



Reflections from the field

Coaching Research: who? what? where? when? why?

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Abstract

The remarkable growth of coaching to date has not, so far, been matched by a similar growth in the research corpus that underpins it. There may be several explanations for this, including the pace of growth relative to the pace of research; coaching's location at the juxtaposition of business consultancy and applied psychology; and competing imperatives that leave coaches themselves torn between being coaches and being researchers. Drawing from a model of these competing imperatives of research and practice in occupational psychology, this article outlines some of the core issues that coaches might face when thinking about research. It suggests some possible answers to the questions of who, what, where, when and why of coaching research, and concludes by identifying the critical questions that will likely shape the future evolution of coaching.

Key Words: Coaching, research drivers, practitioner research

Introduction

It is axiomatic that we conduct coaching research in order better to understand and refine the coaching process and hence coaching outcomes. We do so operating from the belief that through a greater understanding of the many ways in which coaching works, we will be able to refine our coaching approaches, improve the work that we do, and ultimately add value to our coaching offerings, both in order to serve our professional contribution and to meet the demands of the coaching marketplace. Hence, in a utopian world, we would all be that much-vaunted combination of scientist-practitioners, conducting research that ultimately informs and enhances our practice. But, as we all know, the reality is something different to this. Why might this be?

The primary reasons are that research is expensive. It is expensive in terms of the time invested in research, both on the part of researchers themselves and their participants. It is expensive in terms of the physical conduct of the research, with the need for travelling expenses, materials, stationery, statistical analysis programmes, and all the other paraphernalia with which the researcher may need to contend. Perhaps most critically from a business perspective, which is arguably the vantage point of much coaching research, it can be highly expensive in terms of opportunity cost. - that is to say, the cost of research that does not lead anywhere, where the findings don't fit, and where, ultimately, the time and money spent can be put down to experience at best. With these major barriers to research, one may begin to consider that it is surprising that any research is done at all!

However, this dim view of the research future of coaching must be considered in the context of the changing climate of coaching research. Major purchasers of coaching services are increasingly beginning to ask for the evidence basis that underpins the coaching that they are buying in, to ask for the credentials of the coach whose services they are using, and to ask for the professional credentials and supports (e.g., professional supervision) that those coaches have in place.

These shifts in the coaching market place are evidence of the shift from first generation to second generation coaching that has been described by Kauffman and Scoular (2004). First generation coaches established the profession and brought it to the attention of the business world,

being led by coaching gurus who inspired and enthused others from their own wealth of talents and experience. However, their guru status has on occasion created closed systems where their own talents and experience are the beginning and end of their approach, meaning that they are ultimately limited and may fail to learn from wider experience, findings, and development (Storr, 1996).

The shift now to second generation coaching is reflected in the need for coaching to be based on explicit psychological principles and grounded in a solid evidence base, something that is only just beginning. This shift has largely come about as the major purchasers of coaching, typically Human Resource departments, have sought to distinguish between coaching offerings. This may include consideration of the coach's body of knowledge and theoretical approach; their training and accreditation; their ethical basis of practice; their professional memberships; and their supervision arrangements, amongst other things. As such, the various coaching bodies are now developing competency frameworks, ethical guidelines, and benchmarks for best practice, including the use of professional supervision, to address many of these issues. Further, there are many moves to encourage and develop coaching research to underpin the work that coaches are doing. In recognising this, we can learn a lot from being aware of the research drivers that shape the ways in which research is done.

Understanding Academic and Applied Research Drivers

In the context of occupational psychology research, Anderson, Herriot, and Hodgkinson (2001) described a 2 x 2 matrix along the dimensions of the relevance and rigor of scientific research. These four cells are populated by Popularist science (addressing a relevant theme, but without sufficient rigor); Pragmatic science (addressing a relevant theme in a methodologically rigorous and robust way); Pedantic science (addressing a theme of questionable relevance, but with fastidious design and analytical sophistication); and Puerile science (addressing issues of low relevance using research designs and methods lacking experimental rigor). They argued that powerful academics (e.g., journal editors and reviewers), who wish to understand the minutiae of the research focus and design, use their stakeholder position to influence a drift towards pedantic science (e.g., academically rigorous, but increasingly removed from real world application or value). On the other hand, external stakeholders (e.g., organizational clients), who wish to address urgent applied issues, use their position to influence a drift towards popularist science (e.g., very relevant questions, but which are addressed with less than acceptable academic rigor for reasons of expediency).

This framework provides a powerful means of understanding and locating the major research drivers from both academic and applied perspectives that impact on coaching research. First, from an academic perspective, is the bugbear of many an academic - the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). This research audit, with its major financial implications for universities, shapes much academic research activity by pushing academic researchers to publish in journals with higher impact factors, often those that largely serve only other academics, and that struggle to be translated quickly into real world applications and meanings. In contrast, practitioner journals, which may have a major impact, but of a very different kind, are often lowly rated by the RAE specifications. The result is that academics are pushed away from practitioner research towards more pedantic research that satisfies the requirements of the journal gatekeepers (i.e., other academics).

Practitioner researchers face a different set of challenges, but ones no less difficult to negotiate. First, they are unlikely to have the time that many academic researchers may have to dedicate to research projects, nor are they likely to have the research resources readily available either. Immediately, this makes the very question of research all the more difficult to address. Second, they may undertake research at the behest of an organisational client, bringing with it a different set of pressures and concerns. In contrast to the academic pressures of the RAE, here the concern is with conducting and completing the research as quickly as possible and against a budget, almost always in keeping with a business need imperative and a related deadline. These pressures do not lend themselves to periods

of reflection or the opportunity to have everything designed “just right.” Rather, the practitioner researcher is more likely to be attempting perennially to balance research fidelity with the competing demands of business imperatives and timelines. Third, with the practitioner’s time being spent outside the academic realm, they may find it near impossible to keep up to date with research developments, analytic advances, and latest research best practice.

All of these factors serve to deepen the wedge between the academic researcher and the practitioner researcher. They lead to differing compunctions for research practice that may, ultimately, be mutually incompatible. Applied relevance does not always lend itself to neatly controlled academic rigour, just as the time and effort required for publishing in the leading scientific journals are simply not economically viable for many practitioner researchers. But this is to paint a very bleak picture, and having done so, it is now incumbent upon us to explore the ways in which we might bridge these two worlds of the academic and the practitioner in relation to coaching research.

Bridging Academic and Practitioner Research

When undertaking research, the nature of the research question that we choose to ask is possibly the most important decision we will ever make. Yet, so often, we spend too little time thinking about the question and too much time trying to get to an answer. As Robert Sternberg, IBM Professor of Psychology and Education at Yale University described:

When I started, I spent a lot of time thinking about how to answer a question, and what would be a clever experiment I could design to answer this question, and what does the answer mean, and so on. As I have gotten older, I have spent successively more time thinking about the question and less about the answer. Namely, is this a good question to ask in the first place. Why should I or anyone else care what the answer is? ...I think, in general, the developmental trend is to worry more about whether the question you are asking is one worth asking...because...you so often find the answers are good, but the questions were not worth asking in the first place. (Sternberg, in Morgeson, Seligman, Sternberg, Taylor, & Manning, 1999, p. 113).

Good research questions have the potential to bridge the academic-practitioner divide very effectively, because they catalyse the interests, needs, and aspirations of both parties through delivering findings that are not only academically sound and valued, but that also offer practical application and advancement. In thinking about coaching research questions, there are five “W’s” that may inform our thinking about coaching research: who? what? where? when? why?

Coaching Research: Who? When we conduct coaching research, who are we conducting it with, and who are we conducting it for? Are these the best populations to be working with and to be working for? We may be working with coaching clients to explore their experiences and perceptions of coaching, to find out what works for them and why (e.g., Luthans & Peterson, 2003; Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman, 1997). We may be working with coaches to explore the factors that are believed to underpin coaching excellence (e.g., Linley & Harrington, 2005), or to explore different aspects of coaches’ practices and perspectives (Grant & Zackon, 2004; Spence, Cavanagh, & Grant, 2006; Whybrow & Palmer, 2006). Or we may be working with both coaches and clients to explore issues of coach-client match and their impact on coaching outcomes (Scoular & Linley, 2006). In any of these situations, the question we should always be asking ourselves is whether this is the right research question to be asking. What would be lost if we simply did not conduct this research? If the answer comes back ominously clear, ‘Not much at all’, then it may well be time to revisit the question.

Coaching Research: What? The question of what to research in coaching is perhaps one of the most fundamental. Very often the “what” research is focused on the coaching process: What coaching approach works best? For example, Green, Oades, and Grant (2006) have demonstrated the

efficacy of cognitive-behavioural solution-focused life coaching on raising goal striving, hope, and well-being in coaching clients. Foster and Lendl (1996) reported the eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) was effective in helping participants to desensitise and upsetting event that was impairing their performance. Gyllensten and Palmer (2006) found that coaching was effective in helping clients to manage and reduce workplace stress, and also served to increase self-confidence. These studies are indicative of the breadth of coaching research that is beginning, and reflect just how many open questions there are. But in thinking about the process of coaching, and considering possible “common factors” in the coaching process, it may be that, the differences between them notwithstanding, coaching could learn a lot from the therapy literature (e.g., Hubble & Miller, 2004; Wampold, 2001), at least from the perspective of using this as a basis from which to construct critical coaching research questions that will help the field move forward.

Coaching Research: Where? The question of where we conduct coaching research is largely shaped by the nature of the questions we are asking. Survey designs may now be most effectively delivered via Internet protocols (e.g., Whybrow & Palmer, 2006), concerns about the fidelity of Internet data collection notwithstanding (these have now been largely addressed; Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). Experimental designs where different coach or coachee variables are manipulated require specially designed coaching sessions and contexts that necessitate considerable organisation and management (e.g., Scoular & Linley, 2006). Coaching “in situ” can lend itself to the research process through the observation, recording, and reporting of the coaching sessions (e.g., Peterson, 1996). All of these different locations for coaching research lend themselves well to different coaching research questions. As ever, the issue is to ensure that the approach chosen is the best way of answering the research question we have selected.

Coaching Research: When? The issue of when to conduct coaching research really strikes at the heart of research design. Coaching is fundamentally a human change process, and as such, it is imperative that we understand it longitudinally, with measurements pre- and post-intervention, wherever possible continuing over time. Cross-sectional analyses are suitable for the pragmatic identification of associations between different factors that can then be used to inform the more resource-intensive design and delivery of longitudinal research, but they can never speak to the core issues of process and causation, issues that lie at the very heart of coaching. Coaching is fundamentally about change, and as such, coaching research must be designed to document and explain the change processes involved. This requires longitudinal research designs that may begin to allow us to test the sustainability of effects, and to establish possible “dose-effect curves,” to borrow a therapy term (Howard, Kopte, Krause, & Orlinsky, 1986), that may indicate the most optimal deployment of coaching interventions and resources.

Coaching Research: Why? Yet the question that underpins all questions of who, what, where, and when is surely the question of why? Why do we conduct coaching research? To what ends? This takes us full circle to where we began, and our considerations of the fundamental question of “What is the question? Never mind the answers, is this the right question to be asking in the first place?” At this point in time, there are three coaching research questions that I see as the most pressing. First, does coaching work? Second, assuming a positive answer to the former, how does coaching work? And third, following from this, which coaching approaches work best, when, and with whom?

In thinking about whether or not coaching works, we first of all need to establish if this is indeed the right question to be asking (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006). When we ask, “does coaching work?” from a business perspective, the question is really “what is the return on investment?” But as Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006) argue, before we can assess whether or not coaching “works” we must first establish how the coaching is being used, whether it is being used within a coherent framework of practice as coaching, and only then whether it is perceived or quantified as being effective. These are fundamental questions, but ones often missed in the rush to quantify the coaching ROI and hence justify our fees to the purchasers of coaching.

In thinking about how coaching works, we are really trying to identify the active ingredients of the process that engender a successful outcome, so that we can do more of those and less of the things we do not need to do, in the quest for ever greater efficiency and efficacy. These are the same questions that tormented the psychotherapy outcome literature for decades, but around which there is now emerging consensus (Hubble & Miller, 2004; Wampold, 2001). The client and the client's resources are critical to a successful outcome, with relationship factors following thereafter. Practitioner expertise, including models and techniques, are a distant third place. What can coaching learn from this? First, it is highly likely that the role of the client, their resources and their strengths, are critical to a successful coaching outcome. This then suggests that a focus on coaching approaches that harness the client's inner strengths and resources are likely to be most effective (Joseph, 2006; Linley & Harrington, 2006). Second, the coaching relationship is likely to be an important predictor of coaching outcomes, and research may seek to establish if the same coaching alliance factors are predictive of coaching outcomes as the therapeutic alliance factors are predictive of therapeutic outcomes (Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000). Third, there is a need to identify what coaching can learn from therapy research and where it differs, and hence where coaching requires its own specific inquiries and answers. This leads us to the third most pressing coaching research question.

If we are safe in the assumption that coaching works, and we have also identified something of how it works, the next major question inevitably becomes which coaching approaches are most effective, when, and for whom? The answers to these questions will no doubt be informed by findings from the previous questions, but they still speak to the fundamental issue of how we should best coach. However, this is not simply an empirical question. The choice of our models and techniques is likely much more a reflection of our personal preferences, in conjunction with the training opportunities available to us, as it is a reflection of our consideration of the empirical evidence in support of the different modalities. This is not least because when we set out to train, we are likely unaware of this evidence, and by the time we are, we have already embarked on a particular path. But our choice of coaching model is not an idle one, for it influences not only how we work with our clients, and to a small extent the outcomes we may achieve, but it also has a bearing on how we experience our work as coaches on a personal level. Again drawing from the therapy literature, there is ample evidence of the negative effects of therapy work on therapists, and a growing body of research that testifies to the potential positive outcomes of this work (e.g., Linley & Joseph, in press), but there is nothing, to my knowledge, that speaks to these issues in relation to coaches. This is yet another facet of this third research question. Which approaches are most effective – both for their effects on the client, but also for their effects on the coach?

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to map out some of the competing research drivers for coaching research, from both academic and practitioner perspectives. Using these research drivers as a basis, I then went on to identify five broad questions that inform coaching research: Who, what, where, when, and why? By far the most important of these questions is "Why?" Why do we conduct coaching research? To what ends? No matter what the research in which we engage ourselves, I propose that there is one question that we should always ask before any other: "Is this a good question to be asking in the first place?" If we can respond to this question honestly in a way that assures us that our time and resources will not be wasted in addressing it, then we will be doing a considerable service to both ourselves and the coaching fraternity. The precious time and limited resources that we have as coaching researchers make it even more incumbent upon us to ask the right research questions in the first place. My hope is that this article has prompted coaching researchers to ask more of the right questions, and by doing so to drive forward our understanding of coaching.

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