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Title of the paper: Exploring Learning through Coaching Practices in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs): Evidence from Two Case Studies in Thailand

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this paper is to present empirical evidence of learning in small to medium enterprises (SMEs), with a particular focus on coaching practices within two case study organisations in Thailand. These SMEs are recipients of Thai SMEs national award identified as 'critical cases' and they have received numerous awards at national and international level, which identifies them as high performing organisations that ascribe to outstanding Human Resource practices.

Design & Methodology: The paper draws upon case-study and a variety of qualitative methods were employed. Purposive sampling was used to identify 18 key informants, comprising two owner-managers and eight organisational coaches, along with their coachees', with the latter being deemed 'talented employees'. The data generated during the field work has been analysed by template analysis.

Results & Conclusion: The analysis reveals that within the case study organisations the portrayal of Buddhist and Christian philosophy engendered a feeling of belonging, a 'family' atmosphere to support coaching practices in organisation, and the owner-managers plays a crucial role in organisational learning and coaching practices. Three predominant themes emerged: the attributes of talent, employee development and coaching practices.

Keywords: SMEs, Learning, Owner-manager, Coaching, Human Resource Development, Situation Specificity.

Introduction

Throughout the world, SMEs make a positive and substantial contribution to economic growth (Ates, Bititci, Garengo, & Cocca, 2013; Jasra, Khan, Hunjra, Rehman, & Azam, 2011). At a practical level, however, SMEs invariably face a diverse range of issues, encountering both internal and external barriers (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016). One major issue SMEs often face is paucity of time, which sits alongside poor financial investment in HRD (Akterujjaman, 2010). Equally, misunderstandings have arisen concerning how skill sets are developed (Bishop, 2015), with an added distraction in SMEs being the view that financial support will resolve this learning issue (Zainol, Daud, Arumugam, & Ibrahim, 2015). Despite these negative issues, HRD has been identified as a key factor in the survival and growth of an SME (Ahmad, Abdul Rani, & Mohd Kassim, 2010).

Whilst there are several broad approaches to organisational learning, coaching is perceived as a core development intervention, in respect to both individual and organisational success (Ellinger & Kim, 2014; Whybrow & Lancaster, 2012). Despite the importance of individual development, the volume of research on coaching in SMEs remains relatively low, particularly when compared with that undertaken in larger organisations (Lane, 2010). Indeed, it is the dearth of research and the challenges of HRD in SMEs, which drove us to investigate the coaching of those valuable employees who can impact positively on organisational outcomes (Snell, Morris, & Bohlander, 2015).

In order to address the issues surrounding the learning and development of people in SMEs, a rich and deep understanding of the contextual situation needed to be gained, which is how our empirical study emerged. Consequently it is necessary to explore thoroughly the current learning coaching practices, and we sought specifically to explore the following research question: What are the employees learning through coaching practices within two critical case study organisations?

To investigate the above question, this paper adopts a variety of qualitative methods to gain insight into two high-performance SMEs. The paper consists of four main parts which are outlined subsequently as follows: Firstly, we review briefly the concepts of the manager as coach and SMEs particular on the context of SMEs in Thailand, emphasizing the necessity of further findings in this research area. Secondly, the paper describes the research methodological aspects. Thirdly, we then present the findings and discuss the results from data generation and analysis, highlighting to contribute to theoretical development and practical implementation. Finally, we provide the conclusion and discussion on the findings, before giving contribution of knowledge and possible recommendation for future study.

The Research Context

Our research is situated in Thailand, where SMEs perform a vital role in accelerating the nation's Gross Domestic Product (Chittithaworn, Islam, Keawchana, & Yusuf, 2011; Kluaypa, 2013). Whilst SMEs account for 99.73 per cent of all establishments in Thailand (OSMEP, 2015), earlier studies have suggested that barriers exist which impede organisational effectiveness (APEC, 2013). Areas of concern have been highlighted as: management, accounting, financing, production and, importantly for our study, human resource initiatives. Evidence equally exists that Thai SMEs have

experienced difficulty in adopting Western concepts of HRD, with these 'best practices' not transferring easily across cultural divides (Thassanabanjong, Miller, & Marchant, 2009). In addition, the form of Organisation Development proposed by foreign specialists does not combine easily with Thai companies, again, possibly due to cultural variations (Akaraborworn & McLean, 2001). To compete in a globalised world, it is important for Thai organisations to develop effective business methods, including people development, that express synergy with the values and ethos of Thailand (Pruetipibultham, 2010). Two case studies are based on specialises in the trading and manufacturing sector of Thai SMEs; case study 1 is a leading waste recycling business, and case study 2 is a textile business with focusing on niche markets and gaining a competitive advantage in the market. One of the essential criteria in recruiting SMEs is that both organisations are received a SMEs National Award. Also, the companies have grown steadily, they started the business from the ground up and now they are a successful business that the growth are set to continue.

Theoretical background

Our literature review focused on two aspects: (1) The manager as coach concept and (2) The context of SMEs in Thailand

The manager as coach concept

Learning can happen in the various forms: incidental learning and intention learning through formal and informal learning (Nadler, 1970) which 'coaching is an appropriate learning intervention' (Beattie et al., 2014, p. 184) in organisation. It has been argued that coaching has the potential to enhance the learning and development of individuals and teams while contributing to organisational growth (Ellinger and Kim, 2014). Moreover, coaching has almost become a mantra with many authors arguing that coaching can be applied in many areas (Passmore, 2010; Bono et al., 2009; Ellinger et al., 2003; Hamlin et al., 2008). While acknowledging that: 'various forms of coaching exist' (Passmore, 2015: p.11) there is, understandably, no universally agreed definition of coaching (Ellinger and Kim, 2014). Within this paper we focus on the manager as coach concept which can be categorised in the managerial coaching; it has four variants of managerial coaching: peer, team, hierarchical and cross-organisational which hierarchical involves line manager to be a coach and it is considered as the most well-known form of managerial coaching (Beattie et al., 2014). The managers can play a key role as a coach in organisation through appropriate skills and facilitative behaviours such as interpersonal and cognitive (R. G. Hamlin, Ellinger, & Beattie, 2006). The line managers' roles to engage coaching practices focused on improving the skills, competence, and performance (Beattie et al., 2014).

However, coaching research has focused on large companies (Peel 2008) and Scullion and Ryan (2013) have argued that: "there is a real dearth of empirical research on talent management in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs)".

The context of SMEs in Thailand

Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) have been acknowledged as the backbone of economic growth worldwide (Ates et al., 2013; Jasra et al., 2011; Nakwa, Zawdie, & Intarakumnerd, 2012) by “providing job opportunities and supporting the big industries” (Anuar & Mohd Yusuff, 2011, p. 324). In Thailand, at the end of 2014 the total number of enterprises was 2,744,198, of which 2,736,744 were SMEs, or 99.73% of the total number of enterprises, providing more than 80 per cent of the overall employment which are increasingly seen as creator of new jobs in Thailand (OSMEP, 2015; Swierczek & Ha, 2003). In addition, Thai SMEs contribute over 39 percent to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), (OSMEP, 2015). The pivotal role of Thai SMEs has been acknowledged by many scholars (APEC, 2013; Buranajarukorn, 2006; Chittithaworn et al., 2011; Kluaypa, 2013; Pruetipibultham, 2010).

Type of SMEs has been divided according to three broad categories: Manufacturing, Trading and the Service sector. An enterprise is identified to be an SME based on value of assets or number of full-time employees, which an enterprise is categorised as an SME when it has less than two hundred employees and/or fixed asset is less than 200 million baht, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. The categorisation of Thai Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

Small Enterprise		Medium Enterprise		
Employees	Fixed Assets (Million Baht)	Employees (Persons)		Fixed Assets
Manufacturing	<= 50	<= 50	>50-200	> 50-200
Trading				
- Wholesaling	<= 50	< =25	>25-50	> 50-100
- Retailing	< =30	< =15	>15-30	> 30-60
Service	<= 50	<=50	>50-200	> 50-200

Source: Adapted from the Office of SMEs Promotion (OSMEP, 2015)

Note: Exchange rate at 45 Baht = 1 UK pound.

Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion (OSMEP), is a governmental agency, had the role and responsibility to assist, promote and support SMEs and had been undertaking many projects to enhance capability of SMEs in many aspects including the SMEs National Awards Competition project (OSMEP, 2015). This Competition selects the best SMEs in accordance with a set of criteria from the Thailand Quality Award (TQA), which is considered a world-class award. The fundamentals of the technical and decision-making processes are identical to the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) of the United States of America, as the MBNQA is being adopted by many countries around the world (Meethom and Kengpol, 2008). The SMEs National Awards Competition has been held for 8 times started in 2006 which are sets criteria consisting of seven categories. There are three level awards as follows:

- 800 – 1,000 points will receive an SME National Award
- 700 – 799 points will receive an SME Outstanding Award
- 600 – 699 points will receive an SME Rising Star Award.

Even though there have been nearly 3 million SMEs, there have been about 200 SME entrepreneurs granted this awards , with approximately only 30 SMEs being granted

the SME National Award for 8 years (OSMEP, 2017), thus SMEs national award was a key selection criteria for the case study to guarantee the quality of SMEs. We selected two cases from 30 SMEs which are considered to be the 'best SMEs' and 'critical cases' from trading and manufacturing sector to present employee learning and coaching practices. We also believed that it can be the 'good example' for several SMEs.

Research method

This section provides information about research approach and design, data collection and data analysis.

Research approach and design

The approach is qualitative, gaining a deep understanding and analysis of employee learning and development within two case study organisations. The main reason for conducting the case study was that two selected SMEs were based on the organisations' perceived level of good practices, so two selected case studies may therefore be considered as critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2011), also would provide evidence of good practices (R. Hamlin, 2002) . Key informants in both companies shared the view that a strong focus on their perception and practices of learning through coaching which need to become eminent. Thus we selected two organisational cases to investigate learning and coaching practices, by utilising three selection criteria: (1) the companies were registered as Thai SMEs; (2) they had received a SME National Award; and (3) they allowed research access to employees. Purposive sampling led to rich qualitative data being drawn from eighteen key informants. Data was generated by the first author who is a native Thai speaker. She spent a few months in each organisation as a non-participant observer; she undertook document analysis and semi-structured interviews. In addition, an 'iterative' process (Symon et al. 2016) involving a series of conversations with the second author.

Data collection

The data were gathered from two organisations using a variety of qualitative methods to ensure the rich and deep information. The study was carried out over two period of five months (Case study 1: 13 April 2015 – 15 June 2015, and Case study 2: 1 December 2015 - 3 March 2016). The interview process and interview questions were similar in both SMEs to comparison; interviewees were selected from different hierarchical levels in each organisation including one owner-manager, four managers as coach and four subordinates as coachee (see table 2), with the latter being deemed 'talented employees', and the interview each lasted approximately 40-60 minutes with voice-recorded and notes taken during interview, and later verbatim transcribed. In addition, each organisation was observed for a coaching session and its working environment was examined for two days, along with gaining access to relevant documents which background information was collected through organisational websites, documents relating to SMEs national award, HR practices, policies. Permission to use the data was granted, provided Pseudonyms were used to represent all of the participant names.

Table 2. Details of interviewees

Organisation	no. of owner-manager	no. of Coach	no. of Coachee	Total
Case study 1	1	4	4	9
Case study 2	1	4	4	9
Total	2	8	8	18

Data analysis

The themes were identified during the data collection that data collection and data analysis were undertaken in parallel (Silverman, 2013). Template analysis was used to be the main technique to analyse the data which was carried out manually. Following Brooks and King's (2017) guidelines, we generate the template through a linear list presentation to identify the main themes that 'analysis often involves cycling back and forth between stages and this is especially true in template analysis because of its highly iterative nature' (Brooks & King, 2017, p. 26), which template was flexible approach to modify in the process of coding. Then, within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014) were used, and the emerging themes were supported by illustrative quotations from the transcripts to emphasize the point of themes. The initial template analysis from the first author, an insider from Thailand, focused on the a-prior codes which had emerged from her initial review of the literature on coaching and talent management. However, her supervisor, an outsider and the 2nd author of this paper, began to question the initial analysis. This questioning enabled a richer and more contextualized picture to emerge.

To ensure the trustworthiness of finding, we used two strategies; triangulation and member checking. Creswell suggested at least 2 of 8 strategies which there are 8 primary strategies to increase the trustworthiness including triangulation and multiple sourcing of data, member checking, thick description, clarifying of researcher bias, negative case analysis, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing and external audit (Creswell, 2003). In attempting to do so, we employed 2 strategies;

1. Trustworthiness by triangulation: Multiple sources of data were collected as a means of triangulation 'to gain the needed confirmation, to increase credence in the interpretation, to demonstrate commonality of an assertion' (Stake, 1995: p.112). For this study, Document analysis, face-to-face semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation with key informants were utilised to confirm methodological triangulation which Flick (1998: p.230) acknowledge that "Triangulation is not a tool or a strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation"
2. Trustworthiness by member checking: It is recommended by Stake (1995), so after we checked each transcript, and then we verified the accuracy of data with each participant. All verbatim transcriptions were sent to eighteen participants to examine data and all participants provided feedback and already updated following their editing.

Research Findings

This section presents major findings from our data analysis: (1) background of SMEs and (2) three key themes include (a) the attributes of talent (b) employee development and (c) coaching practices.

Background of SMEs

The two cases had the advantages of providing a contrasting and complementary mix of management styles, organisational structures and cultures which could affect employee learning and coaching practices in each organisation, so the following details offer an overview of the two cases selected on the basis of three criteria in recruiting SMEs.

Table 3. The two case-study organisations

Description	Case study 1	Case study 2
Type of SMEs	Trading sector	Manufacturing sector
Enterprise size	Medium enterprise	Medium enterprise
Number of employees	Monthly employee = 32 Daily employee = 134 Total = 166	Monthly employee = 79 Daily employee = 342 Total = 421
Start-up years	Established in 1974	Established in 2001
Enterprise age	42 years	15 years
Nature of work	Demonstrated an trading business operated waste recycling trading with many franchise branches across Thailand and overseas	A specialist manufacturing operation to integrate all process for making T-shirts, polo shirts and jacket focusing on niche markets

In order to address the issues surrounding the learning and development of people in SMEs through coaching practices, a rich and deep understanding of the contextual situation was explored:

Case study 1, which was positioned in trading sector of SMEs, was a family-run business, where the owner1 was perceived as the head of an organisational ‘family’. He also held a strong belief in Buddhism and championed this as a guiding philosophy to underpin learning and HRD, and most of employees (95%) are Buddhist as well. The owner1 believes that Buddhism can be adapted into the employees’ daily lives and that it can help the employees to be good people; this is an important principle to develop them in the next step for HRD. There was also a general consensus amongst employees that Buddhist principles permeated all aspects of business activity, including coaching practices. Informal coaching was apparent in on-the-job support, which established line managers in a coaching role. Moreover, the data from the observation supports strongly the fact that they have 5-6 areas around the factory that serve as the sources of morals for the employees. The owner1 shared:

Our staffs are encouraged to pray and the monks are usually invited to preach to the employees. We also have a distinct hermitage of god in my factory. This

place has preaching practices, giving dharma, and provides the principles as the tool for binding minds. For giving Buddhism's principles, it is perfect for our employees. Performing these principles, they are developing themselves.

Overall, his Buddhist beliefs and the family system emerged as the key factor for learning and coaching practices, especially the tight-knit relationship and deep desire to support and value each other, which was imbued within a concept of 'friendly coaching'. The nature of family coaching is that the owner¹ and his managers spend time working and outside of work they take time to understand the background and values of their employees, develop connections through daily conversation, and listen and learn about the employees. Also, they take time to ask questions about the well-being of the employees and their family members, which demonstrates that they love and care about the employees. These things are an important part of coaching skills that they do subconsciously, and this makes the employees feel warm and connected.

Case study 2, comprised a manufacturing company in which an informal manager-employee style of coaching equally prevailed, although, here the owner² followed the Christian faith of a Protestant. In parallel to the first case study, his personal belief system guided the organisation's approach to learning and coaching. In addition, as the owner² held a strong believe that the human resource was vital to organisational success; he allocated both time and resources in support of HRD initiatives, including coaching and training, to engender a workforce that was prosperous and content. The owner² stated:

I think the key success of my business is human not machine, even though my machines are the most high-tech. The competitor can understand my business models, but they cannot manage the paradigm of the human elements like I do

Because the owner² is a Christian and most of the employees are still Buddhist, so there are no religious symbols, either Buddhist or Christian, in this company like case study 1. However, the owner² seems to be a significant determinant of the adoption in many activities in this company such as HR activities, leadership development, organisation awareness, and happy workplace project. For example, the owner² has adopted the concept of mentoring in church from his religious into the company, he said:

We agreed to have mentoring, which uses the same concepts as the church. I took informal mentoring to adopt with my direct subordinates, more than 10 people for a long time, but it was not announced formally.

At the beginning he used informal mentoring for managers, with himself as the mentor, and now the mentoring programme has been used throughout as systematic and formalised mentoring which is considered to be a good tool to develop employees continuously. Interestingly, the data from the observation supporting the interviews showed that the participants understand and use coaching and mentoring interchangeably. With regards nomenclature, staff identified coaching as 'mentoring' and whilst using the term interchangeably with coaching, they felt that the 'mentoring' conveyed a more caring attitude.

There is considerable evidence in both cases to summarise that the owner-manager have a central role to play in an organisation's learning and coaching practices. The influence of Buddhist beliefs is the key concept underpinning employee learning and

coaching practices in case study 1; a Buddhist approach to coaching provides a discipline that enables the employees to be good people before building talent; in the meantime, in case study 2, the Buddhist approach is not directly relevant to HR practices like case study 1; however, he adopted mentoring from his religious approach and many HR activities from his personal belief are applied in his company. Consequently, this has meant that the owner-manager is the key role and his belief affects the employee learning and coaching practices in both companies.

Three major themes are evidenced

Below we present the evidence emerged from the two case studies that patterns and trends were drawn from the transcripts to identify three predominant themes:

Theme 1: The attribute of talent

Case study 1, Talent is considered to include everyone in the organisation to protect them from jealousy or envy; everyone is treated as equals. The owner-manager¹ gave the following:

I look upon all my employees like my children and siblings, I look upon all employees as equals, even though there is a different gap between the high and low potential, they are not praised in order to protect them from jealousy because all human emotions have jealousy in common.

The meaning of talent has not been raised as an important issue in case study 1; however, in practice, a high performance employee in the view of the owner¹ will be noticed and will be given more opportunities. They are then treated and developed differently. Thus, a hidden Talent management seem inevitable.

Meanwhile, case study², talent are some people; the owner² has built talent like a 'warlord' to manage the business instead of him. He also treats talented employees differently in terms of both time and financial investment. Now, he has around 20 talented employees who are at managerial level, such as managers and the assistant MD, while each manager has their own talented employees at the lower level as well. The owner² is an important role to build talent. His exiting expertise is passed on the managers, and then passed on to the lower level respectively. Talent management has not been used formally, but has been applied inevitable. The owner² spoke about this issue:

Talent is different from a general employee, different in budget. If I have the HRD budget to build an employee up to the management level, I will choose someone who will be invested together; humans are a resource which is invested in through training, study trips and time.

Both companies have different views on talent, but the same thing is that talented individuals stand out from the others, and both cases have practices, plus others that are done subconsciously and they are treated and trained in different ways in each organisation affecting the employee learning and coaching practices, which are explained in the next theme.

Theme 2: Employee development

The second theme is how employee is developed. The key method to develop the employees of both cases is on the job training around 80% of training which is the nature of learning by doing. However, in comparing the case, case1 is different from case2 with being a family-run business and a Buddhist approach are a distinctive; HR policies and most activities are still planned and organised by the owner1. No own in-house training and no plan for off-the-job training are evidenced which the owner1 is the only decision maker to assign who will attend each public training. Interestingly, the good role model comes from the characteristics of the owner-manager1 makes most employees love, trust and have a lot of faith in him, and it makes the employees feel warm and tied up together. Similarities in differences, off-the-job training both public and in-house training are more occurred in case 2. In some cases, the owner2 will select the employees to attend special training classes which he considers them to be good and useful. Also, leader roles are the one key success of this organisation, particularly the owner-manager roles that he often sends the managers to develop them continuously; he cultivates an ownership attitude for all employees to love and engage with the organisation, and he pays them back with a high bonus and salary, so these employees protect the company's assets like they own the business. Moreover, mentoring and happy workplace have adopted as systematic and formalised projects and run them continuously.

Behind the success of the employee developmental projects in both cases, the key driver was the owner-managers who possessed a very strong motivation that made things happen together with the loyal workforce.

Theme 3: Coaching practices

The two companies in our case study do similarities adopted informal coaching using on the job training. The nature of informal coaching in both companies is similar; flexible, friendly and involves informal activities through internal coaching by a manager as the coach; however, cases 2 used to hire external coaches from outside, now they have stopped hiring them because they achieved good results for a while, and vary depending on the individual. Thus, case2 prefers to use the managers as coach instead of external coaches who are expensive and unsuccessful, the owner2 supported:

"I used a lot of consultants and coaches, but it is a waste of money; I agree that external coaches are good but they do not stay for long, and when the coach is not here, the system starts to fail. So I believe my company should be run by the good system, not depending on a coach or individual. For me, the good coaches are the managers, not coaches from outside".

Therefore, the manager as coach concept was adopted through 'friendly coaching' in two case studies having a close and tight relationship between the managers (coach) and their subordinates (coachee). Unfortunately, from the interview with the participants in both cases, it was found that most of them knew little about coaching. The coaching practices in both companies are still adopted informally and subconsciously through on the job. The managers have known that they have a responsibility to motivate their subordinated to perform at their highest capabilities which is a form of coaching; however, the participants did not understand the real concept of coaching very well and they have used the coaching concept following their understanding used it spontaneously. With strong support from the key informant in

both cases, we found that they have not been trained in coaching programmes before. Most of the topics of training concern present tasks. Also, in the both organisational context, the term coaching overlapped with mentoring and sometimes used interchangeably the words 'coaching' 'teaching' and 'instruction' because which when translated into Thai language having the same syllables and a similar meaning.

It could be said that the lack of understanding about coaching makes the managers did not seem to truly know how to coach the subordinates, so both companies could not act to its full capacity on coaching; despite the fact these two cases are the good practices in human resource which may reflect on most SMEs in Thailand faced many problems more than two case studies. Thus, limitations faced by SMEs, especially in the area of training we suggest the relevant governmental agencies, which are main responsible for Thai SMEs promotion, provide resource such as, coaching experts to be a speaker, or support coaching training for Thai SMEs. Moreover, the owner-managers are the key mediator in the adoption of coaching in the organisation. Table 4 provides a summary of three themes to comparison within two cases:

Table 4. A comparison of three themes in the case study organisations

Main and sub-theme	Case Study 1	Case Study 2
1. The attribute of talent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talent as all people • Everyone are treated as equals • however, in practice, different levels to develop different employees; a hidden Talent seem inevitable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talent as some people • More resources are invested in talent • however, talent management has not been used formally; they has been applied inevitably
2. Employee development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - On the job training - Unplanned for off the job • Using Buddhist approach to teach and develop people • A good role model • Job rotation *** Family business is more dominant and affects many activities in this company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - On the job training - More plan for off the job including public and in-house training • Mentoring • Leadership development • Ownership quotient and Organisation awareness • Happy workplace
3. Coaching practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal coaching • Internal coach using the manager as coach • Friendly coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal coaching • Internal coach using the manager as coach • Friendly coaching

Discussion and Conclusions

As an emerging economy, Thailand is experiencing ever increasing pressure to deal with the complexities of business effectiveness. Whilst technology, resources and time contribute to success, the talent development of the workforce remains a viable avenue

for progression. Organisations are situation-specific, yet they are also positioned within a national culture, with its attendant values and norms. Within SMEs, where the boundaries are restricted, the ethos of the organisation, including attitudes to coaching, are more dependent on the owner-manager. Indeed, the two case studies illustrated that drive and direction were encapsulated in the SMEs owner-managers, with their approaches often transcending national culture and values. Both owner-managers were benevolent and sought to improve the lot of their workforce through learning and coaching, in a similar way to the early pioneers of religious zeal in England, epitomised in the factories of Cadbury and Port Sunlight.

Within the case study organisations the portrayal of Buddhist and Christian philosophy engendered a feeling of belonging, a 'family' atmosphere. Further, within the Buddhist tradition, a desire existed to support others and this emerged as a key element of organisational learning. For example, Talent is included everyone in case study 2 in order to protect them from jealousy or envy because envy is one of the five types of poison in Buddhism (Smith, Merlone, & Duffy, 2016). Indeed, the pervasiveness of oneness meant that employees tended not to distinguish coaching as a separate entity; it was embraced within the notion of providing support for the business 'family'. In the second case study it is equally apparent that the Western concept of coaching had been modified to fit the organisational ethos. This realigning of concepts places a focus on understanding actions and concepts in situation, rather than striving for globalised models or solutions. In particular, it is likely that, within an SME, it is the idiosyncratic nature of the owner-manager that 'grounds' the learning ethos.

Even though both organisations could provide learning opportunities in many different ways through HR activities and practices to develop the employees such as training, happy workplace, mentoring, etc., it might not be enough to complete developing the employee because we found that coaching practices in both companies are adopted informally, spontaneously and subconsciously through on the job and the real concept of coaching is not known very well. Meanwhile, coaching has almost become a mantra with many authors arguing that coaching can be applied in many areas (Passmore, 2010; Bono et al., 2009; Ellinger et al., 2003; Hamlin et al., 2008) considered as a key element in the success of individuals and organisational growth, and the most widely used HRD interventions for improving learning processes (Ellinger et al., 2003; Whybrow and Lancaster, 2012; Neale et al., 2009; Bueno, 2010; Lane, 2010; Ellinger and Kim, 2014). The results of two cases are discussed with the existing literature; it appears that most of the features of SMEs are consistent with the literature. In particular, the consistency is about a less formal, uncertainty and more flexible manner (Hill and Stewart, 2000; Westhead and storey 1996, Slobodan), and the owner-manager characteristics is the factor affecting the growth of SMEs (Sarwoko & Frisdiantara, 2016; Sarwoko, Surachman, & Hadiwidjojo, 2013), as reported by several authors is the key success of SMEs, and there is an extensive literature point that the manager can play a role as the facilitators of learning such as a coach (Beattie et al., 2014); however, 'HRD occurring through the job as part of normal work and problem-solving routines is not consciously thought of as HRD, and as a result is likely to be spoken about by owner-manager in term of 'business as usual' and not HRD' (Hill & Stewart, 2000, p. 12) . Thus, there may be a need for practitioners in SMEs and others to more understand coaching as a different approach to developing employees' potential before it is used in SMEs in the appropriate way.

In exploring coaching within two SMEs in Thailand and identifying that the individual philosophy of owner-managers plays a crucial role in organisational learning and coaching practices, this study makes a valuable theoretical contribution to individual learning and development. The study also contributes to the wider debate surrounding the transferability of development models across cultures, illustrating that, even within one nation, notable variances exist. In terms of making a contribution to practice, an impact can be seen whereby owner-managers can grasp a greater awareness of how they influence and codify practice, in support of organisational learning and effectiveness. Further, awareness is raised that a specific focus on core development interventions can engender a culture of learning support, where people resourcefulness predominates.

Recommendations are provided that future research should expand to other SMEs group and other fields of HRD such as mentoring, employer branding and employee engagement in order to obtain a clearer picture and perspectives of the way to develop the employees in the context of SMEs.

To conclude, in contributing to a dearth of qualitative studies on organisational learning and coaching practices within SMEs, our research lends a voice to those small organisations that aspire to achieve results, within the complexity of conducting business in a rapidly emerging economy.

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