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Exploring the Benefits of a Coach Development Process ... on the Coach

Ruth Leggett, *Northumbria University, UK*
Joanne James, *Northumbria University, UK*

This paper examines the extent to which a coach development programme benefits the coach beyond the boundaries of their coaching interventions. Much coaching research focuses on the impact of coaching on the coachee and the organization. This small research project considers the impact on the coach. Alumni from a higher education coach development programme were invited to share their perspectives on their post programme coaching and organizational experiences via focus groups. Our findings suggest that a learning process that encourages self-awareness, reflexive conversations and opportunities to reflect and consider one's coaching identity, enable coaches to apply their learning across a range of organizational scenarios, beyond their role as an internal coach. Organizational coaches report greater levels of confidence in their generic leadership roles and being perceived differently by others in their organizations, as a result of the coach development process. This study will be of interest to HRD practitioners considering an investment in developing internal coaches and to those involved in designing and delivering coach development programmes as the importance of teaching beyond coaching models and theory is demonstrated from this study. It may also help inform potential coach trainees considering embarking on a coach development programme, as the benefits can permeate all aspects of organizational performance.

Introduction

The emergence of coaching, both as an area of professional practice and the rapid growth of the coaching industry, is widely recognized in the literature (Grant, 2012). At the same time the view that research examining the impact of coaching is also required in order to validate the contribution of coaching to individual and organizational well-being and performance is also shared (Pousa and Mathieu, 2015). Whilst there are studies that evaluate coaching interventions (Pousa and Mathieu, 2015), most consider the outcomes for the coachee and the organization and there is very little focus on the coach (Van Nieuwerburgh and Tong, 2012). Many previous studies of coaching in organizations make a call for a more holistic approach to evaluating the impact of coaching to improve our understanding of whether coaching actually makes a difference to leadership behaviour as well as other individual and organizational outcomes (Grant, 2012). A study by DeMeuse et al. (2009) found that, in terms of identifying the outcomes of coaching, most coaching evaluation methods are based purely on perception of the recipient of coaching as opposed to the full range of positive outcomes possible through coaching. Previous studies that examine the impact of coaching on the coach include Grant (2008), who found that through participating in personal life coaching over a 10-12 week period in parallel with participation in a coach training programme, trainee coaches reported reduced anxiety, increased goal attainment, enhanced cognitive hardiness and higher levels of personal insight. Van Nieuwerburgh and Tong (2012) also found that students involved in coaching others in their educational setting,

reported benefits such as better study skills, increased emotional intelligence and improved communication skills.

There are also very few studies evaluating the impact of coach development programmes; whilst there is recognition that the continued growth of the industry is dependent on the quality of such provision (Grant, 2008). Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) make a call for more to be done to understand whether working as a coach affects leadership competences, resilience or the emotional intelligence of the coach. The CIPD also highlights the need for future research on coaching to understand how coaching contributes to line manager effectiveness (CIPD, 2012) and Gray et al. (2015) affirm the importance of coach training in their study on coach identity. Against this background of current research on coaching, this paper sets out to explore the impact of an HE institution's coach development process on the individual coach. It seeks to answer the following research question: what are the benefits of a coach development process to the coach?

The Northumbria Coach Development Programme

There is some debate in the literature about whether coaching as a practice differs from organizational development and Human Resource Development (Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie, 2009) or whether indeed the skills and practice of coaching are largely similar to those of an effective manager (Ladyshevsky, 2010). It is widely recognized that the practice of coaching overlaps with many other development interventions; Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie (2006) consider whether coaching is in fact core to management effectiveness. This is compounded by the fact that there are many different coaching operating modes from external consultant as coach, internal coach, line manager as coach, and mentor as coach to name a few. The case for a professional identity for coaching is also discussed in the literature (Gray et al., 2015), but to date, there is no one professional association for coaches.

Our rationale was to design and deliver a programme suitable for aspiring coaches that come from a variety of industry sectors (academia, health and a range of other public sector and private sector businesses) and a range of professional backgrounds (HRM/HRD professionals, general managers and independent organizational consultants). The programme is designed to help the trainee coach navigate their way through the theoretical underpinning of coaching, whilst considering how they will integrate coaching into their field of professional practice. The programme does not promote one ideal model of coaching, preferring to offer a range of approaches, tools and techniques; enabling the trainee coach to find their own eclectic approach that fits with their future coach role and context.

The learning and development process

The coach development programme draws on five fundamental developmental processes, reflective practice, experiential and social learning, and developing self-awareness and coach identity. The programme design aims to align learning approaches used on the programme with those that are of relevance in coaching practice; namely experiential learning and transformational learning.

A core component of the programme is the opportunity for participants to engage in coaching practice, recognized by Clutterbuck (2010) as key to a coach development process. The coaching practice sessions make use of Kolb's (2015) experiential learning process and are embedded into the programme design. During practice sessions trainee coaches are encouraged to experiment

with new approaches and techniques and through a structured reflection process, draw conclusions about their use of different coaching methods and think through implications for their future practice. This learning approach is also aligned with coaching itself, as being coached is also an experiential learning process (Cox et al., 2010). In addition, the trainee coach learns from the experience of being coached; thereby developing a deeper awareness and empathy with the coachee's perspective, when working as a coach. The coaching practice sessions also make use of social learning (Bandura, 1971). Reflecting teams learn how to operationalise a range of coaching approaches, through observation and reflection on practice. The trainee coaches can then apply and contextualize these observed techniques and approaches in their own coaching practice, enhancing their 'toolkit' of coaching methods and techniques.

The learning process encourages reflective discourse between the peer observers of the coaching practice, discussing and reflecting on their responses to and perspectives on the coaching conversation they have observed, whilst not making judgements about what was 'right' or 'wrong' about the coaching. This reflective discourse, where judgement is suspended until a new determination can be made, is fundamental to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997) and can lead to clearer understanding (Cox et al., 2010). Using this learning method supports coaches in their work with coachees, where different perspectives can be explored without judgement, as a basis for getting a deeper understanding of a particular situation, before considering future choices of thought or action.

Critical reflective practice is encouraged throughout and beyond the programme. Using reflective practice frameworks such as Moon (2004), trainee coaches are required to record their reflections on their coaching sessions, examine their practice from a range of perspectives and begin to recognize patterns and themes in their work as a coach. By making sense and drawing meaning from their experiences, coaches are able to reflect on their own practice and the coaching relationship with the client. By embedding this practice, coaches become accustomed to reflecting and can enhance their capability, as time spent reflecting on how to behave in future situations allows for more options to be identified and greater flexibility (Hay, 2007). This approach supports continuous learning on behalf of the coach.

An underpinning philosophy of the programme is to 'make the familiar strange and ultimately the strange familiar' (Bolton, 2010: 3). Trainee coaches are encouraged to break with their mind-sets; challenge their assumptions; surface their deeply held beliefs and values and explore their frames of reference in order to generate choices on future courses of action. This approach relates to Mezirow's theory of transformational learning (1997). It supports coaches in their work as they will at times be endeavouring to challenge the coaches' assumptions and frames of references, in order to bring about transformational learning in the coachee (Cox et al., 2010).

Developing self-awareness and authenticity in coaches

As practising coaches, and as those charged with developing coaches, our belief is that for coaches to be effective in their developmental work with others, solely learning the skills and process of coaching is insufficient. In order to engage in trusting coaching relationships, coaches require a deep understanding of themselves, a strong foundation from which to act and a conviction about who they are as a coach. For this reason, a number of interventions designed to develop self-awareness and a sense of coach identity are embedded in the programme. The programme uses a personality psychometric which builds confidence in the coach as they understand their preferred

ways of operating across a range of situations and heightens their awareness of how this might affect their coaching style and how they respond to different coachee personality preferences.

Coaching is a development approach that aims to facilitate greater self-understanding and self-belief in the coachee. In developing coaches to facilitate this in others, the programme also devotes considerable time to supporting the trainee coach in their own journey to discover their true self. Activities which enable coaches to be more consciously aware of their beliefs, values, emotions and motivators, and encouraging them to develop self-regulation, are essential elements of this coach development process. Conceptualizing identity as the notion of ‘who a particular person is’ (Watson, 2002: 107), is considered at various points during the programme. This is of significance for many of the trainee coaches as most are building on an existing professional identity, adding coaching to perhaps an already established organizational role (such as line manager, HR/D professional) or existing suite of business consultant services, and some are embarking on a new professional route as an independent coach. It is, therefore, important that they consider what this change will mean to them, both in terms of self-identity, (the individual’s own notion of self) and a social-identity (the notion others have of who the person is) (Watson, 2002: 107).

Working with coaches to develop a heightened sense of self-awareness during the programme, coaches are supported in becoming more consciously aware of their inner voice when immersed in coaching conversations. Listening to and acknowledging this inner dialogue, enables coaches to be reflexive in the moment, using their intuition in working with others and noticing what is going on beneath the surface of a conversation. This deeper awareness is also critical, in order that the coach can surface their unconscious biases and motivations that underpin their behaviour (Lee, 2003); enabling the coach to become more aware of the influence of self in the coaching conversation.

In considering the essential elements of a coach development process and the approaches to learning that are seen as effective, the approaches discussed above have been acknowledged as being important in coaching by previous studies of coaching. Engaging in coaching practice is seen as a critical element in learning to be a coach (Clutterbuck, 2010) and Grant (2008) emphasizes the importance of experiencing being coached. Clutterbuck advocates exposure to different philosophies and perspectives of coaching (2010) and Turner (2010) considers the importance of psychological awareness in coaching. The use of critical reflective practice is recognized as important by Clutterbuck (2010). In examining the role of coach identity, Moore and Koning (2016) use narratives of adult learners on an academic coach development programme to argue that there is mediating role for relationality and reflexivity in making sense of identity.

Research Design

The research was conducted during an alumni event where participants were invited to engage in a number of activities designed to promote ongoing learning and development in a supportive network. The inquiry element of the event comprised four one-hour focus groups conducted to elicit dialogue exploring the experiences of participating in a coach development programme.

Focus groups were selected as an appropriate method of conducting the research, given their alignment to social learning activities experienced during the programme which emphasized the benefits of learning through dialogue and the sharing of multiple perspectives to achieve deeper

understanding of the issues (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2011). This method aligns with our belief that knowledge is socially constructed. It supported our objectives to create a mutually beneficial research experience in that the participants developed deeper appreciation of their own experience through the communal telling of their stories and as such this process would support their ongoing development as coaches (Steyaert and Bouwen, 2004).

The researchers comprised four members of academic staff (two of whom are the authors of this paper), all with intimate knowledge of the coaching programme and experience of working as professional coaches. As such this background identifies us as insider-researchers (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013) with their own experiences of the topics under investigation and an existing relationship with the participants as teachers on the programme. In line with our programme philosophy we maintained a stance of collaboration as opposed to any notion of elitist expert researchers. As such we see our research as “intersubjective, in which all are participants in constructing meaning” (Cunliffe, 2003: 997).

The sample

Twenty-four alumni participated in the research, three males and twenty-one females. As the sample was based on volunteers participating in an evening event we did not have control over the gender balance of the participants involved and recognize this is a limitation within the research design. The participants coaching experience since attending the programme ranged from one month to seven years and comprised a variety of coach roles from independent coaches, internal organizational coaches, to line manager as coach. The research team were interested in these different ‘contextual categories’ of coach so the focus groups were made up of three groups of organizational coaches (line manager as coach, HRM/HRD professional as coach and internal coach) and one group comprising independent coaches. This paper concerns the outcomes emerging from the organizational coaches’ groups.

A facilitator’s guide, including standardized questions was devised by the research team and all discussions were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were sent to participants for approval and all contributions were anonymized. The analysis and findings below focus on outcomes to a specific open question asked in all focus groups; “what was the impact of the course?”.

Analysis of the data

Analysis of the qualitative data provided rich detail on the benefits of engaging in the coach development programme and subsequent experience as a coach. Thematic analysis of the data followed the phased approach as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). There were a total of 136 answers in response to the question: “What was the impact of the course?”. The responses were coded and categorized using an inductive approach and three unexpected themes emerged and which are discussed in more detail below.

Findings

Our findings reflect anticipated and unanticipated outcomes in the form of responses by the coaches to the question “What was the impact of the course?”. Anticipated outcomes focus on describing gaining competence through practical skills such as listening and confidence with

the coaching process. The impact of coaching within their organizations support the findings of previous studies and emphasize the impact on goal attainment, resilience and workplace well-being (Grant et al., 2009), self-efficacy within management and leadership roles of the coachees, (Baron and Morin, 2010) and driving organizational change (Rock and Donde, 2008).

However, it is the unexpected findings that are of interest in this study. Alumni from the organizational coaches' focus groups reported changes to their practice and behaviour in the wider domains of their roles as well as in their work as coaches.

Enhanced skills across a wide range of organizational scenarios

Many of the alumni responded to the question by talking about the way in which they had used the learning from the programme to adapt their approach to others in the organization in a more generic way in their substantive roles in organizations, rather than specifically in their role as a coach. They discussed being more adaptable, flexible and prepared to challenge on issues:

Personally I've become more outcome focused in my thinking, more confident, like I said I can challenge people more (Respondent 6).

I wasn't afraid to be up as a leader and also because the organization noticed maybe a bit of a difference in me (Respondent 5).

They mention having more techniques and skills in their interactions with others:

how I act towards people and how I react to people and I think it's given me a lot more technique and skill in talking to people (Respondent 8).

and report approaching work situations differently:

it changed the way I interacted with my team but I think it also changed the way I interacted with some of the senior leaders in xxx, the types of conversations I started having with a lot of different managers (Respondent 3).

These findings suggest that alumni have employed the skills of coaching such as listening, challenging, and providing feedback across a broader range of organizational scenarios and this is related to the debate in the literature about whether coaching skills are indeed the core of managerial effectiveness. Perhaps by focusing on and developing these skills during the programme, alumni have found that these enhanced abilities are giving rise to greater managerial effectiveness. Similarly, Ladyshewsky (2010) research on 'the manager as coach', supports the view that employee coaching is in fact a core managerial skill and that it can have a positive impact on organizational effectiveness. In addition, Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie (2006) suggest that managers and leaders that are regarded as effective have coaching embedded into the heart of their practice. Therefore, perhaps by honing coaching skills and practice, we are also supporting managers in becoming more effective in their general practice.

Through using their coaching skills across a wider range of organizational situations, the alumni indicate that they are more effective in their roles generally. Specifically, for example, Respondent 5 discusses how they felt differently about their leadership competence. These findings also resonate with the research of Rock and Donde (2008) who discuss the benefit of developing coaching skills. They argue that the benefit goes beyond formal coaching relationships, as coaching helped coaches change the way they operated in a number of managerial situations

such as running meetings, organizing work and relating differently with their peers and team. These findings may also respond to Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) who call for more to be done to understand whether working as a coach affects leadership competences, resilience or emotional intelligence of the coach.

Noticing that they are interacting differently with others in the organization, that they have become more outcome focused in their thinking (a noticeable change for respondent 6), and changing the way they react to others, suggest a more conscious and flexible approach in their work relationships with others. We consider that this may be attributable to the way in which alumni have embedded reflective practice into their work, enabling them to learn from past interactions and scenarios, identify a range of options of how they might respond and therefore achieve greater flexibility in their approach as advocated by Hay (2007).

Increased confidence

In addition, participants reveal that they are using their increased confidence from the programme across a wider range of organizational situations. For example:

I think, within the organization, it's made me a much stronger person; much more confident, I challenge a lot, a lot more than I did and that was only to the positive (Respondent 1).

I have had a job promotion and I think that was partly because I had more confidence and wanted to get up there and realized I wasn't afraid to be up as a leader and also because the organization noticed maybe a bit of a difference in me (Respondent 5).

I think it's given me the confidence that I'm quite a good coach and I'm doing — slowly working with more — slowly more senior people (Respondent 4).

So actually the value of the course, apart from what I learned, obviously, was very much for myself and my own practice, it gave me the confidence (Respondent 9).

References to being 'a stronger person' and 'not being 'afraid to be up as a leader' and 'challenge people more' implies greater confidence and not solely in their role as a coach. By providing a learning environment on the programme that enables coaches to discover more about their values and beliefs and raising their self-awareness through personality profiling, personal reflection and reflective discourse with peers, we aim to give the trainee coaches a self-understanding that enables them to operate as a coach with a strong sense of who they are as a coach and a person. The connection between self-awareness and self-belief is well researched, from studies on developing self-awareness in leaders and managers, we learn that to build trust, authenticity is key and that success in leadership is dependent on self-awareness and self-regulation (George et al., 2007). The findings suggest that through this process of self-discovery and developing a deeper connection with their authentic self, organizational coaches have become more self-assured, and this has increased their confidence in their more generic roles as managers in their organizations.

A new identity

Another emerging and somewhat unexpected finding in the data was that of a change to, or development of, a professional identity that went beyond the role of coach. Many stated that they saw themselves differently as a result of engaging in the coach development process and

practising as an organizational coach.

it's given me a new language and a new way of being that I certainly practice differently, I'm a different person to when I first started on the course in terms of particularly leadership (Respondent 2).

I wasn't afraid to be up as a leader and also because the organization noticed maybe a bit of a difference in me (Respondent 5).

I think it had a massive effect on my life and the way I was dealing with my life. You know, all of a sudden I was thinking about things in a different way and making different decisions, so personally it was a big change for me (Respondent 5).

people that know I have been on the course come and ask me really random questions — their expectations of me are completely different to what they — before ... (Respondent 10).

The alumni report the programme has had an impact on what they do:

I was thinking about things in a different way and making different decisions (Respondent 5),

how they do it:

I practice things differently (Respondent 2).

and the way in which they view themselves:

a new way of being ... personally it was a big change for me (Respondent 2).

An unprompted articulation of this as a way of answering the question on the impact of the programme, suggests that alumni were really noticing that their own notion of self (Watson, 2002) has been changed as a result of experiencing the coach development process.

The alumni also highlight that the notion that others have of them as a person, their social identity (Watson, 2002) has also changed:

their expectations of me are completely different (Respondent 10)

and that:

the organization noticed maybe a bit of a difference in me (Respondent 5).

Their perception is that colleagues in their organizations appear to be responding to them in a different way. As discussed earlier, the programme affords opportunities for trainee coaches to explore their changing identity as a coach and the way in which they intend to integrate coaching into their professional practice. In this way they are conscious of the concept of identity as a result of the learning process and are therefore perhaps paying more attention to this as their role is changing in their organizational contexts.

These findings may also relate the way in which the learning process encourages transformational learning through challenging coaches to explore their assumptions and frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997), largely about themselves. Participants, having journeyed through the process of learning and deeper awareness emerge changed in some way and are more aware of these changes.

Conclusions

Of particular interest to us is a significant impact of the learning process on the coaches beyond the boundary of their coaching interventions, in particular within their wider leadership roles. Participants describe a greater confidence in taking on different roles in their organizations, having a different sense of their organizational identity and improved interpersonal skills, enabling them to adopt more flexible approaches. Our findings suggest that creating a programme that encourages self-awareness and reflexive conversations and opportunities to reflect and consider their coach identity, supports behavioural change and learning that is applicable in a wider organizational context.

Implications for HRD practice

As HRD professionals seek to build adaptive and agile workforces (CIPD, 2014), able to embrace uncertainty, there is a depth of evidence that coaching can play a critical role in supporting employees through organizational change. Additionally, though, and in the specific context of this research, widespread opportunities for employees to engage in coaching offers further organizational benefits. It equips employees, who have become trained coaches with the capability to continue to learn and be open to embracing new challenges due to their enhanced psychological awareness, ability for self-reflection and increased confidence.

These findings will be of interest to HRD professionals and organizations considering an investment in developing in house coaches as the wider benefits can permeate all aspects of performance that in turn, contribute positively to an organization. Given that conceptualizations of HRD have much in common with conceptualizations of coaching within organizations (Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie, 2009) with both aiming to have a positive impact on personal growth, learning and change to the benefit of both the individual and the organization, we propose a greater integration in thinking about coach development programmes — not as a stand-alone skill building endeavours for a select few in an organization but as an integrated culture change intervention that has an impact on the confidence, capability and leadership potential of all staff in a wide range of contexts beyond the coaching room. Further we propose that the developmental activities of reflective practice, experiential and social learning along with developing self-awareness and identity work, strengthen contributions of the participants in their wider organizational roles.

We also consider that these findings may be of interest to those considering embarking on a coach development programme. It seems that as providers of coach development, we could raise awareness of these wider benefits to potential coach trainees. Finally, we believe our findings challenge organizations to go beyond coach training that is focused on primarily on models and tools. We argue for coach training that is transformational for the coaches themselves, role modelling the types of transformational learning we hope all coaches seek to evoke in others.

Limitations and future research

This study examined a small cohort of coach alumni from one specific coach development programme. The researchers are also the programme delivery team, and are therefore stakeholders in the process and are known to the alumni; this may have influenced the views put forward in the focus groups. Whilst this means that findings can only be tentative; the topic warrants further in depth investigation.

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The Authors

Joanne James is Head of Corporate and Executive Development at Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University, where she leads a team of academic and professional support staff, creating and delivering bespoke leadership and executive development interventions for senior leaders and managers in a range of client organizations. Joanne also works as an executive coach and has a particular interest in enabling leaders to create high performing organizations through authentic leadership, team development and creating a coaching culture. Joanne's research interests include leader identity and leader development through developing reflective practice; executive coaching particularly coach development and team coaching. Joanne's doctoral study involves utilising autoethnography to explore the practice of team coaching.

Ruth Leggett is a Senior Lecturer in the Corporate and Executive Development Department at Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University, where she leads the provision of Postgraduate Coaching programmes and contributes to the development and delivery of a range of other leadership development programmes and bespoke interventions. Ruth also works as an executive coach and runs the North East Association for Coaching Co Coaching Forum. Ruth's research interests include work based learning and development; particularly the promotion of reflective practice in managers and evaluating the impact of work based learning and development on the individual and the organization. She is currently completing a coaching supervision qualification at Oxford Brookes University.