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Academic Paper

The Adequacy of Competency Frameworks for Coaching Academic Deans: A Critical Review

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Abstract

This paper explores the adequacy of existing coaching competency frameworks to address the complexities of coaching academic deans. The unit of analysis of this interpretative and evaluative case study is the coaching practice based on the core competencies as prescribed by ICF and EMCC. It uses five sources of evidence that converge to address the research question. The paper concludes that an evidence-based practice that integrates scientific knowledge with expertise of practitioners may be a more effective approach to coaching at the executive level such as Deans. A competent coach is not enough to generate inspired insights for complex coaching of Deans. A deeper understanding of the purpose, relevant learning theories and context are sufficient conditions for effective coaching engagements.

Keywords

coaching, competency frameworks, adequacy, complexity, academic deans

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Introduction

This paper aims to conduct a critical review of the competency frameworks prescribed by two coaching professional bodies: ICF and EMCC. It is derived from the findings and conclusions of the research by Nadeem and Garvey (2020) which resulted in a learning-informed framework that is coachee-centered and context relevant.

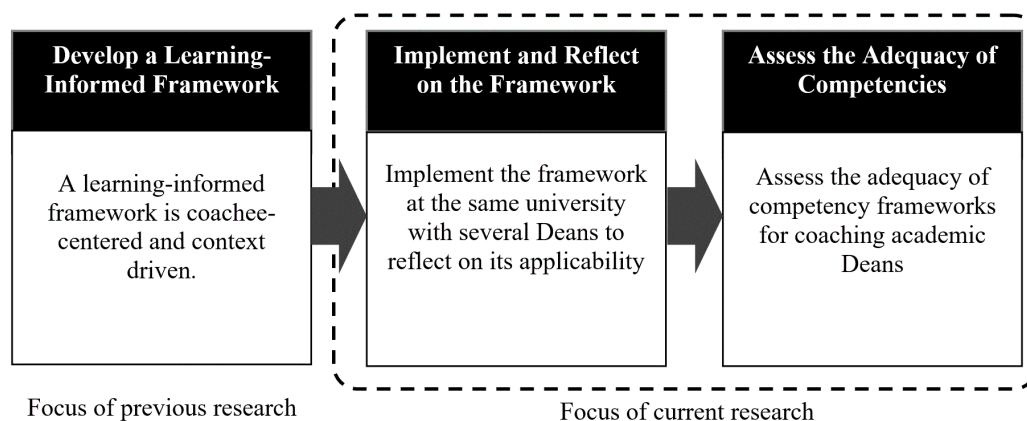
According to Nadeem and Garvey (2020), coaching of academic Deans is a complex process and their learning is positively influenced by coachee-specific contextual variables such as disciplinary background, learning preferences, calm and safe reflective space and the enablement of critical thinking. Due to their middle management role (Buller, 2007), and like other middle managers that play a similar and crucial role in any organization (Zhang et al. 2008; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011 &

Wolverton and Wolverton, 1999), academic Deans are frequently exposed to challenges such as goal setting, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, political knowledge, professional judgement, tension-filled situations, accumulated experiences, problem-solving, and need for self-actualization and congruence with their values. The main difference here between other middle managers in other organizational settings and Deans is that often, in other organizational settings there is investment in the development of middle management. In universities, this is less common (Aasen and Stensaker, 2007 & Sarros et al 1998), argue that the role is the least researched and most misunderstood role in the higher education enterprise. In this context, Winters & Latham (1996) argue that when a task is straight-forward, specific goal setting often leads to improved performance. However, when the task involves complexities, Seijts et al (2004) argue that 'learning goals' are more relevant and it is through these that there is a shift away from specific task outcomes and towards the 'discovery of task-relevant strategies or procedures' (p.229). The role of the context is specifically relevant here. According to Stokes et al. (2020), context plays an agentic role, for example either a controlling or a facilitating influence in the learning process of coachees. The coach needs to be aware of the above coachee-specific variables and the context.

This raises a question about the adequacy of the coach training programmes accredited by professional bodies such as International Coach Federation (ICF) and European Council of Mentoring and Coaching (EMCC). It has been observed that both the ICF and the EMCC keep updating their competency frameworks, which are generic and largely practitioner based and do not reflect specific context needs (Garvey et al. 2018).

As shown in Figure 1, the focus of this study is to implement and reflect on the application of this framework (heuristic) and subsequently assess the adequacy of the competencies established by ICF and EMCC. It underscores the importance of integrating the theoretical knowledge and professional practice of organizational coaching in order to improve the leadership coaching for academic leaders. It directly relates to the issue of leadership development of academic Deans in universities. These Deans are at the centre of the academic decision-making process and, potentially at least, add value to the vision and outcomes of learning and research. This study is therefore expected to contribute to the development of leaders as well as the institution. Specifically, it supports a customized and sophisticated coaching framework that is grounded in the learning experiences of the academic Deans.

Figure 1: The development process of the research question



This paper explores the adequacy of the current coaching competency frameworks to address the complex task of coaching academic Deans. Specifically, it seeks to address the following questions:

- Are the current competency frameworks evidence-based?
- Do these frameworks address the significance of context and conditions?

- Do these competency frameworks address complexity in the coaching process?
- Are current competency frameworks coachee-centred or coach-centred?

Literature Review

The literature review is in four domains: leadership development and coaching academic deans, the origins of coaching competency frameworks, issues related to coaching competency and contexts of coaching and learning. The advanced literature search employed the following databases: SmartSearch, ProQuest ABI/Inform, EBSCO, ERIC, Elsevier Scopus, Springer Link and Google Scholar.

Leadership Development and Coaching Academic Deans

Leadership development is about expanding the overall capacity of organizational leaders to play their roles effectively (McCauley et al. 1998). According to Black (2015), leaders in higher education need a combination of leadership and management competencies in order to deal with their strategic and operational challenges. Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) recommend a portfolio of collaborative leadership programmes that cut across conceptual, operational and strategic dimensions of leadership education. Spendlove (2007) argues that academic credibility and experience of university life play crucial roles in the success of a leader in a university. He also claims that university leadership is fundamentally different due to the inherent organizational complexity, caused by conflicting interests of various stakeholders, and therefore requires additional competencies. Drew (2010) supports the argument of Spendlove (2007) and suggests the development of customized individual leader-centered development plans since the challenge of each leader is different from the other. Since each academic Dean in a university may have specific development needs (like other middle leaders, coaching can support individual leadership development plans (Barner and Higgins (2007) because leadership coaching is a one-on-one partnership that enhances the self-efficacy and performance of a coachee and consequently improves effectiveness of their organization (Baron and Morin, 2009; Harper, 2012). According to Nadeem and Garvey (2020), coaching of academic Deans is a complex process and their learning is positively influenced by coachee-specific variables such as disciplinary background, learning preferences, a calm and safe reflective space and enablement of critical thinking. In their exploration of the lived learning experiences of academic Deans, Nadeem and Garvey (2020) noted a clear significance of Deans' learning preferences and biases.

The Origins of Competency Frameworks in Coaching

Arguably at least, the competencies movement in coaching originated from the well-known academic, Warren Bennis, who is quoted in Morris & Tarpley (2000) as saying in relation to coaching, 'I'm concerned about unlicensed people doing this.' This article was probably the first to raise concerns about standards in coaching practice and used the term 'wild west of coaching' to describe the then current state. The term 'Wild West' gathered momentum within the coaching world on both sides of the Atlantic and in 2004, Sherman and Freas published an article in the Harvard Business Review called 'The Wild West of Executive Coaching'. Given the importance often given to The Harvard Business Review, 'the Wild West' concept took hold and there followed calls for professionalization of coaching and this led to standards, based on competencies being created by the then burgeoning numbers of self-styled professional bodies (Garvey, 2011). Given the 'taming of the wild west discourse' which followed, these competencies were also driven by the need for economic competitiveness among the professional bodies as well as market differentiation needs. The standards and competencies were rapidly adopted in businesses by Human Resources (HR) functions (Horton, 2000). This may have been due to organizations subscribing to the managerial discourse (Western, 2017), which is embedded within competency frameworks, needing something to justify their purchasing decisions in executive coaching.

Whilst there are many clear advantages to competence frameworks, for example:

- They offer some regulation of the 'Wild West' concept;
- Being grounded in practice, rather than research, they provide insight into 'what practitioners do';
- They provide a framework for comparison and a template for training;
- Validation comes from practice and therefore there is some applied legitimacy (See Garvey et al. 2018);

There are also many disadvantages. Garvey et al. (2018) argue that one problem with a competence framework is that it tends to simplify a complex task by reducing it to short descriptive statements. They argue that 'simplification of the complex' is a core behaviour within a managerialist discourse (Western, 2017). Bachkirova and Lawton Smith (2015) support this idea and suggest that a competency based coaching framework reduces the complexity of the coaching process to merely a task rather than involving critical thinking. Hawkins (2008) goes further suggesting that competencies are self-serving for professional bodies.

Barnett, (1994) argues that competency frameworks focus on predictability –

“The notion of competencies is concerned with predictable behaviours in predictable situations” (Barnett, 1994 p.73).

Garvey (2011) and Ferrar (2004) also identify this issue in coaching and suggest that a competency framework treats learning as a linear system and Ferrar (2004) adds that coaching competency frameworks are more relevant as ethical guidelines and promoting professional behaviors at principle levels in the coaching industry.

Cavanagh and Lane (2012) challenge the assumption held within the competency framework ideology that coaching is a linear function (see also Garvey et al. 2018). They believe that it is the space between linear and chaotic that is called “edge of chaos” which creates possibilities for emergent creativity.

Barnett (1994) argues that the drive to competency frameworks is a societal issue. He states:

“Society is more rational; but it is a rationality of a limited kind.’ ‘Limited rationality’ is a rational pragmatism devoid of ethical or environmental justification.” (p. 37).

He goes on to say that this is driving out “genuinely interactive and collaborative forms of reasoning” (p. 37). We argue that coaching can, potentially at least, facilitate a ‘collaborative form of reasoning’.

Linley (2006) predicted that the demand for evidence-based coaching is expected to grow as more and more purchasers of coaching services are asking for but do competencies provide the evidence base?

Griffith and Campbell (2008) say that competency frameworks are not evidence based because these are not empirically tested. If this is the case, coaching can never become a recognized profession because professions are based, in part, on evidence-based activities and procedures.

So, what is evidence-based coaching? Grant (2016) offers that it is:

“intelligent and conscious use of relevant and best current knowledge integrated with professional practitioner expertise in making decisions about how to deliver coaching to coaching clients and in designing and delivering coach training programs”.

It is notable that often coaching research recognizes the contribution and importance of practitioner expertise (Garvey et al. 2018). Stober et al (2006) also support Grant's (2016) argument that evidence-based practice integrates scientific knowledge, practitioner's expertise and they add the coachee's context. They describe this as a scientist-practitioner coaching model.

Stober et al. (2006) emphasize the:

“need to take into account an array of variables that make up the individual context of each client” (Stober et al. 2006).

An understanding of context requires a broader understanding of not just the 'individual context', for example, age, gender orientations, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, personality factors, but also an understanding of both the internal and external relational network that the coachee is part of, the organization and external operating environment and culture (Hofstede, 2003). This requires the Coach to apply a systemic approach (Whittington, 2020) that may not be reflected in a simplified competency framework.

This integrative, rather than simplified, approach may not only provide a comprehensive and practical framework for coaching but also serve as basis for an evaluation of any competency frameworks.

Contexts of Coaching and Learning

According to Stokes et al. (2020), it is the context that plays an agentic role in the learning process of coachees and mentees and helps in distinguishing it as either coaching or mentoring or a mix of both of these help orientations. The coach needs to be aware of the above coachee-specific variables and the context. Cox (2013) also highlights the importance of contextual knowledge in coaching and mentoring and calls for the recognition of context by coaching and mentoring educators to further enhance professional practice and standards.

According to Griffith and Campbell (2008), the process of reflection generates learning and insights in coaching. In most organizations, learning environments are complex due to the inherent business processes and interaction among people. Garvey (2017) argues that competency-based coach/mentor training does not develop reflection and reflexivity, which are essential abilities within the complex dynamics of coaching. This is an important issue and it is associated with a key idea in learning, which is 'practical judgement' (Harrison & Smith, 2001) or 'reflective skills learning' (Jarvis, 1992; Schön, 1983). The concept of practical judgement is based on Aristotle's ideas on learning, which remain relevant today, particularly in relation to coaching. Aristotle suggested that learning was comprised of three elements:

- Episteme, which emphasises scientific theories and analysis - favoured in psychology;
- Techne, which is associated with skills and techniques – favoured in a managerialist discourse;
- Phronesis, which is practical wisdom and relates to behaving ethically within a context of practice and experience (Flyvbjerg, 2001) - largely absent from the institutional professional discourse.

Phronesis is about 'noticing' within a specific context. It involves flexibility of thought, sensitivity to the context, reflective analysis based on a critical interpretation of the situation and the exercise of a personal judgement related to action. In this sense, it moves away from the idea of compliance to a competency framework and goes into the realms of what is appropriate for a given situation. Phronesis is concerned with values, emotions and interests, as a precursor for action (Flyvbjerg, 2001 & Hemmestad et al., 2010).

Techne and episteme frameworks are associated with prescribed learning–competency frameworks. Phronesis is about ‘action’ or thought in the moment, which is often what happens in a coaching situation. Further, whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in a debate about the similarities and difference between coaching and mentoring, in recent times Stelter (2019) argues for an integrated model of coaching and mentoring by suggesting the coach as a ‘facilitator of dialogue’. In practice, this means that a coach needs to flex their practice to suit the needs of the coachee within any specific context. This, in itself, adds a layer of complexity into coaching which may not be covered by a competency approach. According to Garvey and Alred (2001), “the environments in which we work are becoming more complex and mentoring is also complex”. Both coaching and mentoring could help coachees/mentees deal with such complex work environments that apparently lack strict rules and predictable outcomes in the way a competence framework assumes.

Lane and Corrie (2006) provide a useful framework for client case formulation by developing an appropriate approach to meet client needs. This focuses on developing clarity of ‘Purpose’ based on client needs, the ‘Perspectives’ that you and the client bring which include values, beliefs and knowledge, the range of personal, interpersonal and systemic models and underpinning philosophies and limits of competence. Once the purpose and perspectives that underpin it have been defined then it is possible to structure a ‘Process’ for the work that you and your client intend to undertake.

In applying the ‘Purpose, Perspective, Process’ approach, due consideration is given to the Coach’s ability to formulate and meet different client purposes, the perspectives that the Coach brings that are relevant to the client’s needs and the Coach’s skill in developing a process for the work that the Coach and Coachee intend to undertake.

Stokes (2015), in his PhD thesis (British Library EThOS: The skilled coachee: an alternative discourse on coach, (bl.uk)), argues that much of the literature on coaching focusses on the skills of the coach but the coachee is just as skilled. There is evidence in the literature to support versions of this idea. For example, Joseph (2006) argues that coaching approaches that harness the coachees’ inner strengths and resources may produce better results and if this is the case, a greater focus on understanding the coachee and his/her inner resources rather than coaching models is required. Linley (2006) agrees with the above notion:

“Practitioner’s expertise, including models and techniques, are distant third place” (Linley, 2006, p. 5).

Flaherty, (1999) points out that there is little work done on the coachee’s perspective. Further, according to Stelter (2019), there is a need to increase our understanding of coachee experiences in a coaching process. Passmore (2010) asserted that only a few studies have considered the coachee’s behaviours and preferences in learning and this is an omission. Carter et al. (2014) argue for a shared responsibility on the coachee for the success of the coaching process whereas Sztucinski (2001) proposed that coachee ownership of the coaching process is critical to a positive coaching process.

However, the question of whether a competency approach provides this, needs investigating.

The Research Question

This research question is based on a proposition that coaching academic Deans is a complex and context driven process which may or may not be addressed adequately by a competency framework. The research question for this study is therefore:

Do existing coaching competency frameworks adequately address the complex task of coaching academic Deans?

Research Method

The context of this research comprises a higher education organization where the academic Deans are performing the complex role of middle management, and they would like to improve the effectiveness of their leadership. This qualitative research is based on a case study method.

According to Yin (2009), the case study research design must have a research question, its propositions, its unit of analysis, a determination of how data are linked to the propositions and criteria to interpret the findings. The unit of analysis of this interpretative and evaluative case study is coaching practices based on the core competencies as defined by two professional bodies with the largest membership: ICF and EMCC.

Case study is a flexible methodology, which can accommodate a variety of research designs, data analysis methods and epistemologies (Simons, 2009). It also allows for the analysis of single phenomena within its own context (Kyburz-Graber, 2004). Many researchers, for example Wortruba (2016), Cull (2006) and Hanna (2004) have studied coaching and mentoring by using case study research method.

In line with Yin (2009), this research uses five sources of evidence that converge to address the research question. Data sources for the research include the competency frameworks by ICF and EMCC, a heuristic from the recent study (Nadeem and Garvey, 2020), an interview with the coach who implemented this heuristic model using some assessments and a coachees' satisfaction survey. According to Zucker (2009), a case study uses scientific credentials as its evidence base for professional application and this research investigates the adequacy of the coaching frameworks for academic Deans in-depth in light of the scientific base of evidence of various learning theories and their applications in a real-life coaching case.

This research is interpretive and evaluative. Its approach is flexible and it captures multiple perspectives as well as being descriptive and context-sensitive (Yilmaz, 2013). The researchers are responsible for the understanding and interpretation of the phenomena under review. Therefore, it is not intended to generalise or identify a cause and effect relationship (Carson et al., 2001).

The Case: The Coaching Competency Frameworks

The ICF Core Competency Model

According to an ICF statement (2020), after a rigorous job analysis process involving more than 1,300 coaches over 24 months, the federation has developed and validated a new core competency model that will replace the current one from 2021. "While the empirical data we collected through the job analysis process validated that much of the original ICF Core Competency model remains relevant and reflected in current coaching practice, this new competency model offers a simpler, more streamlined structure and integrates consistent, clear language" (ICF, 2020). According to the ICF, the 1,300 coaches are all qualified and represent styles and experience levels. It includes members and non-members from various disciplines and training backgrounds.

The core competency model issued by ICF in October 2019 has four domains and eight competencies (ICF, 2020). The four domains include foundation, co-creating the relations,

communication effectively and cultivating learning and growth. The various competencies within these four domains are listed below.

A. Foundation

- Demonstrates ethical practice
- Embodies a coaching mindset

B. Co-Creating the Relationship

- Establishes and maintains agreements
- Cultivates trust and safety
- Maintains presence

C. Communicating Effectively

- Listens actively
- Evokes awareness

D. Cultivation Learning and Growth

- Facilitates client growth

EMCC Competence Framework

The EMCC combine coaching and mentoring and have a separate competency framework for coach supervision (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006). The purpose of EMCC coaching and mentoring competence framework is to evaluate the behaviours and categorise the levels of skill of a mentor or coach (EMCC, 2020). Unlike the ICF, which does attempt to justify the 'research-base' of their competency framework, the EMCC do not appear to explain or justify the evidence for their competency framework on their website.

EMCC 'competence framework' has eight mentoring and coaching competence categories as follows:

I. Understanding Self

Demonstrates awareness of own values, beliefs and behaviours; recognises how these affect their practice and uses this self-awareness to manage their effectiveness in meeting the client's, and where relevant, the sponsor's objectives

II. Commitment to Self-Development

Explore and improve the standard of their practice and maintain the reputation of the profession

III. Managing the Contract

Establishes and maintains the expectations and boundaries of the mentoring/coaching contract with the client and, where appropriate, with sponsors

IV. Building the Relationship

Skillfully builds and maintains an effective relationship with the client, and where appropriate, with the sponsor

V. Enabling Insight and Learning

Works with the client and sponsor to bring about insight and learning

VI. Outcome and Action Orientation

Demonstrates approach and uses the skills in supporting the client to make desired changes

VII. Use of Models and Techniques

Applies models and tools, techniques and ideas beyond the core communication skills in order to bring about insight and learning

VIII. Evaluation

Gathers information on the effectiveness of own practice and contributes to establishing a culture of evaluation of outcomes

Research Participants

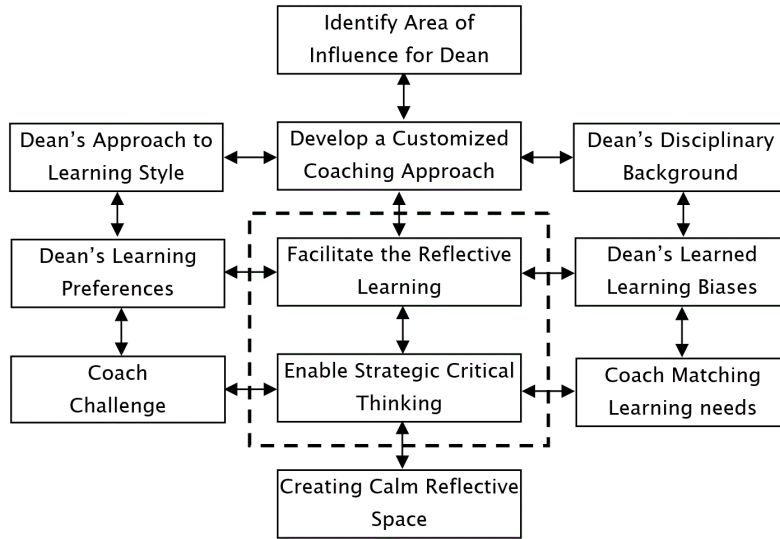
The participants were purposively sampled. Purposive sampling provides relevant and rich information which is important in qualitative research as the participants are selected because they are likely to be best placed to know about the phenomena under investigation (Patton, 2002). According to Obwuegbuzie and Leech (2007), the objective of purposive sampling is not to generalize but obtain insight into a phenomenon. The participants of this study are the coach and the coachees who are academic or college Deans in the same university. The same five Deans participated in the initial Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis study (see Nadeem and Garvey, 2020), which produced the coaching heuristic. The research participants therefore provide a strong link between the two studies and confirmation of some results from the initial study. The coach coached/mentored the same academic Deans thus providing relevant data from the same sample to confirm their lived learning experiences and preferences.

The Learning Informed Heuristic

The initial study provided a heuristic framework as presented in Figure 2, as an alternative to the basic competency framework and acts more as a decision-making process to enable the coach to develop a dyadic dialogue (Stelter, 2019). This is more like a hybrid between mentoring and coaching or a 'repertoire' approach (Garvey et al. 2018). According to Nadeem and Garvey (2020), the main elements of the heuristic framework include:

- Working from an understanding of what a Dean may feel they can influence and what they think they can directly control in their context.
- Being aware of and adjusting the coaching approach to suit the learning style of the Dean.
- Being aware that certain disciplines prefer the technical over the social and interpersonal.
- Being prepared to 'work in the moment' and adjust.
- Being aware that coaching is primarily a dialectic process and that Deans may prefer the opportunity to visualize through diagrams, visualization techniques or practical examples.
- Being aware that the technical mindset may prefer the coach to use tools such as questionnaires, 360, numerical data and diagrams in order to provide 'objective data'.
- Being aware of the use of and the difference between specific goals and learning goals and enabling the Dean to develop strategic critical thinking.
- Helping to create a calm reflective space to enable the Dean to relax and reflect.

Figure 2: A learning informed heuristic



Interview of the Coach

The main purpose of this interview was to obtain insight into the learning experiences of academic Deans and on the efficacy of the competency frameworks from the coach's perspective. The interview was a semi-structured, face-to-face interview with supplementary probing questions and prompts. It was transcribed verbatim to produce MS Word documents for analysis.

The coach worked with the Deans over several months. He had many years of coaching experience, particularly in Higher Education. He is an EMCC member and was also a Dean himself.

The audio recording was listened to twice to improve the accuracy of the transcripts as well as to help understand the responses of the participant. The transcription were read three times to fully comprehend the content, language used and the context. An example of this step is seen in Table 1

Table 1: An extract from interviews with researcher's comments.

Original transcript (partial)	Exploratory Comments
<p><i>Researcher:</i> What is the role of a college dean, in your view? <i>Coach:</i> "In my view, I think it's a pretty complex role. Because in many ways there are expectations on a dean in terms of leadership and decision making and I think there is a challenge with being an academic dean in terms of the sheer numbers of people that you need to communicate with and relate to."</p>	Dean's role is complex due to inherent conflicting demands and leadership.
<p><i>Researcher:</i> How much of their disciplinary backgrounds influences their learning? <i>Coach:</i> "So a lot of them think in cause and effect terms. I think because the majority of them are kind of from scientific engineering disciplines."</p>	Deans' learning is influenced by their respective disciplinary background.

Following this step, the comments and notes were developed into emerging themes and then major themes. These emerged as follows:

- Dean's role is complex due to inherent conflicting demands and leadership
- Deans' personal and professional challenges includes time management, lack of autonomy, high expectations and multi stakeholders' satisfaction
- Deans' enjoy teaching and research activities and supporting others' growth
- Deans' learning is influenced by their respective disciplinary background
- Deans' prefer to set learning goals rather than specific goals

- Deans' prefer critical thinking and reflective learning
- Deans' appreciate evidence-based learning and decision-making
- Deans' deal with cultural issues such as 'power distance'
- Coaching frameworks limit a coach's ability to become coachee-centric
- Coach education [not training] integrates theory and practice, supports reflective learning
- Understanding of coachee's context is critical for effectiveness of coaching
- Trust is built through competence and empathy. Understanding of coachee's learning preferences and biases improve coachee's perception of competence of the coach.
- Coaches who are trained on specific framework/model find it hard to hold broader and reflective conversation centered on the learning needs of the coachee.

Coachees' Satisfaction Survey

At the conclusion of the coaching engagement, a Kirkpatrick (1959) level one survey was conducted to measure the satisfaction level of the coachees. Although we acknowledge the limitations of satisfaction surveys as a tool for assessing satisfaction rather than level of learning, insight generation or behavioural change, it does provide some helpful data. However, it is also necessary to be mindful that supportive challenge in coaching may not feel very satisfying but may generate much learning and this can be reflected in a level one evaluation.

Identification of Themes

At this stage of data analysis, commonalities and connections between emerging themes were grouped based on their similarities. This involved clustering emerging (subordinate) themes into super-ordinate themes as show in Table 2. Some weak themes were discarded during the clustering exercise.

Table 2: Clustering of themes

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Evidence-based coaching frameworks are more effective for Deans.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deans prefer evidence based decision-making • Knowledge leads to reflective learning • Combination of knowledge and skills is more effective. • The frameworks lack a strong basis of theoretical foundation • Academic Deans appreciate scientific knowledge based coaching
Context and conditions play pivotal role in coaching of Deans.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Context play agentic role • Organizational systems impact their emotions and health • Cultural nuances influence the learning and coaching outcomes • Deans learn more and quickly when relaxed • The frameworks are not flexible to specific context and conditions
Coaching process for Deans is complex.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deans' role is complex • Deals with conflicts due to demands and values • High expectations for quality and performance • Unstructured and ambiguous situations • The frameworks are too simple to address complexities of a coaching process
Deans appreciate coachee-centered approach.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning is influenced by individual disciplinary backgrounds of coachees • Coachees have learning biases • Coachees may prefer directive approach for solving problems • The frameworks may limit a coach to accommodate individual needs of coachees

The following section critically discusses the coaching competency frameworks with regard to the literature, data collection and the interview with the coach. It also offers a critical review of the competency-based coach training as preparation for coaching Deans.

Findings and Discussion

Organizations, including universities, engage coaches for leadership development and supporting executives to resolve their personal and professional issues. The professional services offered by coaches go through strict scrutiny and matching of coaches who are assigned to the leaders. In most organizations, the criteria used to assess the coach's suitability for the job includes his/her credentials and coaching experience. While the coach's experience may be measured through numbers of coaching hours, the credentialing is left to the professional bodies such as ICF and EMCC. These professional bodies have prescribed competency levels for junior, middle and senior levels of coaches depending upon their proficiency to demonstrate the skills and required hours of paid as well as pro bono coaching. Such credentialing standards do not require any minimum education of a coach. As long as you can demonstrate the prescribed level of a pre-defined competencies through a series of questions, you are a qualified coach. There is an abundance of coach training programmes available and these tend to focus on skills development using competency frameworks. Such a competency-based approach of training and assessing professional coaches is an oversimplification (Garvey et al. 2018; Bachkirova and Lawton Smith, 2015) of the complex process of coaching and therefore deserves a discussion on those themes one by one with inputs from various sources of evidence including the literature, the initial research, the interview with the coach, the competency frameworks and the coachees' satisfaction survey.

The next section takes our original four research questions and discusses them in relation to the evidence and the literature.

Are competency frameworks evidence-based?

According to Bachkirova and Lawton Smith (2015), the issue of accrediting and assessing professional coaches is widening the divide between academia and professional bodies. Academia argues for theory to inform practice whereas professional bodies are solely relying on the opinion of coaches to define coaching and its competencies. According to Griffiths and Campbell (2008), most existing coaching competency frameworks are not evidence-based because they are not empirically tested and they argue that competencies do not reflect the coaching process. Coaches understanding and ability to make the links between the tools and techniques they use and the underpinning theoretical basis would help to bridge this gap but this ability is not listed in the ICF and EMCC competency frameworks.

ICF claims that its new core competency model issued in October 2019 is evidence-based and a 'Gold Standard' because its development involved a large number of qualified coaches.

By the ICF's own figures taken from their Global Survey 2016 (coachfederation.org) there are an estimated 53,300 coaches worldwide and the 1,300 sample represents 2.4% of this population. The business social media site, LinkedIn has 586,292 people listed as coaches on their site and 1,300 represents 0.22% of this population. Further, we do not know the precise demographic make-up of the 1,300 and although it is hinted at but we don't know anything about the contexts and purposes of their coaching. Further, we have no information on how the job analysis was defined to take into account these different variables.

Alternatively, if 'behavioural analysis' were to be used to define what differentiates the best coaches rather than 'job analysis', again, the unknown is how the different contexts and purposes of coaching are taken into account in defining 'best'; what is best in one situation may not be best in another. The ICF also claim that the competency framework is 'validated' but not on what basis.

The last update of EMCC Competence Framework V2 was released in September 2015. Like the ICF, the EMCC relies on coaches and mentors to define their respective set of competence categories. There is lack of clarity in the definition of competencies as the overall framework is a

mix of skills, tasks, behaviours and commitments. Again there are questions about the sample, for example, are these coaches and mentors EMCC members? If they are, there may be a vested interest in supporting competencies because their membership depends upon it!

We are left with three other questions:

1. What is meant by Competencies, which include a mix of skills, commitments behaviours and tasks?
2. Does a 'simpler' structure results in a 'one size fits all' approach that does not adequately reflect the different purposes, types and contexts of coaching?
3. How are the various professional backgrounds of coaches taken into account in such an approach?

We cannot find complete answers to these questions currently.

Defining the competencies in this way places less emphasis on coaching as a process and more on coaching as a set of skills and techniques (Aristotle's *techne* and *episteme*). Griffiths and Campbell (2008) conclude that "...coaching process, rather than coach competency, more adequately defines coaching". Therefore, reducing coaching to a few competencies may not help achieve the desired results.

Stober et al. (2006) and Grant (2016), while recognizing the expertise of a practitioner, argue that evidence-based practice integrates scientific knowledge, practitioner's expertise and coachee's context. Competencies alone are like focusing on Aristotle's *techne* while 'nodding at' *episteme* and ignoring *phronesis* altogether. It is the practical wisdom accessed through reflective analysis of the coachee's values and personal interests that leads to impactful coaching (Flyvberg, 2001). Therefore, a scientist-practitioner coaching model may provide the much-desired practical wisdom for coaches. The ICF claims that their frameworks are evidence-based and yet this claim lacks the necessary detail that such a claim requires.

Do competency frameworks consider context and conditions?

The context of coaching is multifaceted and it is made up of an array of variables (Hofstede, 2003) and requires a systemic approach to coaching (Whittington, 2020). In addition to the context, some conditions, created in the coaching room itself, such as calmness, stress level and being relaxed also matter.

Both the ICF and EMCC appear to be silent on the array of variables within any context. However, the ICF competency 4.1 (Cultivate Trust and Safety) sets a marker for coaches to demonstrate as follows:

"seeks to understand the client within their context which may include their identity, environment, experiences, values and beliefs" (ICF, 2020). The context is clearly important and this includes the coach's ability to work in a systemic way (Whittington, 2020) in helping the coachee make the links between the issues they are facing and the links with what is occurring in the wider network of relationships of which they are part. Moreover, the ICF competencies 7.1 and 7.7 also require coaches to consider the client's experience and adjust the coaching approach in response to client's needs.

The EMCC on the other hand demands coaches to understand their own values and beliefs and how these impact on their own practice (EMCC, 2020).

Contrary to Stober et al. (2006) and Stokes et al. (2020), who argue that context is an essential element in evidence-based practice, neither the ICF nor EMCC give context its due place in their

frameworks. Deeper understanding of the various contexts of practice requires scientific knowledge which can't be acquired merely by learning the competency models and frameworks.

Context is influenced by the culture and subcultures (Cox, 2013). The organizational culture sets the context in which the Deans operate. For instance, the coachee satisfaction survey indicates that Deans who received coaching preferred face-to-face in-person coaching sessions. The coach noticed various national or organizational cultural influences on the coachees. For example, power distance (Hofstede, 2003) was highly visible, as the coach noted:

“But there are cultural nuances which influence them and one of them I think deals with what could be referred to as power distance. There seems to be quite a power distance between people of positional power here and I think that in itself creates a deference to power and I think that's cultural.”

Stokes et al. (2020) suggest that context determines which coaching or mentoring orientation should be used in a session. In some contexts, for example, a performance oriented setting, coaching is more suitable if a coachee is also performance-driven and goal oriented. However, coaching may not be effective if the coachee is using the opportunity for a long-term learning and growth. Here, a different type of conversation maybe necessary and the relationship between the helper and the helped changes to embrace Stelter's (2019) concept of a 'facilitator of dialogue'. This is where Seijts et al.'s. (2004) concept of 'learning goals' rather than specific performance goals (see also, Nadeem and Garvey, 2020) come into play.

Further, the coach highlighted the conditions in which the Deans seem more creative and engaged. The coach consistently observed that Deans think clearly when they are relaxed and calm or not in a hurry.

“I think when they are relaxed they are more open and receptive, they talk more freely, and they engaged in the process better. And sometimes, as I said, some of them take a while to get relaxed and they need to just get all this stuff out of their heads and some of it is just a kind of pouring of stuff and they leap from one thing to the another.”

Nadeem and Garvey (2020) support the above observation by the coach. There is no evidence that both the ICF or the EMCC competencies consider such conditions to stimulate the critical thinking and learning for the Deans.

As an alternative, the coach acknowledges the importance of coaching skills but in explaining the difference between coaching education and coach training stated:

“And so I think that the educational development route does not ignore skills which are important, but it also brings in knowledge and theory, and reading and rigor, and the all-important critical reflection”

The coach here is suggesting that training programmes using competency frameworks are not enough and an educational perspective is needed to help coaches develop their repertoire (Garvey et al. 2018).

Can competency frameworks address complexity?

There are several sources of complexity for Deans which stem from the organizational culture and conflicting demands and expectations. The Coach expressed this as follows:

“In my view, I think it's a pretty complex role because in many ways there are expectations on a Dean in terms of leadership and decision making and I think there is a challenge with being an

academic Dean in terms of the sheer numbers of people that you need to communicate with and relate to. So, there's an issue about reporting to people who are higher up in the hierarchy and trying to work with their expectations and their demands they put on you [the Dean] to do with the overall strategy in the university."

Deans interact with various internal and external stakeholders such as faculty, students, senior management, donors and industry partners. From the coach's interview:

"It's also about understanding the organizational politics in the university and I think each university I ever worked with has its own set of politics. And that's complex. Who knows who and who's powerful whether or not they have the position. Who people take notice of, who's allowed to make jokes and who isn't...."

This type of complexity necessitates a deeper understanding of the context and ability for a coach to quickly adapt to coachees' needs. However, as competency frameworks are based on predictable outcomes (Barnett, 1994) and thus reduce complexity to merely a task (Bachkirova and Lawton Smith, 2015), a coach working in such an environment may need to take on the role of a mentor at times.

Interestingly, the EMCC does not distinguish between coaching and mentoring. However, neither the ICF nor the EMCC frameworks address complexity that may form learning biases or varied disciplinary backgrounds of Deans or indeed, any coachees.

The ICF competencies related to 'Listens Actively' does require coaches to consider the clients' environment to enhance communication. Similarly, the ICF competencies related to 'Evokes Awareness' demands coaches to demonstrate an ability to explore beyond current thinking and adjust the coaching approach (ICF, 2020). As per the latest Competence Framework of the EMCC, competence category 5 and category 7 focus on 'enabling insight and learning' and 'use of models and techniques'. For example, at master practitioner level, a coach/mentor should be able to support clients effectively with their increasingly complex needs (EMCC, 2020). However, such statements are a simplification of a complex activity and fail to offer further insights as to how this may be developed.

Nadeem and Garvey (2020) argue that Deans have a complex 'in-between' role that can create significant leadership and personal challenges. While coaching offers an opportunity to support Deans to navigate through this complexity, a competent coach cannot be enough. A more flexible and adaptive coach is needed with a repertoire (Garvey et al., 2018) of skills, processes and phronesis.

The coach agrees with the above and asserts that a specific model of coaching is likely to limit a coach and may not be sufficient for Deans. As the coach said:

"The whole spectrum of things that you might encounter with the coachee may not be addressed if you only have one methodology."

The coachees' satisfaction survey supports this view and most coachees agreed that the coaching helped them deal with the complexities of large personal and professional change.

Are competency frameworks coachee-centred?

Most of the coaching research focuses on the coaches (Stokes, 2015; Griffith and Campbell, 2008). There is very little work done to understand the coachee's structure of interpretations (Flaherty, 1999).

In the coach interview, the coach said that each of his coachees' had quite different learning needs in that they were not only biased by their own learnings from the past but also driven by their disciplinary backgrounds. Nadeem and Garvey (2020) agree with observations of the coach and thus recommended a coachee-centred approach that is flexible to accommodate individual learning needs of a Dean.

The ICF coach competencies rely on the trust safety and listening actively to understand a client better which is quite limiting. The coach felt that he had to depend on his deeper knowledge of learning theories and knowledge of coaching repertoires to understand his coachees.

“I mean, you have to develop that wide knowledge of repertoire first before you can strip it back.”

The above observations by the coach and the literature are consistent with the outcomes of the coachees' satisfaction survey. The survey clearly shows that, though all Deans are satisfied with the results of the coaching engagement, they defined their respective successes quite differently. It is interesting to note that the above successes were not defined in advance as required in competency frameworks but rather emerged during the process over time.

The coach's interview highlighted that the Deans in this study preferred evidence-based decision-making. Given this preference, a learning challenge or goal for them might be to learn to deal with situations where there is no clear evidence base, an emerging evidence base or dealing with relational issues or situations of high uncertainty or unpredictability.

The coach said:

“they will often want evidence; they will often want theory behind it in order to see the reasonable thing to do. I have also found that this might relate to decision making as much as anything, some of them like to have tools providing them with some kind of questionnaire that generates a sort of data”

As found by Nadeem and Garvey (2020), Deans in this study, appreciate scientific knowledge due to their learning biases and disciplinary backgrounds. The coach supports this notion that knowledge leads to reflective learning.

The coachee's satisfaction survey showed that Deans appreciated the strategic and critical thinking developed in their coaching as a process of new learning for them. The new learning is also related to trust building because the more they learn, the more they trusted the coach.

The EMCC has a competence category 'enabling insight and learning' that requires coaches/mentors (who are at master practitioner level) to adapt their approach in the moment while keeping focus on outcomes. However, these competencies do not require that a coach needs to have scientific knowledge including that of learning theories that underpin the learning processes of coachees.

While the ICF competencies underscore the value of partnering with clients to create a safe and supportive environment that cultivates trust and safety and another ICF competency emphasizes 'evoking awareness' and learning by using tools and techniques (which Linley, 2006 reminds us are a poor third place), the level of coachee-centeredness required to achieve the understanding and flexibility to adapt by the coach is beyond tools and techniques. It is an example of phronesis in action. Learning is a non-linear process (Garvey, 2011 and Ferrar, 2004) and a coach needs to honour the coachee's learning journey. The ICF and EMCC have little to say on this issue.

Griffiths and Campbell, (2008) assert that coaching is a process rather than a set of competencies. A coach should therefore follow a process that is valuable to his/her coachees rather than the

demonstration of competencies. Such a process involves critical reflection and a coachee-centered approach. Over a time, coachees develop their own learning muscles and intrinsic ability to hold themselves accountable to outcomes and their values. It is in this spirit that Hawkins (2008) terms the accreditation standards as formulaic and self-serving to members of their professional body instead of coachees. It is also of importance to note that the purpose of coaching is understood. Linley (2006) underscores the critical role of the coach-coachee relationship as a predictor of outcomes which is emphasized by both the ICF and EMCC competency frameworks. However, because coaching is an idiosyncratic intervention (Grant, 2016), each coachee may have his/her own evolutionary process of building the relationship that is conducive to a successful engagement and a competency framework may not allow for this individualism.

Conclusions

This paper provides evidence that the ICF's and the EMCC's competence frameworks are not evidence based in the empirical sense. They are legitimized by practitioners. It also presents evidence and arguments to suggest that these frameworks do not take sufficient account of the contexts in which the coaching is happening and that the coaches educational background or experience is not considered. This implies a need for cultural understanding (Hofstede, 2003; Whittington, 2020) to move to Stelter's (2019) 'integrative' position, we argue that it needs to be.

There is also some evidence and arguments that coaching 'in between' middle leaders is indeed a complex task and that competence frameworks, in essence, attempt to reduce the complexity (Bachkirova and Lawton Smith (2015). This study also finds that competencies tend to create a coach-centric framework for working rather than a coachee-centric approach which focusses on the coachee's learning needs and styles. According to the competency-based approaches, a coach is the one who can demonstrate the prescribed set of competencies in a coaching session regardless of who the coachee is. This approach is challenged by academics (Garvey et al. 2018; Bachkirova and Lawton Smith, 2015) who term it as an oversimplification of a complex process of learning and human change in an idiosyncratic relationship. This case study on professional practice is congruent with the findings of many researchers that indicates that evidence-based practice that integrates scientific knowledge with the expertise of practitioners is a way forward for coaching (Stober et al. 2006; Grant, 2016), especially at the executive level with people such as Deans. Whilst this study focused on academic Deans, it's findings may be relevant in other complex settings where the coaching needs to move away from a performative approach to a coachee-centred learning and development approach.

In view of the above, the paper concludes that a competent or skilled coach may not be enough to generate inspired insights for the complex task of coaching Deans. A deeper understanding of the purpose, relevant learning theories and context are other sufficient conditions for effective coaching engagements.

In essence, we argue that every coachee is unique and a coach should either be able to understand their uniqueness by developing a coachee-centered repertoire that is flexible and adaptable or, not attempt to work with people in complex situations with a simplistic competence based model.

The study has some limitations. It has been conducted in a single university with a single coach and five Deans. Therefore, the findings may not be generalized to other leaders and industries, they may, however, be employed as a basis for further study and therefore they become transferable to other contexts.

This study does go some way to address the question:

Do existing coaching competency frameworks adequately address the complex task of coaching? We argue that, overall, they do not, however, it must also be acknowledged that some progress has been made with the competency frameworks, particularly of the ICF in recent times.

Implications for Practice

This research has identified limitations of the competency-based frameworks for development of professional coaches in two professional bodies as well as coaching managers with significant complexity in their jobs such as academic Deans. There is a need to revisit the competencies-based models in order to consider knowledge based coaching models (Griffiths and Campbell, 2008; Stober et al. 2006 and Grant, 2016). Knowledge based models are expected to have a balanced approach by giving due weight to both the science and the art of coaching practice. The implications for coach development are considerable. There needs to be more programmes which offer a critical perspective (Griffiths and Campbell, 2008) on coach development and the individual learning needs and styles of individual coaches needs to be taken into account within the coachee's specific context. This is where an educational approach to coach development is needed, rather than a training approach, where phronesis has a chance to develop (Flyvbjerg, 2001 & Hemmestad, 2010).

Implications for Research

More research is needed to promote coaching as a process rather than a set of competencies so that it could address the inherent complexities found within the various purposes and contexts of coaching. Learning and complexity theories may provide a solid foundation to further explore the balance between knowledge, skills and practice for development of coaches who are well prepared through an educational rather than a training process to address the complexities of the coaching process.

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