table 4. Presentation of factors related to context: organizational context and environment (outside the organization)

Categories	Factors	Description of factors	References	
Factors related to the organizational context	Types of coaching	Internal or external to the organization	[21, 23, 25, 28, 33]	
	Support and engagement of the hierarchy Exemplary behaviors Coherent policies	Support and commitment to the immediate superior but also of senior management from the beginning to the end of the coaching process Behavior management serve as a model The coaching process is coherent with the policies of human resources (training, development, promotion)	[19, 25, 26, 27, 39] [25] [25]	
	Time and budget Values	The allocation of time and budget A good match between the values of the coach, the coachee and the organization	[25] [25]	
	Fit between objectives	A good fit between the personal goals of the coachee and those of the organization	[25]	
	Assessing the impact	Assessment of the effect of the coaching process on the organization	[25]	
	Timely moment	Appropriate time for the organization to perform a coaching process	[25]	
	Confidentiality	Confidentiality of the coaching process guaranteed by the organization	[25]	
	Communication	The organization communicates information on the launch of the coaching program for all employees	[25]	
	Organizational culture	An organizational culture which is open to change and innovation	[25, 26, 33, 39]	
	Factors related to the environment (outside the	Socio -cultural characteristics	Characteristics that refer to the culture and social structures (e.g. country, language)	[47]

organization)			
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The above tables present 68 different factors included in the scientific literature. Regarding the factors linked to the coachees, 15 factors were identified. Indeed, the authors highlighted the impact of different characteristics and attributes of the coachees (see *Table 1*) for having an impact on the effectiveness of the coaching process. Then, the systematic review has highlighted 18 factors related to the coach. *Table 2* presents personal characteristics, attributes and also skills, knowledges, academic background, important and linked to the effectiveness of coaching. Furthermore, *Table 3* presents 9 factors related to the relation coach/coachee and also 13 factors linked to the coaching process. The importance of a working alliance is highlighted in the literature related to the relation coach/coachee. Regarding the process of coaching, the presence of feedback seems particularly important. Finally, 12 different factors were identified in relation to the organizational context and conditions in which the coaching takes place while only one factor has been identified in the literature related to the external environment, the latter is however quite broad.

Discussions and Conclusions

This study helps to meet the need expressed by several authors [1, 8, 9, 11] to do more studies on the effectiveness of executive coaching. The methodology of the systematic review has also allowed us to present an inventory of scientific studies on factors determining effectiveness of executive coaching. Those factors were grouped into six different categories. The present study includes all categories already proposed by some authors [25, 48] and distinguishes the category of factors related to the environment (outside the organisation). Also, this study presents all factors determining the effectiveness of executive coaching found in the scientific literature. Although some authors [40] propose another category named «placebo effect», it was decided to include the placebo effect's factors in the category related to the coachee because they referred to the hope of the coachee with respect to his own development. In conclusion, identification of factors determining the effectiveness of executive coaching determined by scientific research will encourage further research by social scientists and ease the selection of a coach by organizations and clients but also foster skills development for coaches.

Limitations and Further research

The main limitations concern the use of the methodology of systematic review. Indeed, this method puts out of context the knowledge to identify generalizations. This is why it is so important to write a diary to be prepared to respond to criticism. Given that this review include studies between 2000 and 2015, it will be necessary to perform an update to include future studies.

Future researches could take the determinants proposed here to examine what are the most explanatory or predictive factors of effectiveness. It would be interesting that further researchers investigate the presence of new factors determining the effectiveness of executive coaching. For example, given that the coaching process is usually done in collaboration with the supervisor of the coachees [20, 21, 22, 26, 27], it would be interesting to examine the importance of the relation «coach-coachee-supervisor» and the important characteristics of the supervisor (e.g. his/her openness, capacity to communicate a feedback). Thus, it would be interesting to consider the creation of a new category which includes such factors.

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