# Psychodynamic Group Executive Coaching:
# A Literature Review

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## Abstract

Group coaching is growing as a leadership development intervention for executives, in business schools and organizations. Benefits include economies of scale, diversity of perspectives, and behavioural change. We studied the psychodynamic group coaching intervention technique practiced at a global business school. This intervention has been experienced by thousands of senior executives for over a decade with positive results. To contribute to a robust theory of why this intervention is effective and how it works, we reviewed the literature of the critical components to analyze their efficacy.

**Keywords:** Psychodynamic group coaching, executive coaching, group dynamics.

## Introduction

As yet, psychodynamic group coaching interventions have received limited empirical attention. We felt that mapping and awareness of the existing component methodologies would assist practitioners in applying a balanced combination of these components or techniques (psychodynamics, group facilitation, and coaching) as well as delivering more reliable and consistent outcomes.

The germ of this article comes from our work with a leadership development process at a well-known international business school. Generally, the participants in these programs are senior executives from multinational companies, diverse with respect to gender and nationality, and aged 35–50 years. Before they arrive on campus, they are asked to submit a 360-degree feedback report called the Global Executive Leadership Inventory, containing data provided by superiors, colleagues, employees, friends and family (Kets de Vries, 2005). To date, more than 10,000 senior executives have completed the instrument, which covers 12 leadership dimensions and combines qualitative and quantitative feedback.

Psychodynamic group coaching is at the core of this leadership development process. The process consists of an initial day of group coaching, in groups of four or five, and a follow-up hour of individual coaching the following day. Each group is assigned a leadership coach with psychodynamic training and

experience in facilitating groups. The groups are composed to represent diverse industries, geographies, and gender, and demonstrate a mix of perspectives. To start the process, participants are asked to draw a multi-dimensional self-portrait that references different aspects of their lives. This creative "ice-breaker" is a way of encouraging the participants to present themselves in a way that they would not normally choose, and creates a setting that helps them to speak more freely. The day is then spent in the group discussing each participant (everyone gets 60–90 minutes in sharp focus)—a process facilitated by the coach. During these sessions, different aspects of the participants' professional and personal lives come to the fore. The feedback instrument is explored and debriefed by the coach, and the whole group is brought into the process to reflect on their own experiences, provide their own perspectives, and to offer suggestions for the future. At the end of the day, each participant presents a draft action plan. This draft is finalized the following day, in a one-to-one session with the coach. The participant makes a commitment to implement this action plan over the two months following the program, after which time a group conference call takes place to re-engage, check progress, and provide more perspective, support, and coaching. (Ward, 2009)

We have studied the feedback data from these brief psychodynamic coaching interventions. What is evident is that the participants declare themselves to be very satisfied with this intervention. We examined the data from 14 cohorts of one specific program over a four-year period (n= 414) between 2006 and 2010, we found that, when asked if the "intervention was effective as a way toward better self-assessment and work on one's leadership development," participants rated the intervention on average 4.253 (on a 5-point scale, with 5 being the highest). Furthermore, the participants rated on average 4.434 the "effectiveness of coaching in a group setting."[1] Detailed results are tabulated in the appendix.

To better understand what makes these kinds of interventions so successful, this paper presents the key components of the interventions and a comprehensive literature review. This should facilitate a better understanding of psychodynamic-oriented interventions, group psychotherapeutic interventions, and executive coaching interventions. It is hypothesized that reviewing the literature in each of these domains will help us to develop a theory of psychodynamic group coaching with executives.

### Psychodynamic group coaching - Critical components

In this kind of intervention the coaches use a *psychodynamic* approach, which generally implies highlighting some of the unconscious behaviour and patterns that may play out in organizational life. When appropriate, coaches may also explore if certain patterns have their origin in behaviour established in early life.

An explicit psychodynamic approach plays a major role in psychotherapeutic treatment, but is not commonplace in executive coaching. There is growing agreement, however, that psychodynamics and the role of the unconscious in coaching conversations is not only pervasive, but relevant (Turner, 2010). A significant body of research emphasizes the importance of unconscious processes at work, (Levinson, 1982; Zaleznik, 2009), and many contributors to the coaching field have indicated its value in the coaching domain. For example, Kilburg (2000) argues that psychodynamic theory is a flexible and useful

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[1] Often the efficacy of coaching is tested as a response from coachees only. We recognize the need to understand both the coachee's and coach's perspective. More details of this research and the qualitative data will be presented in a future paper.

tool not only for psychologists but also for consultants and coaches. Allcorn (2006) states that in the dyadic coaching relationship it is the subjective, out-of-awareness, unconscious, and hard to discuss elements of the relationship that count. Laske (2007) points to forms of development in coaching that surpass and supersede the purely behavioural. Kets de Vries has underlined the paramount importance of psychoanalytic conceptualizations in executive groups (Kets de Vries, 2005, 2011). Florent-Treacy has examined executives in what is described as "an identity laboratory", a process that is presented through narratives from the program participants. The study concludes that group psychotherapy can be adapted to create an identity laboratory experience for executives (Florent-Treacy, 2009).

In studying group coaching interventions, we note that various techniques deployed in longer-term psychotherapy come into play. Examples are: exploration of defences, reflection on early and parental influences, and the linkages between these and irrational behaviour. Group coaching facilitates the elicitation of other dynamics including multiple perspectives, group pressure, and group support.

While psychodynamic group therapy has been widely studied, the same cannot be said about group coaching. To gain a greater insight into this intervention technique, we reviewed what has been learned taking this approach. Hence, the research became focused on psychodynamic interventions, the efficacy of different group interventions, and the efficacy of coaching itself.

**Methodology**

In the case of each of these different disciplines, we have taken a similar approach: a search for the relevant *empirical* literature, a conclusion derived from the literature, and a comment with regard to the intervention for which we are developing a theory. Where possible, we have based our search on meta-analysis and outcome studies, and in particular randomized control trials rather than qualitative analysis. The rationale behind this approach was to confirm the efficacy of each discipline based on quantitative analysis, in the knowledge that myriad theories lay behind each one, many of which have been hotly debated for decades. We intend to assess what worked as it relates to the intervention that we are researching.

The advantages of meta-analytic comparison are well documented. The method applies only to empirical data, and it is a technique for encoding and analyzing statistics that summarize research findings. Moreover, the studies must be conceptually comparable and use similar research designs (Lipsey, 2001). We have undertaken to look at the three critical components of psychodynamic group coaching separately. We are unconcerned as to the extent that each discipline worked. Ultimately, we seek to understand how they interlock to create a positive outcome.

As a starting point for this investigation we have reviewed the relevant literature on psychotherapy, considering its effectiveness both from the use of different approaches and given a variable timeframe.

*Psychodynamic psychotherapy and relationship with psychodynamic coaching*

There is a vast amount of literature on psychotherapeutic effectiveness. However, we concentrate on the meta-analytic studies available (Silverman, 2005; Eysenck, 1952). Although there are large tracts of competing data, the studies tend to point consistently in a similar direction. Using the database PsychInfo, PsychArticles, and the Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection, the search terms "Meta-Analysis Psychotherapy" were employed in the subject terms. PubMed was used at this stage, as a more generalist and holistic approach was needed to determine an overview of the subject matter. In PubMed the search

term "Psychodynamic Psychotherapy" was used with the filter "clinical queries," and then the filter for "systematic reviews." The search resulted in 258 meta-analytic studies in the first three databases and 84 systematic reviews in PubMed. These were then sorted in ascending date order to assemble a history of the field and the developing theory. Given the quantity of results, it was necessary to apply subjective limitations to the studies reviewed. For example, a meta-analysis of psychotherapy outcome studies was deemed relevant since it involved a review of clinical trials, whereas the effects of drug therapy on clinical disorders was not considered useful in the narrower context of group coaching.

### *Outcome studies of talking cures*

Broad analyses of psychotherapy show efficacy irrespective of which conceptual framework is used. In fact, the low correlation between differences confirms Rosenzweig's expectation that because of the large overlap of "ingredients" of different therapies, comparative studies will show little difference (Rosenzweig, 1936). For example, when making an analysis of the differences between long-term and short-term psychotherapy, research shows that (a) each of the different types of psychological treatments shows benefits, (b) the amount of benefits from each type of therapy shows mainly non-significant differences, (c) these non-significant differences are especially evident when the researcher's therapeutic allegiance is taken into account, (d) both short-term and long-term treatments show some positive benefits for some patients, and (e) there is a tendency for longer treatments to show more lasting benefits (Luborsky *et al.*, 2003). In short, it is clear from the literature that psychotherapeutic interventions work.

Attempts to understand current trends in psychotherapy generate supporting data. While psychotherapy is considered effective compared to the absence of treatment, some authors struggle to find differences between different approaches. Indeed, suspicions abound that many of the studies (especially narrative studies) are criticized for being compromised by subjective bias (Joyce *et al.*, 2006).

In 1977 a review of 375 studies compared various therapies, including the two major streams—cognitive-behavioural (CBT) and psychodynamic—with control groups. The conclusion was that the average therapy patient exhibited greater symptom reduction than 75% of untreated patients (Smith, 1977). In turn, this meta-analysis itself was studied and reduced to 292 studies by removing non-clinical diagnosis. The percentage of patients exhibiting symptom reduction remained broadly similar (Smith, 1977).

It was later hypothesized that the allegiance of the researcher to a particular type of therapy biased the results of the study (Robinson & Berman, 1990). Indeed, it was found that allegiance was highly correlated with outcome. When assessed independently, the research went on to find all treatments equivalent in outcome (Robinson & Berman, 1990), subsequently confirmed in a review by Wampold (Wampold, 1997; Joyce *et al.*, 2006). Joyce *et al.* concluded after analyzing meta-analytic literature that differences in therapies are attributable to variables such as investigator allegiance and that if one adjusts statistically the effectiveness of different therapy approaches disappears.

Perhaps the most ambitious analysis to date is that of Staines and Cleland (2007). It produces a distillation of over 1000 individual studies into six meta-analytic studies. Averaged, these studies depict a positive effect size of +0.8 (a positive almost linear correlation), which according to Cohen is a significant positive outcome (Cohen, 1992).

More recently, Luborsky, one of the most prominent researchers evaluating therapies, concluded that only a few psychotherapeutic comparisons with each other tended to have large differences and these occasional differences are likely to be attributable to chance (Luborsky *et al.*, 2003).

**Comment on clinical trials studies as related to psychodynamic group coaching**

We deduce from our research that the well-known talking cures of psychodynamic psychotherapy and cognitive behavioural therapy work well with clinical populations. The intervention we are studying does not involve clinical populations however. What may be hypothesized is that engaging with others, sharing ones feelings and stories may have a cathartic effect (though not necessarily a behavioural effect in isolation). The psychodynamic approach utilized, (looking at the coachees' history, allowing them time to reflect on themselves emotionally, to be listened to in a controlled environment), may however, afford them an opportunity to gain greater self-insight and develop.

**Intensive Short-term Dynamic Psychotherapy and the relationship to psychodynamic group coaching**

*Definition*

We turn to Intensive Short Term Dynamic Psychotherapy (ISTDP) since it is particularly relevant as a comparison to the form of group coaching we are studying, due to the intense and brief nature of the intervention. ISTDP is a form of short-term psychotherapy developed through empirical research by Davanloo, a Canadian psychiatrist who was frustrated with the length and limited efficacy of psychoanalysis (Davanloo, 1978). ISTDP's primary goal is to help the patient overcome internal resistance to experiencing true feelings about the present and past that they have warded off, because they are too frightening or too painful. The technique is *intensive* in that it aims to help the patient experience these warded-off feelings to the maximum degree possible; it is *short-term* in that it tries to achieve this experience as quickly as possible; it is *dynamic* because it involves working with unconscious forces and transference feelings (Davanloo, 1995).

*Comparative reviews and meta-analysis of STDP*

We wanted to find out how effective short-term dynamic therapy is and whether it delivered a sustainable result, since our short-term coaching intervention seemed to have good self-reported results. One major study conducted research of 19 studies covering the period 1978 to 1988 (Svartberg, 1991). It found that effectiveness at post-treatment (i.e. as soon as treatment finished) showed significant superiority to no treatment, but compared with alternative therapies showed a "large sized inferiority after a year." Moreover, it was noted that outcome effectiveness increased with treatment duration, a new finding in the light of a lack of conclusive evidence either way in previous studies.[2]

Another psychiatrist, Vaillant, built on this meta-study, drawing attention to the limitations of the analysis, namely that the studies used only different short-term psychotherapy interventions, leading to poor comparisons (Vaillant, 1994). Further investigation was needed and it came from Lewis *et al.* (2008), who subsequently conducted a meta-analysis of short-term psychotherapy efficacy studies between 1996 and 2006, covering 18 studies. His conclusions were that short-term psychotherapy can be equal to other psychological treatments and has more efficacy than non-treatment, in the short-term.

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[2] This is relevant to the coaching practitioner looking for permanent behavioural change. It raises the question as to whether coachees experience a short-term high, and then a subsequent relapse into old behaviours after a period of time. We intend to investigate this separately.

Confirming these findings, Bortolotti posited from a meta-analytic study of 10 different types of psychological intervention that all are significantly linked to clinical improvement over usual GP care in depressive symptomatology (Bortolotti *et al.*, 2008).

More specifically, a meta-analysis conducted in 2003 by Leichensenring, a comparative study of both long-term and short-term psychodynamic psychotherapy, revealed substantial positive effects for the treatment of generalized personality disorders (Leichensenring, 2003). In this study short-term psychodynamic therapy showed a higher efficacy both for self-reports and observers. In 2002, Leichensenring also conducted an inconclusive comparison between behavioural therapies and short-term dynamic psychotherapy (Leichensenring, 2002). He did conclude, however, that there was no evidence of "highly significant" superiority of behaviour therapies over short-term psychodynamic therapies, a conclusion drawn before by Christoph-Crits (Christoph-Crits, 1993).

### *Comment*

STDP works as an intervention with some limitations. For example, it may well be that the short-term nature of psychodynamic group coaching may not have long-lasting results. More longitudinal studies of psychodynamic group coaching will be needed to assess this. What we can conclude is that both short-term and longer-term psychotherapeutic interventions improve symptoms, irrespective of approach. An impact study is required to evaluate whether behaviour changes long-term when this psychodynamic approach is applied in the group coaching setting.

## Group therapy and its relationship with group coaching

### *Definition*

Group therapy is a form of psychotherapy in which one or more therapists treat a small group of clients together. The term can refer to any form of psychotherapy when delivered in a group format, including cognitive behavioural or interpersonal therapy, but it is usually applied to psychodynamic group therapy.

### *Group therapy reviews and meta-analysis*

Group therapy meta-analysis investigation broadly demonstrates efficacy in the intervention and with different types of case ranging from deep psychological disorder to mild addictions like tobacco (Stead, 2005). Moreover, it seems to have efficacy across age groups and is not gender-specific. One study in this field reviewed the effects of group therapy on older (55+) adults, useful for our research as many of the senior executives we are researching are approaching that threshold (Payne, 2008).

A number of researchers engaged in a longitudinal study of group versus individual control treatments (Tillitski, 1990). Combining nine studies with 75 outcome measures, they found that both group and individual treatments had a measurable positive effect that was consistently greater than controls. Meta-analysis of traumatized patients also showed efficacy. Some other researchers in a systematic review of women in group therapy with breast cancer showed moderately positive effects in improving quality of life, a moderate to strong effect in improving depression and a moderate effect for improving anxiety (Naaman *et al.*, 2009).

In another offshoot, short-term group therapy was found to be more effective than long-term unless the participant had advanced disease symptoms. Furthermore, Fettes and Peters reviewed 40 outcome studies of patients with the eating disorder bulimia (Fettes & Peters, 1992). Not only was moderate

efficacy noted at the end of the treatment, but it also appeared to have sustainability when revisited after a year. Moreover, positive effect size was better still when the group treatment was interspersed with one-to-one therapy and more hours per week.[3]

Finally, a Cochrane review of group therapy intervention results for smoking cessation (six months being the qualifying period) demonstrated that group programs were more effective than no intervention but not dissimilar in outcome to intensive one-to-one counseling (Stead, 2005). Hence at this point we do not know whether a group context is optimal for coaching executives given that the practice is mainly done in dyads. It is for that reason that we turn our attention to T-Groups, more closely aligned to the group aspects of the coaching intervention in methodology.

### *T-Groups*

In the context of group interventions with measured outcomes, T-Groups are notable. Lewin's work at the 1946 Connecticut conference was the foundation for T-Groups, and developed through his work at the Research Center for Group Dynamics at MIT. Its intention was to find better methods of changing people's attitudes and provide them with greater insight into their own attitudes and values (Lewin, 1951; Highhouse, 2002). The first T-Groups were offered in 1947, the year of Lewin's death. It seems that when measured there were observable changes in behaviour after T-Group experiences. Nevertheless, the ability to observe and measure these changes was not without limitations (Campbell, 1968). Other changes that were researched and confirmed in T-Groups were personality changes. Culvert *et al.* noted increased self-awareness, and that those participants who engage in a process of mutual therapeutic engagement showed the most progress as tested by a scale on which they were deemed to have congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy towards each other (Culbert *et al.*, 1968).

There have been dissenting voices, however. House (1967), in a review of literature, concluded that while change generally happened following T-Groups, the change might be harmful or detrimental to the organization or individual depending on how well they can tolerate the change or anxiety it provokes. Moreover, Glueck (1968) suggested that those who attend such training should have the capacity to be open, know a little about interpersonal relations on the job, and have a job that requires those skills.

In an effort to find out whether change really materialized, Cooper (1971) studied the results with the help of an instrument concerned with self-actualization, comprising the results of 16 senior managers after two one-week T-Group trainings. The result showed significant change in the direction of becoming more independent and self-supporting, more flexible, more sensitive to their own needs and feelings, more spontaneous, and more accepting of aggression.

Evidence suggested that (a) personality variables do not change as a result of T-Group participation, but attitudes may change, (b) some personality traits are related to success in T-Group experiences (e.g., openness and independence), although they may not be changed by the experience (Anderson, 1973). Members of T-Groups might also be used as a network of internal change agents within organizations who were seeking a cultural or structural change (Winn, 1971).

From a per annum high in 1971 of 25 articles, the amount of research produced on T-Groups fell quickly so that by the 1990s this had fallen to below one per year. T-Groups had been widely seen as a management fad. Yet many of the architects of T-Groups were still active and deeply associated with

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[3] This may be noteworthy for our research since it combines group and one-to-one coaching.

organizational behaviour (Highhouse, 2002). Highhouse goes on to hypothesize that the T-Group has a "more subtle influence on modern techniques considered to be mainstream management" namely both formal and informal team building and 360-degree feedback techniques. He posits that the very notion of how 360-feedback is generally delivered, via one-to-one coaching sessions, and the gap analysis between perception and reality, is the principle that guided the T-Group at its inception: namely to gain insight into one's behaviour and how it impacts others.

*Comment*

The wide range of studies on group therapeutic interventions, including T-Groups, point to positive efficacy of outcome. When applied in an executive setting, some of the disciplines of group therapy necessarily need implementation, namely that of a holding environment and dynamic administration (Ward, 2008; Thornton, 2010). In the absence of these preconditions the group coaching experience becomes more of a facilitated conversation. While group therapy usually takes place over months or even years, the group executive coaching intervention we are studying is intensive and takes place over a day and a half, with follow-up after a few months. While boundaries are quite rigid, members of the group only occasionally meet face-to-face. And while group therapy is usually conducted for groups of people with specific conditions, e.g. cancer support or addiction, the group coaching intervention is heterogeneous in approach.

Psychodynamic group coaching borrows heavily from group theory and Lewin's development of strategies for executive groups. A different type of intervention from the usual dyadic forms of talking therapies and cures, group interventions are shown to be effective in producing change, albeit in some cases with only short-term effects. It is clear from the outcome studies on T-Groups that there were positive benefits. Moreover, the empirical data around group therapy shows positive efficacy for a range of symptoms. It may be that the security of sharing a journey where the other participants experience similar challenges leads to reassurance, openness, and support structures developing within the group. What we learn is that, broadly speaking, group interventions-whether with executives or clinical populations-seem to have broadly positive outcomes. We now turn our attention to the final component of the intervention, executive coaching.

**Coaching studies**

*Definition*

Coaching as an exercise in developing people in organizations may have existed as far back as the 1930s, albeit in a different form from today (Zeus, 2002). According to Kilburg (2000), modern coaching and development practices are based on the tenets of general systems theory. Organizational development theory, however, does not often give rise to the integration of the psychodynamic perspective (Kilburg, 2000). That said, a number of scholars have contributed to the overlapping fields of psychodynamic theory and organizational practice (Levinson, 1972; Zaleznick, 1999; Kets de Vries, 1984; Baum, 1987; Czander, 1993). Relevant to this intervention in particular, Kilburg cites the Socratic model of questioning, logical inference, metaphor, and stories, which helps clients build their own models and methods with which to address the problems they face, as a useful developmental coaching approach (Kilburg, 2000). Parkin (2010) more recently discusses the unconscious effects of listening to stories in groups. Moreover, stories have recently been conceived as "transitional objects"(Ann & Carr 2011), a useful metaphor for this intervention, which has been described as taking place in "transitional space" (Ward 2009).

*Comparative coaching studies*

Before looking at studies in detail it may be helpful to properly understand the frame of reference. We are looking at a form of developmental coaching, a term now in common use and which is a broad church (Cox & Jackson, 2009). Coaching is an interdisciplinary field, populated by psychologists, business practitioners, psychotherapists, and consultants. Bachkirova identifies at least seven different theories that have a solid theoretical foundation, including the psychodynamic approach (Bachkirova, 2011). The suggestion that developmental coaching is "integrative" seems to dovetail well with what we observe in this intervention. Namely, the process deals with the person as a whole, considers long-term behaviours as well as growth opportunities beyond the professional arena, and puts the coach in the position of a "thought partner," to name but a few of the characteristics cited by Bachkirova in the literature (Bachkirova, 2011). Ives (2008) argues that goal oriented coaching has a different perspective to personal development oriented coaching, with respect to the role of the coach and the objectives. Our observation is that the psychodynamic group coaching intervention seems to combine both.

More specifically, group coaching differs from other group interventions in many ways, including the group helping to set professional, personal and possibly even business goals for individual members. Moreover, the individual is accountable to the group as well as to him/herself and will inevitably develop an action plan (Britton, 2010). It clearly involves non-clinical populations.

However, since executive coaching is a recent development in the social sciences, and since it takes place generally in a private organizational context, it has not been subject to the same level of scrutiny as clinical medical interventions to date. Therefore, good accurate data are harder to unearth. Nevertheless, data do exist: randomized clinical controlled trials are practically non-existent, but meta-analyses are easier to come by. By far the most accessible literature is that of evidence-based coaching. Evidence-based coaching links theories and research from the behavioural sciences with coaching best practice, and may be one wa**y** of distinguishing professional practice grounded in proven science versus the simplistic, unproven coaching approach popularized by the many coaching associations (Stober, 2006).

In an early study, Douglas and McCauley presented a wide-ranging survey of development in institutions (Douglas, 1999). Using telephone interviews they surveyed 300 random US organizations. From the 2,426 respondents, their findings discovered that organizations with developmental programs (including coaching) in place were more likely to have both more satisfied employees and higher sales.

Subsequently, Smither and associates conducted an experimental field study in order to ascertain whether executives who worked with an executive coach experienced higher ratings from a multi-source feedback instrument over time (Smither, 2003). The time element is relevant here, as previous studies had noted an immediate impact. The wide-ranging study incorporated 1,361 senior managers, 404 of whom worked with a coach. After a year, managers who worked with a coach were found to have improved more than other managers, although the effect size was small.

By the time this survey occurred the use of external coaches was beginning to become popular in corporations (Smither, 2001). Earlier self-reported surveys had been conducted testifying that executives had found the process useful and had changed behaviours (Edelstein & Armstrong, 1993). A more rigorous outcome study in 2003 (Wasylyshyn, 2003) elicited the top two credentials and experience criteria for choosing a coach: training in psychology (82%) (confirmed in a later study by Stevens), and experience and understanding of business (78%) (Stevens, 2005). The study also created a typology of executives most likely to benefit from coaching. In the eyes of the author those most likely to derive a

favourable outcome are high potential employees with no performance issues, who are at the same time interested in their development. Fegetter (2007) tested this hypothesis with high performance employees at the UK Ministry of Defence and found that not only does coaching impact positively on those with commitment to exhibiting and demonstrating leadership behaviours but also that these improved behaviours spread through the managers' departments. Moreover, there was a supposition that benefits exceeded costs and therefore there existed a positive return on investment. This positive return had an antecedent hypothesized in the earlier work by Dagley (2006). A similar survey of 426 coaches from psychologist/non-psychologist backgrounds concluded important differences in coach competencies but not necessarily related to outcome or benefits of the coaching (Bono, 2009).

In order to test the efficacy of coaching on one specific behaviour, one exploratory study examined 20 coaching clients to test behavioural change around effectiveness in company meetings (Perkins, 2009). Findings demonstrated coaches displaying "significant behavioural changes." Another earlier exploratory study had also looked at the effect on a specific behaviour, in this case managerial flexibility (Jones *et al.*, 2006). This study also found positive benefits although these were limited only to the duration of the executive coaching itself.

In 2007 the first randomized controlled study of coaching outcomes appeared (Grant *et al.*, 2009). Participants received a leadership workshop, 360-degree feedback, and four coaching sessions over ten weeks. The methodology was biased towards cognitive behavioural approaches. Compared with controls, coaching enhanced goal attainment, increased reliance, and reduced stress, there were many positive qualitative findings, including that short-term coaching can be effective and that evidence-based executive coaching can be valuable as an applied positive psychology that facilitates people dealing with uncertainty and change.

From the coachees' perspective, two empirical processes form a lynchpin to understanding why the intervention we are investigating may be broadly successful. In one of these studies, Franklin examined and built on earlier research in trying to evaluate a range of potential client change factors as they relate to successful change. One outcome of the study is that three key potentiating factors for change in an individual are: 1) acknowledgement of a desire to change something 2) a sufficient understanding of the process or mechanism of the proposed change and 3) access to a trained professional who can facilitate the change or an ability to get it done themselves.[4] (Franklin, 2005)

A recent field study involving 73 managers and 24 coaches empirically investigated links between the coach–coachee relationship and the success of coaching in organizational settings showing positive outcomes on a number of measures (Baron, 2009). Also relevant to this study was a comparative study of psychodynamic and non-psychodynamic approaches to executive coaching (Roberts, 2006). The qualitative research showed that differences in outcome between psychodynamic and other orientations to coaching were limited, thus correlating with our earlier findings between various psychotherapy practices. Two recent randomized control studies of coaching in an academic setting suggest positive outcomes. Franklin and Doran (2009) observed positive effects in a range of measures. Franklin and Franklin in a follow up study (2012) provided further evidence of academic improvement, measuring performance 12-18 months after coaching completion.

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[4] We have observed all three of these factors to be broadly present in the kind of interventions we are involved in, in particular the last, since different group members serve to support the change process.

An integrative review of the practice and research of executive coaching in 2005 had attempted to develop a conceptual framework for the practice while at the same time admitting that there was still limited empirical evidence as to its impact (Joo, 2005). Styrhe observed the lack of both agreement on a unified comprehensive theoretical framework for coaching and also of studies of how coaching works in practice (Styrhe, 2008). Finally, in 2010, Ely summarized an integrated framework of coaching evaluation based on 49 studies ranging from cases, interviews, self-reported data and surveys, which made recommendations for a more even approach to understanding coaching outcomes (Ely *et al.*, 2010).

### *Comment*

Coaching interventions seem to be so broadly positive in outcome it is no wonder that organizations have alighted on them in recent years. There is little negative data but that may reflect the relative paucity of proper comparative trials and evidence-based studies. While it seems that coaching works, it is unclear at this point which type of coaching intervention is more effective than any other. As Grant said, more studies are required to assess impact at individual and organizational levels (Grant, 2006). The intervention we are studying sits on that continuum and future research requires an impact study to properly assess its efficacy.

## Conclusions and implications for future research

We have looked at the various components of psychodynamic group coaching and individually they seem to work. One might hypothesize that if the coaching intervention provides similar mechanisms for change, simply to sit with a coach and discuss a known challenge might be enough to set the client on the path to change. Wampold (2001) concludes from an extensive psychotherapy review:

> *"Specific ingredients account for less than 1% of the variance of outcomes. Decades of research have failed to find a scintilla of evidence that any specific ingredient is necessary for therapeutic change."* (p.204)

The most widely accepted rationale is that the therapeutic (or working) alliance provides the basis of change, namely the therapeutic bond, the expectancy the patient has of a positive effect, and the shared goals of the patient (Garske, 2000). Its analogue in executive coaching may reflect similar efficacy, except the working alliance would need to be examined and reworked. In executive coaching, contracting—the process through which the coach and coachee agree terms of engagement, process, and acceptable outcomes—is the most useful analogy.

Group work, both with clinical populations and executives, is demonstrated to be empirically effective and especially when combined with one-to-one work. T-Groups had a greatly beneficial utility in executive development. When these factors are combined into one intervention, a psychodynamic group coaching intervention with one-to-one follow up, we notice a high degree of appreciation with the process at its conclusion. One could conjecture that at the intersection of short-term dynamic therapy, group therapy, and coaching lies the possibility of positively changed behaviour and improved performance.

As can be seen in the appendix, in this psychodynamic group-coaching intervention, most participants report great satisfaction with the process from a number of perspectives. In addition, we discovered anecdotal follow-ups by coaches testify to the fact that many participants have made significant changes. It is not yet clear whether these changes are long lasting, or whether this intervention

is more readily acceptable in different cultures. To get more data about these matters, longitudinal studies are needed. It will also be of interest to examine the efficacy of other group interventions using control groups. Such studies will be difficult, but they may be well worth the effort to help further leadership coaching as a profession.

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