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## The quest for research in the coaching relationship

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### Abstract

*With the aim of enabling a deeper understanding of coaching relationship research, this collection of articles is further intended to expand a perspective on approaching evidence-based coaching research in this area and on engaging your coachees in the coaching relationships in your own coaching practice. In this article, the contributions from all authors are each reviewed, with a further discussion and integration of themes arising that are germane to future coaching relationship research, and to building effective coaching relationships with coachees.*

**Keywords:** *Coaching relationship, evidence-based research, evaluation, young coaches, power and symmetry, coaching outcome, active ingredients.*

As practitioners and researchers in the field of coaching, we have a mutual interest in identifying the ingredients in coaching that work, how they work, why they work, when they work and for whom? However, black holes still exist in our knowledge base on coaching and its active ingredients drawn from findings in evidence-based studies. Most publications on coaching provide insufficient knowledge about how to deliver the most fruitful and effective coaching interventions in regard to organizations, groups and people that psychologists and coaches are working with (Spaten, 2013). As we speak, there still seems to be an element of disconnect between, on the one hand, the rapidly changing field of coaching and self-help books in

vogue and on the other hand, the empirical and evidence-based approaches to coaching research.

For a number of years, the field of coaching has been expanding but as Palmer (2013), Grant (2012) and Linley argue, the future success of the field is to be founded on empirical and evidence-based approaches (Linley et al., 2010, Linley, 2011). In spite of the increasing amount of coaching literature it seems opportune and constructive to broaden the field with further systematically strict, empirical and evidence-based coaching research.

So, when we ask what the active ingredients in coaching are, the answers are likely to be found within evidence-based research. As we saw in the article on 'The coaching relationship and beyond',

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there is an increasing amount of research literature that points to the fact that possible (positive) outcomes of the coaching session are linked to the coaching relationship (e.g. Lai & McDowall, 2016). In an ongoing search for more evidence-based research that can consolidate the active ingredients of coaching it therefore seemed appropriate to look deeper into the coaching relationship and its influence on the outcome of the coaching session. In the present collection, we have tried to present some of the latest contributions in this field.

Each of the articles presented in this Special Issue will now be discussed in terms of their individual contribution.

### Leadership, power and symmetry

Spaten (2016)'s research study on Employee Coaching found that coaching relationship quality was a necessary precursor for moments of symmetry and equality (in terms of power balance), which was when the most fruitful coaching occurred. The study's first contribution is its closer scrutiny and inspection of several aspects of power relations in employee coaching (such as symmetry/asymmetry, favourable and unfavourable asymmetry, empowering rather than dominating the coachee, coaching relationship issues when establishing the coaching contract, and the question of inclusion of personal topics). As Spaten notes, greater clarification of power balance issues in coaching could lead to a greater understanding of when employee coaching works at its best, and further research and discussion on both employee and executive coaching is needed on this under-researched area.

Second, the study contributes in consolidation of the finding of the important role of the coaching relationship in these power dynamics. A crucial question is addressed by the article 'Is the imminent power in the coaching relationship used to empower the coachee (employee) or to dominate the coachee?' The findings suggested that the nature of the coaching relationship is both symmetrically and asymmetrically on different parameters which are both rigid (focus on the coachee's world; roles and tasks; power and unequal positions) and changeable (the knowledge distribution). It was found, that the most fruitful coaching was obtained when the coachee experienced moments of symmetry and equality. To achieve these moments, it was concluded, that the quality of the coaching re-

lationship is of great importance. The making of a high quality coaching relationship requires that the manager as coach is honest, objective, exhibits empathetic skills, and is ready to adopt a new stance 'at equal levels with' the employee – if coaching is to be fruitful. In addition, the coach needs to implement a meta-reflective attitude to the approach to and understanding of the before-mentioned different symmetrical and asymmetrical aspects of the employee coaching relationship. Furthermore, the coach must be aware of power positions and respect coachee confidentiality. The study concludes that the most successful coaching happened when the coach was able to use power to empower rather than to dominate the coachee.

Research studies acknowledging the importance of, and identifying key coach attributes in creating, effective coaching relationships (Lai & McDowall, 2014); studies on the self of the coach (see Bachkirova, 2016); and research studies beginning to examine the coach's role in interpersonal processes in the coaching relationship (e.g. Ianiro & Kaufeld, 2014) all speak to the importance of further study of the coach's attitudes and behaviours in the coaching process. The lack of extant research on power, and the findings of this study strongly endorse the need for studies examining power dynamics, how the coach works with the power balance, and their relative importance in the coaching relationship as part of this research strand.

### GENERATION Y: Are British organisations ready for younger executive coaches? A Mixed Methods Study

The study by Dobosz & Tee (2016) focusing on whether Generation Y coaches' age matters in the selection process indicates that age can be a barrier in selection of young coaches. Beyond these findings, the study goes on to make further individual contributions and to raise a timely point in its discussion.

First, the study's contribution was in being able to look deeper into perceptions of the coach attribute of age through a range of participant responses in their qualitative findings: that argued the belief that a young coach could be an effective coach whilst another respondent demonstrated a preference for a coach aged 35 or above; to state that a coach could be effective with the appropriate skills and enthu-

siasm at any age, whilst another asserted a young coach may not have the breadth of experience to coach at an executive level. Age was also considered to be associated with coach experience and credibility – two noteworthy factors in the selection process that could explain why there could be barriers to young coaches seeking to enter organisations to undertake executive coaching. Having explored coach age at some depth, the study was also valuable in being able to identify a number of opportunities, barriers, as well as recommendations for younger coaches entering coaching.

Second, the article contributes to the coaching literature by pinpointing trends of possible accelerating changes in the coaching environment, of the coach population age and of what coaching is perceived to be. Whilst studies providing demographic age data of coaches have historically registered low incidences of young coaches (e.g. Jenkins, Passmore, Palmer & Short, 2012) there are recent indications of more younger coaches entering the coaching domain. Concurrent with this indicated increase of younger coaches entering the coaching arena is the changing perception of the role of coaching; moving away, as Dobosz & Tee (2016) note, from the more instructional and advisory role of executive coach twenty years ago to a more facilitative and transformative role. In this new role, executive coaching could be argued to require a skillset rather than a wealth of experience, thus providing a possible opening for younger coaches to gain greater acceptability and in the executive coaching domain.

The article also makes a contribution directly to coaching relationship research findings in the area of coachee engagement in that the study was conducted in the broader context of the importance to coachees of coach attributes in the executive coaching selection process. In this regard coach relationship factors of personal rapport, effectiveness of coaching process and coach confidence were found to be the highest valued attributes of coachees in selecting a coach, replicating those of the International Coach Federation Global Coaching Clients study (2009). The importance of rapport was acknowledged as essential in coachee development and growth by participants, and a situation whereby the coachee is closed to a relationship with a younger coach risked jeopardising rapport and the mutual facil-

ity for collaboration between coachee and coach. Conversely, rapport was also argued to be at risk if the coachee failed to understand the context in which the coachee operates.

With this study, Dobosz and Tee (2016) make an important contribution. On one hand, they contribute to our evidence based knowledge on coaching and on the other hand, they raise new questions with regard to future practitioners and their chances of consolidating a practice within the coaching field.

## Coach satisfaction and Beyond: A Systematic Review of the Coaching Relationship

Turning to our next article, Lai & McDowall (2016)'s first contribution was to reinforce the calls by others in the coaching field (De Haan, Duckworth, Birch & Jones, 2013; Smith & Brummel, 2013) to focus on the common principles (or 'active ingredients') of coaching. Using the findings from their Systematic Review (Lai & McDowall, 2014) conducted to investigate effective attributes of coaching psychologists associated with a productive relationship and with subsequent positive coaching outcomes, the authors identified the coaching relationship as a key indicator for effective coaching processes and outcomes of coaching.

Their second contribution was in highlighting the challenge for coaching researchers seeking to strengthen evidence-based practice of using substantial, concrete, (and one might add comparable) outcome measures in future studies on the effectiveness of coaching, rather than commonly used coachee feeling and feedback measures directly post-coaching. The article drew on the background of their Systematic Review study. In discussing coaching effectiveness studies in the coaching research literature, they highlight the shortcomings of evaluation measures used to date in some coaching outcome coaching research, in particular the tendency to use coachee satisfaction outcome measures (see also Grant, 2014). Lai & McDowall do not underestimate the difficulties in designing comprehensive standardised outcome measures given diverse coaching approaches and content, nevertheless argue their importance in measuring coachees' full range of learning and behavioural change to meet organisational objectives resulting from coaching programmes.

## Where we have been, where we are now, and where we might be heading: Where next for the coaching relationship?

Finally, the article by O'Broin (2016) posed the question of what do we know about the coaching relationship and its role in coaching and coaching outcomes, and how might we go about finding out more. Its conclusions were that there is sufficient indicative evidence to confirm an association between the coaching relationship and coaching outcomes, and for the possibility that the coaching relationship performs a mediating role in relation to other variables and coaching effectiveness.

The first contribution of the article is that it provides an overview of the coaching relationship research literature to date embedded within the coaching context of underlying assumptions in the coaching literature and in relation to important salient issues some of which have not been previously discussed inclusively and in detail in discussions of the coaching relationship research.

Second, the article makes the contribution of raising the issue of measurement of the coaching relationship as a specific area for discussion and research focus. There is arguably a place for use of the global Working Alliance measure adapted from the therapy context given its imputed translation across helping relationships, its pantheoretical applications, and the current stage of the coaching relationship research base. Furthermore, there are occasions when use of other metrics measuring aspects of the coaching relationship may be appropriate if the particular study calls for a detailed examination of that aspect. Nevertheless, there are advantages in developing coaching relationship measures deriving from the executive coaching context itself, particularly as there are likely to be areas of functional similarity and dissimilarity with the therapeutic relationship (the domain from which the Working Alliance measure originates).

A further contribution of the article is its suggestions (on both approaches and methods) for future coaching relationship research based on its overview and evaluation of the extant coaching relationship research to date in the context of issues and assumptions implicit in the coaching context. In the interests of evidence-based coaching practice which incorporates *best current knowledge* drawn from coaching-specific research, the coach's own expertise, and incorporates preferences of the

coachee, (Stober & Grant, 2006), readers are invited to consider these issues in their own work in researching coaching relationships or in building, developing, and maintaining coaching relationships with their coachees in their own coaching practice.

## Common Contributions

Following discussion of their individual contributions, brief discussion of two themes raised across all our contributors significant to the aims of this Special Issue will now be briefly outlined.

Central to the topic of these articles, and in keeping with accumulating findings in the coaching relationship literature was the assertion by all authors of the necessity of a strong coaching relationship for effective coaching outcomes.

Across the research contributions and broader commentaries was the affirmation of coaching as a complex process. This theme resonates with the realisation that whilst we might research or focus in our coaching session with a coachee on one or a few aspects of the coaching process at any one time, or on global constructs such as 'coaching relationship' and coaching 'outcomes,' that coaching is ultimately an evolving, interpersonal, multifactorial, complex and multi-level activity. With greater realisation of this complexity in coaching comes the greater need for development of those research strategies and methods that are capable of addressing a more challenging research agenda.

## Final words

Taking a step back to where we came in, and our quest for deeper understanding of the coaching relationship and its influence on the outcome of coaching, the articles of this Special Issue have taken us forward in terms of both our broader and our more detailed knowledge base on the topic. Maybe this outcome mirrors the task at hand in approaching further coaching relationship research. It potentially highlights that we need to corroborate and expand findings about the broader, direct association of the coaching relationship with coaching outcomes; and of the possible mediating effect of the coaching relationship on coaching outcomes. Furthermore, we also need to explore in detail the interpersonal connection of coachee and coach to reveal the nuanced mutual and role-specific dynamics and attributes that can benefit coaching relationships and coaching success.

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Previously an investment analyst and Fund Manager for Investment capital group 3i, Alanna is a practicing coaching psychologist, working primarily with executives in achieving their developmental and performance goals. She also runs a small therapy practice.

Her doctoral research was on the coaching relationship, and she has authored and co-authored a number of book chapters and peer-reviewed articles on the coaching relationship and related topics, including parallels between sport psychology and coaching psychology. Alanna was Co-Editor of *An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, a Consulting Editor of *The Coaching Psychologist* between 2013 and January 2016, is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Annual Review of High Performance Coaching and Consulting*.



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Lillith Olesen Løkken er psykolog fra Aalborg Universitet og tilknyttet den Coaching Psykologiske forskningsenhed og psykologistudiet som ekstern lektor.

Hendes forskningsmæssige interesse ligger især indenfor særligt kvalitativ forskning, hvilket har givet sig udslag i medvirken til flere publikationer indenfor personlighedspsykologi, udviklingspsykologi og i særlig grad studier indenfor coaching psykologien. Senest har Lillith været med til at gennemføre en større længdesnitsundersøgelse af livscoaching psykologi, ligesom Lillith tidligere har været forskningsassistent på et studie omkring coaching psykologis indflydelse på nystartede studerendes velbefindende. Ud over en særlig interesse for coaching psykologi har Lillith også både på personlig og faglig basis beskæftiget sig med mindfulness i en række år.

Privat bor hun sammen med sin mand og deres to børn i Lundby Krat ved Aalborg.

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