

Coaching: an expensive conversation or a return on investment?

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Abstract

The Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) is designed for the transfer and sustainability of learning from the coaching session to outside that experience: it is a return on investment. The model emanated from a doctoral level research study conducted with leaders from UK voluntary sector organisations: namely Advance, Mencap and Rethink. The study found that both the coach and the leader have individual and shared responsibilities in the transfer and sustainability of learning, and this paper describes the research study as well as the model emerging from the author researching her own external coaching practice.

Key Words: coaching, leaders, transfer of learning, sustainability of learning, collaborative action research

Introduction

Coaching could be criticised as being an expensive conversation. When organisations are deciding on whether or not to contract the services of an external coach to work on a one-to-one basis with leaders, they are expecting much more than simply an expensive conversation. They are hoping that this top-end investment will reap benefits for both the individual and the organisation. As professional coaches we are also hoping that our coaching intervention will reap benefits. With a rich and diverse range of theories, models, tools and techniques in the professional field of coaching, it can be challenging to find an evidence-based coaching approach that works towards a return on investment and moves away from an expensive conversation.

Return on investment can be described as “achieving business alignment” (Phillips, Phillips & Edwards, 2012, p.17) through a robust evaluation process, attempting to show to organisational investors the direct impact of coaching on business goals and objectives. This appears to be a specific extension of the Kirkpatrick (1975) model of evaluation as amended by Phillips (2003) with the addition of the return on investment element; with this extension the results element of the Kirkpatrick model (1975) is extended to both internal and external organisational environments. However, it could be argued that the isolation of the specific transfer of learning element from the Kirkpatrick model (1975) (but broader than behaviour) with the addition of sustainability of learning, could also be an effective way of measuring return on investment in Human Resource Development (HRD) and, specifically, coaching. The Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) puts the responsibility for ensuring return on investment through transfer and sustainability of learning in the hands of both the coach and leader. Collaboratively, through their own actions, they enable the transfer and sustainability of learning from the coaching session to outside that experience.

Cox (2013, p.138) sums it up very well when she states that:

One of the unwritten goals of coaching is to ensure enduring learning and development for the client that can be sustained long beyond the end of the coaching intervention. Such sustainability would guarantee a return on investment for both the client and any sponsoring organisation.

It could be argued that applying HRD return on investment evaluation processes (Kirkpatrick, 1975; Phillips, Phillips and Edwards, 2012; Parker-Wilkins, 2006; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Holton Bates and Ruona, 2000) can suit the specialism of coaching provided it has an element of longevity. However, in light of the challenge of empirical evidence for HRD evaluation processes, including the transfer and sustainability of learning, the HRD research world has been in need of a specific model to suit the coaching environment specifically. In a strongly relationship-based learning method such as coaching, the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) emphasises the importance of the

evaluation of impact being conducted by the people with most investment in that relationship, *ie* the coach and the leader. In the model, impact is defined as the transfer and sustainability of learning.

There have been several definitions of transfer of learning used over the years. Ruona, Leimbach, Holton and Bates (2002, p.220) prefer the expression “transfer system” in which “transfer involves the application, generalisability and maintenance of new knowledge and skills.” It is notable that this statement includes the word “maintenance” which implies some form of sustainability of learning. Although, Smith, Oosten and Boyatzis (2009, p.148) espouse that sustainability is “that the changed state endures for a relatively long period of time.” In this longitudinal research study, sustainability is defined as learning sustained both during the period of the coaching intervention (about nine months) as well as after the coaching intervention has been completed (about four months).

Literature

The literature on the transfer of learning in the workplace is mainly focused on how learning is transferred from training and development programmes which sometimes involve coaching to assist with that transfer of learning but the majority do not include any coaching interventions. A seminal work relative to this research study is Olivero, Bane and Kopelman (1997) which provides something more specific in examining executive coaching as a transfer of training tool, although they focus specifically on productivity as an outcome. The more recent work of Holton, Bates and Ruona (2000) and their *Learning Transfer System Inventory* reflects the current debate on the transfer of learning from training programmes with an emphasis on a transfer system as opposed to a transfer climate. With regard to coaching and transfer of learning, there is little research although the recent work on *coaching transfer* (Stewart, Palmer, Wilkin and Kerrin, 2008) appears to relate to the seminal work on the transfer of learning and training programmes.

Similarly, the sustainability of learning literature is not prevalent, perhaps because researching sustainability requires longitudinal studies of which there are generally fewer. Seminal work is provided by Wasylyshyn (2003) and Wasylyshyn, Gronsky and Haas (2006) who have briefly examined coaching and sustainability of learning, alongside other areas of research, with a focus on coaching outcomes. Smith, Oosten and Boyatzis (2009) provide the most current applicable work for this study on their research into coaching and sustained desired change which appears to have more of a focus on learning and development.

Cox (2013) refers to the work of Lobato (2006) who introduces two contrasting transfer approaches: classical and actor-oriented. Cox (2013, p.140) suggests that “the second approach appears to be more congruent with coaching, Transfer in this definition is not the reproduction of something that has been acquired elsewhere, but is a transition involving the transformation of knowledge, skills and identity across multiple forms of social organisation.” The Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) is designed specifically to deal with the transfer and sustainability of learning from the coaching session to outside that experience, thereby taking on board Lobato’s (2006) idea of participation across different activities. The evaluation of the transfer and sustainability of learning is built into the coaching relationship and process from the beginning, throughout the time that coach and client are working together and beyond. The model is also designed from evidence-based research.

Methodology

The Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) emanated from a doctoral level qualitative study using collaborative action research as its methodology. Within a social constructivist and interpretivist paradigm, this longitudinal study explored the findings of three action research cycles for a period of just over one year. During this year long intervention, I coached and researched with four leaders from the UK charitable sector (Advance, Mencap and Rethink), researching my own external one-to-one coaching practice. The study was focused on coaching for leaders exploring factors in the coaching relationship, the coaching process, coaching tools/techniques and other factors to determine what might help or hinder the transfer and sustainability of learning outside the coaching experience.

The components of the Collaborative Action Research approach employed in the study are outlined in Figure 1 below. Originally, there were four action research cycles but, for practical timing issues, this was reduced to three. However, every cycle had each of the components specified in Figure 1. As a result, during a re-design phase, two *Critical Analysis Groups* were added after both action research cycles one and two; and a group feedback session for the leaders collaborating in the research. The *Feedback Providers Data* is a unique element of the collaborative action research methodology.

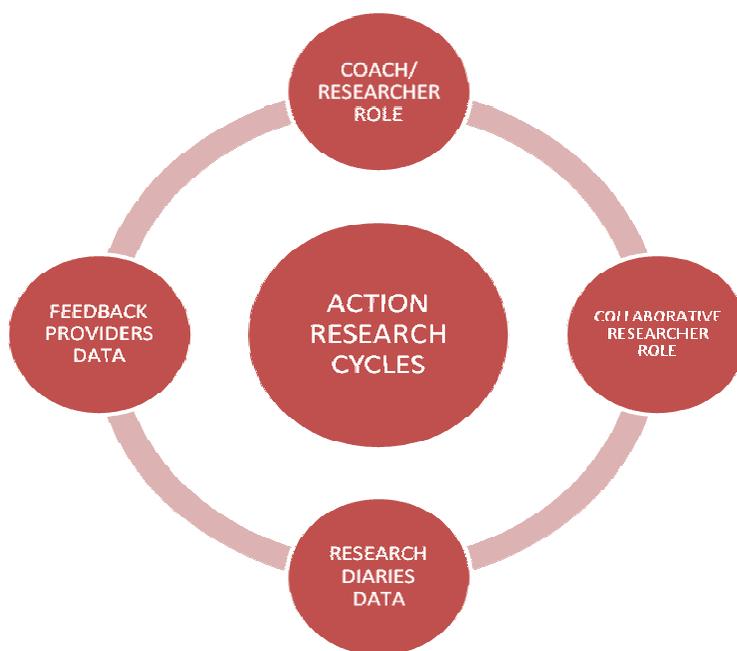


Figure 1: Developing a coaching model from researching our own coaching practice, through collaborative action research (Cook, 2010)

The feedback provider sessions were direct observation sessions in which the leaders received feedback on the learning from the coaching sessions and I observed the sessions in order to collect research data. These direct observation sessions provided data from people external to the collaborative action research relationship. In line with the approach of this study and the underpinning philosophical beliefs, leaders were left to choose both the feedback providers and the format of the sessions they led. Support was offered by me as a sounding board for the leaders to discuss their choice of participants and process for these sessions. Immediately prior to the session, I had a briefing session with the leader to check that the process was suitable for the collection of data for the research. The feedback providers selected by the leaders were a mixture of line managers, peers, direct reports and customers.

The idea for these sessions was sourced from a coaching model designed by Rogers (2008, p.199-203) called a *Real Time Coaching Model* which I have used in my coaching practice previously. As a practitioner researcher in a professional doctorate environment, using a professional coaching model on which to base part of the research process seemed appropriate. Rogers' model involves the coach "working 'live' with the client" (2008, p.199), but the coach is not facilitating the meeting. The difference is that the coach is there solely for the client which is not the case with the feedback provider sessions in this study as they have a dual role of providing learning for the client, as well as facilitating the collection of research data.

These sessions did of course raise some ethical challenges to avoid any damage to the leaders' internal organisational relationships during the feedback provider processes, especially as this type of feedback was new to all the leaders in their respective organisations. In meeting these ethical challenges in this regard, I supported the leaders in their choice of feedback providers and the facilitation of the sessions. I spent time with each leader discussing their choice of feedback providers and any potential risks associated with their involvement, as well as discussing their chosen facilitation approach and methods. This not only supported the leaders in their choices but also helped to minimise the risks of involving work colleagues in quite an intimate learning process.

A more common element of collaborative action research methodology is research diaries. Their use appears to be popular in the education, sport and health sectors (Bakker and Bal, 2010; Devonport and Lane, 2009; and Wiggins, 2009). The use of diaries in coaching research is more unusual although coaching research is in its infancy in relative terms. However, there is one important piece of work in mentoring research (a similar field). In that work, Cox (2005, p.460) suggests that "the regular use of a reflective practice tool or model makes learning from experience a more reliable and faster method of gaining access to necessary knowledge and wisdom about our work processes and about ourselves". Overall, whatever the professional field, research diaries appear to assist with reflective learning and aid personal development and this is their primary use as a research method in this study.

Herr and Anderson (2005, p.69) describe the action research process as "designing the plane while flying it" and this study was no different in that stages of re-design were necessary during the research process. As mentioned above, when the action research cycles were reduced to three, I adjusted the

design in Figure 1 and added in two *Critical Analysis Groups* after each of the first two action research cycles and a *Group Data Collection Session* after the third cycle. The group session followed the feedback provider session approach, with me as the person seeking the feedback rather than the leaders. This provided the opportunity to receive feedback on the emerging coaching model before finalisation, using a group approach to explore the findings in a different environment thereby provoking some additional data.

For public scrutiny purposes, there were two different *Critical Analysis Groups* in which peer coaching professionals who had had no involvement with this research, critically analysed the emergent themes and coaching model from action research cycles one and two. The creation of the *Critical Analysis Group* concept followed a review of the action research literature. I found Stringer's (2007, p.45) *Critical Reference Groups*: a "charting of stakeholders" which "will help identify research participants" but this did not quite fit my research study. I also found McNiff and Whitehead's (2006) *Critical Friends* concept of "testing your claims by making them and their evidence base available to public scrutiny" (2006, p.74) which was more suitable for this study. Upon further review, I found an earlier reference to *legitimising rituals* by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, p.27): "involving consultants or other 'outsiders' who can help to show that respected others are interested". The importance for this study was to find people who would be interested enough to listen to my account of the coaching practice and to critique the detail of such an account, and to be challenging, not just reinforce my biases. These *Critical Analysis Groups* were further developed from the concept of a "Validation Group" put forward by McNiff and Whitehead (2006).

With regard to the membership of the *Critical Analysis Groups*, it could be argued that a doctoral supervisory team are *Critical Friends* because they have a support role (friend) as well as a critique role (critical). McNiff and Whitehead (2006, p.158), when writing about *Critical Friends*, suggest that their job is "to guide you and invite you to question your own assumptions ..." which is a role expected of and delivered by a doctoral supervisory team. However, this is a relationship which builds familiarity over time and I was looking for a group of people who would be more outside the study, almost 'visiting' the research with their impromptu observations and analysis. I considered involving coaching clients outside the research to act as *Critical Friends* although it did not feel ethically or professionally appropriate to expect this additional role to be played by my coaching clients, and I did not want to undermine or negatively impact those coaching relationships by introducing a new type of relationship. Therefore I decided to choose the membership based on the desired outcome of an evidence-based coaching model: independent coaches with some academic research experience.

Research data was generated from: detailed reflections recorded in research diaries completed by me and the collaborating leaders; recorded discussions of the research diaries with each individual collaborating leader; transcribed feedback provider sessions; and the final *Group Data Collection Session*. For each of the three action research cycles, theoretical and latent thematic analysis (Braun, 2006) was applied to the data collected. Within a social constructivist paradigm this approach to data analysis allows for the individual experience to have a voice, and for their interpretation of their experiences to continue to exist. It was tempting to put my own labels onto their experiences (especially as I was researching my coaching practice), but instead I used a combination of my and their descriptions in the categories and themes to reflect the collaborative nature of this study. Within an interpretivist paradigm, this method of data analysis allows for interpretations to emerge direct from the data, with meanings made from the experiences through thematic analysis. This structured approach is not suggesting that the process is creating an objective reality but more that the collaborative researchers are helping to construct the 'reality' with me as the researcher (Robson, 2002).

This approach to collaborative action research was designed specifically for this study and, therefore, it could be contended that this revised approach to collaborative action research is only suitable for coaching research because of the use of a coaching model in its design. Alternatively, it could be viewed as helpful for research into other learning and development methodology, or in any research which is exploring the impact of particular relationships or processes, for example a line management relationship. Overall, the study found that coaching can help the transfer and sustainability of learning and that both the coach and the leader have individual and shared responsibilities in the transfer and sustainability of learning.

Discussion of findings

The Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) enables the transfer and sustainability of learning and is outlined in Figure 2 below. Collaborative action is reflected in the model's six categories as both individual and shared responsibilities are needed.



Figure 2: Transferring and sustaining learning through coaching: a collaborative action coaching for leaders model (Cook, 2011)

For coaches individually, the positive or negative effect of the coaching relies entirely on an ability to be **client centred** in their approach which was described by one leader as “client tailoring” (Cook, 2011). The ability to tailor the coaching approach to the individual client occurs almost entirely in the moment, as opposed to any advance preparation. For example, by having at their disposal a range of tools and techniques, the coach can select the most appropriate process for an individual client. Figure 3 below details the thirty-three themes identified under each category, including Tools/Techniques in this category. Also important to the transfer and sustainability of learning is the coach’s ability to enable and facilitate the learning of the client. This **enabling/facilitating learning** utilises the coach’s experience in a way that encourages leaders to make their own decisions about how they will apply the learning outside the coaching experience. It could be described as coaching consultancy (a theme in Figure 3) with the important element of choice on the part of the client.

For clients, the positive or negative effect of the coaching relies entirely on an ability to ensure that the coaching **session content** reflects their required areas of learning which needs advance preparation and continual review on the part of the clients. Also important to the transfer and sustainability of learning is for the client to practise **active learning**. This includes willingness on their part to encourage and receive feedback from colleagues at work which requires a proactive and open approach to their learning. It also includes being open to transfer and sustain learning from the coaching sessions back in the workplace, requiring focus and tenacity (Figure 3 details the identified themes for these two categories).

For both coaches and clients, there is recognition that at the beginning of the first action research cycle and the initial stage of the coaching the coach had primary responsibility for the **coaching relationship**. However, as the sessions progressed and the coaching relationship developed the responsibility became shared with both parties having similar responsibility to ensure that the relationship is effective in encouraging the transfer and sustainability of learning. For example, as detailed in Figure 3, the theme of Honest Dialogue applies to both coach and client to assist with the transfer and sustainability of learning.

The **reflective learning** category in Figure 2 includes a theme of coaching supervision which could be seen more as a coach responsibility than a shared responsibility with the client. However, it is the overall shared responsibility for reflective learning which is most important to the transfer and sustainability of learning, with coaching supervision representing one element (Figure 3 for the specific identified themes). The link between coaching supervision and the transfer and sustainability of learning is certainly more tenuous than the link between the reflective diaries completed by all the collaborative researchers and the transfer and sustainability of learning as the latter was significantly more in-depth. It is more of an indirect link because the coach reflects on the coaching relationship and process for all

clients during the supervision process, and the learning emanating from these discussions is transferred by the coach into those relationships and processes to encourage the transfer and sustainability of learning. This indirect link relies on a transfer and sustainability of learning by the coach from supervision into the coaching sessions. The study does not include any analysis of the coach's transfer and sustainability of learning but acknowledges the contribution this learning makes to enable the transfer and sustainability of learning for the clients.

By focusing on the responsibilities required of both the coach and the client (individually and shared), the majority of hindrances are dealt with through the coaching relationship and process itself, rather than expecting others outside the coaching process and relationship to take responsibility for any hindrance to the transfer and sustainability of learning. With the centre of attention on taking responsibility, a positive environment for the transfer and sustainability of learning from the coaching experience was created. Whilst the model has a positive focus of 'helping factors', the study did identify that coaching can hinder, albeit to a much lesser extent, the transfer and sustainability of learning from the coaching experience, although the hindrances are found to be almost entirely confirmation of the 'helping factors' identified from the research process. The main feature which hindered the transfer and sustainability of additional learning was the fact that the coach was not able to delay any of the coaching sessions as the research timetable dictated they be held within a specific period of time. This was of particular importance to the more newly appointed leaders, who felt they would like to delay a couple of the coaching sessions in order to wait for certain new or different experiences at work, whilst the more experienced leaders did not find it a hindrance, which confirms the need for a **client centred process** as in the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011).

The other identified hindrance was some lack of opportunity for practising of learning back in the workplace which was due partly to the leaders not bringing current content to the coaching sessions, the lack of opportunity in their organisational context, and the session timing issue in the paragraph above. The session content is the responsibility of the client; the opportunities to practise back in the workplace are more in the control of the client than an external coach but may not always be possible to engineer back in the workplace; and the timing of the sessions is the responsibility of the coach. The 'helping factors' in the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) reduce possible hindrances to the transfer and sustainability of learning which, it could be maintained, is because there is a strong emphasis on both the coach and the client taking responsibility.

It could be argued that both my belief that coaching enables the transfer and sustainability of learning (especially as the study is researching my coaching practice) and the positive coaching relationships developed with the collaborative researchers, have influenced the positive emphasis of the research findings. Further research could explore the impact of the coach's beliefs on the coaching outcomes. However, the coaching relationship is already a key 'helping factor' in the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model. The fact that the findings and conclusions from the study are overwhelmingly positive could also be resulting from, in part, the emphasis on taking responsibility encouraged by the collaborative action research methodology (an unpredicted outcome when the research study was designed).

The six categories derived from the data over time remained constant from cycle one, and the thirty-three data themes accumulated from each of the three cycles (Figure 1). It is clear from the emerging data across the three cycles, that it is the combination of all six categories (and the thirty-three themes) which over time enable the transfer and sustainability of learning; there does not appear to be any weighting of a specific category or theme.

Overall, one observation is that in the first cycle only transfer of learning occurred; in the second cycle, both transfer and sustainability of learning occurred with transfer being dominant; and, in the third cycle sustainability of learning was more dominant than transfer of learning. The sustainability of learning became more of a feature over time. In addition, there was a significant increase in the data of examples of both transfer and sustainability of learning in the third cycle which could be explained by an accumulation of the learning from the coaching sessions which encourages the transfer and sustainability of learning to increase over time. Therefore, sufficient time to transfer and sustain learning from the coaching sessions appears to be important in the findings.

With regard to the categories of data, all the leaders agreed that the **coaching relationship** was important, with three of them saying it was of prime importance. As mentioned above, the data suggests that the leaders and I were more aware of the coaching relationship during the first cycle than the second cycle. This suggestion makes sense as this was when the relationship was being formed and, during the first cycle, the coach seemed to have primary responsibility to ensure a successful relationship. Once the relationship was established, the leaders began to take more of a shared responsibility. A case could be made that it is harder to see a link between the coaching relationship and the transfer and sustainability of

learning in the same way as with the coaching process categories (**client centred process, enabling/facilitating learning, session content**), because the relationship is less tangible. However, the data suggests that the coaching relationship created the learning environment in which the coaching process could flourish. As with the coaching process categories, the **active learning** category of data is similarly tangible, albeit different, because the processes take place outside the coaching experience. With the client taking responsibility to learn actively away from the coaching sessions, transfer and sustainability of learning is enabled. The weighting of the categories of **client centred process, enabling/facilitating learning, session content and active learning**, did not change over time, they were important throughout each of the three cycles.

CATEGORIES					
COACH RESPONSIBILITIES		CLIENT RESPONSIBILITIES		COACH & CLIENT RESPONSIBILITIES	
CLIENT CENTRED PROCESS	ENABLING/FACILITATING LEARNING	SESSION CONTENT	ACTIVE LEARNING	COACHING RELATIONSHIP	REFLECTIVE LEARNING
THEMES					
Coach In Charge Of The Process	Encourage Practice Back In The Workplace	Contracting: Start Point	Colleague Feedback	Comfort	Reflective Diaries
Tailored Tools/ Techniques	Share Experience To Facilitate Learning	Client Bringing Content	Transfer Of Learning Measures Identified	Safety/ Confidentiality/ Trust	Feedback Provider Sessions
Challenge/ Support	Suspend Judgement		Being Open To Learning	Coach And Client Match	Record-Keeping
Client Context	Not Therapy		Client Takes Responsibility For Their Learning	Face-To-Face	Coaching Supervision
Physical Environment	Lasting Impact Of Coach		Reflective Practitioner	External Coach	
Setting Goals	Coaching Consultancy			Honest Dialogue	
Sounding Board				Primary Role As Coach	
Friendly Support				Keeping In Touch Outside Coaching Sessions	

Figure 3: Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model – identified categories (6) and themes (33) (Cook, 2011)

This equal weighting over time also applied to the **reflective learning** category of data. The contribution of reflective learning in relation to transfer and sustainability of learning was clear from the first cycle through to the third. **Reflective learning** was encouraged by the research data collection processes: reflective diaries, feedback provider sessions and coaching supervision which all became data themes. The fourth data theme of record keeping was not part of the research process. The influence of the research process was unexpected and important in the transfer and sustainability of learning from the coaching experience.

One consistent feature of the three cycles is that there are no examples of what might be described as ‘negative learning’, *ie* learning something which could be politically unacceptable or possibly damaging to the organisation. My observation is that this is about my experience as a leader combined with my ability as a coach to facilitate clients’ learning about taking actions which could be unacceptable or damaging to them or their organisations. It is also possible that this is strengthened by the fact that some of my experience is specifically in the same sector as the leaders which may have prevented any ‘negative learning’ being transferred or sustained. Another consistent feature is the element of individual and shared responsibility which is important for maximising the transfer and sustainability of learning from the coaching experience to outside that experience.

However, as a social constructivist, I do not believe in absolute truth and would not presume, therefore, that any coaching model was the one right way to coach. Whilst this model offers is an

alternative approach to evaluating return on investment, it is not entirely clear whether this model is suitable for all coaches and appropriate for all coaching for leaders interventions. In coaching practice, there is a prevalent assumption that coaching models are transferable from coach to coach, and client to client. However, if the coach is truly applying a client-centred approach surely this denies the automatic transferability of any model to any coaching experience. In addition, there is the skills, knowledge and experience of the coach to take into account, as well as the learning ability of the leaders being coached (neither of these elements were part of this research study). Therefore, the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) needs to be further explored with different coaches, different clients and in different organisational environments to build on this research experience and continue to assess its ability to ensure that coaching is not just an expensive conversation. By bringing their own style and approach as a coach, as well as putting their clients' learning needs at the centre, both coach and client can determine collaboratively if the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) is helping them to transfer and sustain learning from the coaching experience to outside that experience.

Law, Ireland and Hussain's (2007) work is complementary to this research because they argue that both the coach and the person being coached have to be actively engaged in learning. Their learning process of "input, means and outcomes" (2007, p.53) bears some similarity to the six categories in the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011), for example, *Input* could be the session content brought by the clients, *Means* could be the coach enabling/facilitating learning, and *Outcomes* could be the identified transfer of learning from the coaching experience. This study also augments the work of Wasylyshyn (2003) which has more of a specific focus on return on investment and the work of Smith, Oosten and Boyatzis (2009) which focuses on sustained change, although change could be learning by any other name. However, this study emphasises the contribution of the coach and the person being coached rather than simply focusing on the contribution and competence of the coach.

The concept of the coach and the client being in partnership or collaborating has only started to appear more consistently in the literature during the 2000 decade. Natale and Diamante (2005, p.372) in their research have determined that "executive coaching is viewed as a collaborative alliance focusing on change and transformation". Stern (2004, p.157) suggests from his experience that "executive coaching works best when the coach does not work alone as a supplier but in partnership with the executive, his or her boss, HR professionals within the organization, and other key individuals". In reviewing a range of techniques and tools, Law, Ireland and Hussain (2007, p.142) come to the conclusion that "common ground exists among different coaching approaches; they are a collaborative intervention between coaches/mentors and coaches/mentees". However, this study looks specifically at the collaborative actions required of both coach and leader as outlined in Figure 1 above.

However, there is a gap in the literature with regard to coaching and the transfer and sustainability of learning, particularly in the external, stand-alone, one-to-one coaching for leaders in a business environment which was the focus of this research. The findings explain the importance of a shared responsibility of both coach and client in the transfer and sustainability of learning which is uncommon in the current literature. This study makes a significant contribution to the current literature, and paves the way for more empirical research in the area of coaching and the transfer and sustainability of learning from the coaching experience to outside that experience.

One of my research participants (an independent coach) described identifying the transfer and sustainability of learning in coaching as "the Holy Grail" for their client organisations. In their experience, coaching clients often found the coaching sessions enjoyable but returned to work and did not appear to transfer any learning. There are two main findings from the study: coaching can help the transfer and sustainability of learning; and both the coach and the client have individual and shared responsibilities in the transfer and sustainability of learning from the coaching sessions to outside that experience. The Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) illustrates how coaching can help the transfer and sustainability of learning from the coaching experience, highlighting the importance of both individual and shared responsibility.

Conclusion

This research has several key features. It is a longitudinal study which, in itself, is fairly new in the world of coaching research; however, the longitudinal nature of this study was only possible because of the commitment of the individual collaborative researchers. Also, the equal weighting of the categories and themes outlined in Figures 2 and 3 is a striking feature of the coaching model, as well as the on-going impact of the outcomes of the research, *i.e.* the transfer and sustainability of learning. This in-depth work with these leaders was both inspiring and productive. Inspiring because of their individual commitment to their collaborative participation in the study (despite the challenges of life often getting in the way), and productive because of the depth of reflection which generated the data for a new coaching model. I am indebted to all of them for this truly mutually beneficial collaboration.

One leader said: “I know I have retained information and reused it so much, and will continue to do so. It will also support me as I move forward ...” (Cook, 2011). It was similar for me, in that the research experience is now embedded in my coaching practice, although there is always more learning from which to benefit. This study identified that transfer and sustainability of learning was a consequence of a collaborative approach to the coaching relationship and process, and hence a new coaching model for return on investment was created.

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