

Does managerial involvement in workplace coaching impact the outcome? A mixed-methods study into the current methods managers employ and the impacts on coaching effectiveness

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Abstract

Research into workplace-training suggests actions taken by **managers**, such as discussing applying the training, can significantly impact the effectiveness of training. However, little is known as to whether these findings translate to **workplace-coaching**. This **mixed-methods** study gathered information on current practices involving managers and the perceived **effectiveness** on the **outcomes** of coaching from coachees, managers and practitioners within the field. Those approaches that required discretionary effort as opposed to prescribed involvement were perceived to have a greater impact on coaching outcomes. There appeared to be no cumulative effect; more involvement did not translate to a perception of greater impact on outcomes.

Key words: workplace-coaching, manager, effectiveness, mixed-methods, outcomes

Introduction

With workplace coaching on the rise (ICF, 2014, CIPD, 2015), understanding whether coaching within the workplace is effective and whether this translates into business outcomes has been a topic that has occupied many academic researchers and practicing consultants. Grant (2013) identified 234 studies seeking to understand the outcome of coaching between 2000 and 2011. Researchers in this field tend to agree that the results “lean towards coaching being an effective intervention in terms of their self-efficacy, goal attainment and for organisations in terms of their leadership” (Grover & Furnham 2016, pp.23).

An early study investigating the impact coaching has on business outcomes was conducted by McGovern et al. (2001). The authors sought to quantify business results that resulted as a direct impact of externally provided coaching. These results were compared with the costs of coaching, thereby identifying the return on investment (ROI) of the coaching intervention. Individuals who had received coaching were asked to self-report on business outcomes they believed had improved as a result of the coaching. Key stakeholders including the coaches were also asked to provide feedback on the perceived outcomes. The participants estimated there to be significant financial impacts on the performance: on average the perceived ROI was £100k of incremental benefit to the business. The authors concluded that coaching has a significant impact on business results (McGovern et al. 2001).



As studies in this area increase, meta-analysis has become possible, examining whether common outcomes and inferences can be drawn. The results aggregating the research findings have led researchers to conclude that coaching works, with outcomes including moderate-to-large increases in skill and/or performance and productivity (De Meuse & Dai, 2009, Theeboom, Beersma and van Vianer, 2014, Grover & Furnham, 2016, Jones, Woods & Guillaume, 2015, Sonesh et al. 2015).

More than simply determining whether or not coaching is effective, understanding *what* impacts the effectiveness of coaching is of significant interest to researchers and practitioners. Understanding what impacts the effectiveness of coaching could support those practitioners managing coaching within organisations, helping to influence how best to design support around a coaching interventions.

Having established that coaching has an impact on performance, researchers have sought to analyse the mechanisms within coaching to understand why and how it works and to identify whether some aspects have a greater impact on the outcomes than others. One notable finding is that trust and an ability to create an effective working relationship is critical to driving effective coaching outcomes (Baron & Morin 2009, de Haan et al. 2016, de Haan, Culpin, Curd, 2008, Rekalde, Landeta & Albizu 2015, Ely et al. 2010). The attributes of the coachee have also been researched, finding that personality matching between the coach and coachee has no impact on the effectiveness of coaching (de Haan et al. 2016). When researchers compare the effectiveness on coaching goals between internal and external coaches, internal coaches are found to fare better (Jones, Woods & Guillaume 2015).

In terms of researching the impacts of different elements within the coaching process itself, the findings vary. In terms of duration, it was found that the number of coaching sessions does make a difference, more than three appeared to have the best results. The researchers of this study hypothesised this may be due to the relationship between the coach and coachee improving over time (Baron & Morin 2010). However, meta-analysis carried out found no difference between different durations and the coaching outcomes (Jones, Woods & Guillaume 2015). The coaching format – e.g., face-to-face v's phone, or e-coaching was found to have no differing impact on the outcomes (Jones, Woods & Guillaume, 2015).

These studies focus exclusively on the coaching as an event, the people involved in the sessions and how the sessions are constructed. They have not assessed how the coaching and the outcomes apply in situ, i.e. in the workplace. Research in the related field of workplace-training has identified that a supportive environment experienced after training is more important than the quality of the trainer or training materials in terms of applying and maintaining the learning (Rouiller & Goldstein, 1993; Tracey, Tannenbaum & Kavanagh, 1995). Examples of a supportive environment that the manager can impact include: discussing how to apply the training, reshaping the role to enable the practice of new skills, giving feedback, providing positive reinforcement or rewarding the use of new skills, or conversely punishment for not using them.

Some research points to managerial involvement potentially having a positive impact on coaching outcomes. Rekalde, Landeta & Albizu (2015) conducted a series of focus groups with experienced coaches, coachees and purchasers of organisational coaching. The manager's involvement was rated as a highly important factor in the successful outcomes for coaching. The authors hypothesise that in actively supporting the coaching, the coachee is encouraged to increase their efforts to develop and achieve their goals. Similarly, in a study by Baron & Morin (2009) the coachees who reported the highest performance outcomes were those who rated their supervisors as most involved in the coaching. However, with relatively few studies specifically looking at this type of involvement, further research is evidently needed. Little is currently known about the different ways managers get involved and how these interventions impact the effectiveness of coaching.



With this in mind, the research objectives for this study were;

1. To identify the different methods by which managers are involved in workplace coaching
2. To examine the perceived impact of managerial interventions on the effectiveness of workplace coaching.

Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods approach; a synthesis of different techniques used to improve research outcomes (Brewer & Hunter, 1989). In this case, harnessing the benefits of both qualitative (in-depth semi-structured interviews and open survey questions) and quantitative (a survey) research methods. This combination allowed a much larger population to be studied than using only a qualitative approach.

A survey was sent to 750 coachees who had recently experienced coaching in their organisation, asking about the current practices in terms of managerial involvement in coaching and the perceived impacts it has on coaching outcomes. A high response rate of 20% was achieved, providing 150 coachee responses, from a broad range of global and UK based companies. A similar survey was sent to the coachees' line manager and/or HR manager. This validation of the data through cross-verification, termed 'triangulation' provides crucial alternative viewpoints and can highlight if coachees' answers are impacted by bias positively or negatively towards the topic in question (i.e. if the answers vary drastically between respondents in the 'triangle'). Eight of these questionnaires were returned from the manager and/or HR manager (a disappointing response rate of 5.3%). Additionally, a number of in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted using the survey questions but allowing for deeper probing with experienced coaches and those who have managed coaching provision in organisations for a number of years.

The data analysis leveraged statistical packages (quantitative) to understand if the differences in perceived outcomes between groups who had experienced different types of managerial involvement were significantly different. Thematic analysis was used to understand the qualitative data and sort the responses into categories. The approach of combining qualitative and quantitative methods and the respective ways of analysing the data has provided deep insights into not only what activities are underway in organisations, but also the perceptions of their effectiveness and also thoughts and ideas from those most closely engaged in the activity of coaching in organisations. This method was chosen to gain a broad understanding of current practices (large population size possible through quantitative methods) and also insight to direct further research (deeper and more specific details possible through qualitative methods).

Findings

The findings are divided below into two sections; firstly what types of managerial involvement in coaching takes place as was evidenced by the research and secondly what was the perceived impact of the different types of managerial involvement by the coachee, manager and/or HR manager.

Managerial Involvement in Coaching

The high level analysis of the survey responses indicated that in the main, managers are involved in the coaching in some way. Only 9% of the coachees responded that their



manager was not involved at all. Nearly half of those who responded said that their manager had suggested the coaching.

The most common methods that managers currently get involved in coaching in the population surveyed are:

Recommending the coaching	48%
Participating in an interview to give feedback used in the coaching	38%
Asking what they could do to support the coachee's coaching goal	37%
Setting the objectives for the coaching	34%

The least common methods coachees reported that managers employed were;

Participating in some way in most or all coaching sessions	0%
Followed up with the coachee after most or all the coaching sessions	5%
Rewarded the coachee for demonstrating changes	6%
Created or sought out opportunities for the coachee to practice	9%
Held the coachee to account for demonstrating changes	10%

The correlation between the coachees' response and that of either their line manager or HR manager only achieved low to moderate correlations. However, with such low numbers in the responses in these pair/triad perspectives, the sample sizes are too small to provide confidence that these results are generalisable (Bonnet, 2000, Cohen & Cohen, 1975). In an effort to overcome such limitations, this study sought to provide additional viewpoints through interviewing experienced coaches & HR coaching co-ordinators.

To further understand the methods of managerial involvement used in coaching in organisations, three experienced coaches and three HR coaching co-ordinators were interviewed, using semi-structured questions. The transcripts were read and codes applied for each method described. Thematic analysis was conducted to provide a rich and detailed account of what coaches and HR coaching co-ordinators were practicing and witnessing within their coaching practices and organisations.

1. *Setting expectations of managers about their required involvement.* This includes briefing managers, or when coaching was used for a cohort on a programme through a group call, outlining what was expected of them in terms of the coaching engagement. The interviewees did acknowledge this was a desired best practice and wasn't adhered to all the time. They often spoke of having to intervene as described by one of the coaches:

"I sometimes have to influence the coachee to instigate time with myself and the line manager so that I can brief them as to their required involvement.. it makes such a difference" (Coach)

2. *Managerial (and other stakeholders) feedback as input into the coaching.* This was often a formalised process, usually before starting the first coaching session. If not formalised within the organisations process, the coaches noted that they felt this was such an important part of the process that they had their own surveys or interview methods that they would turn to in the absence of organisations having their own 360 questionnaire as described by one of the coaches.

"I always try to get stakeholder input into the coaching, however, whereas [in the past] it used to comprise of quite long interviews, now they are much shorter, like 10 to 15 minutes each" (Coach)

3. *Encouraging managers to participate in one or more of the coaching sessions:* This was frequently described as a formal part of the process that was specified by the organisation or the coach. Often this meant the manager participated in the first coaching session or the last session as described in this quote.

"it's a time to review progress, agree further development needs and to attempt to create some momentum for their continued support of the coachee's development" (Coach)

From the field of organisational training research, Tannenbaum and Yukl (1992) refer to the fact that activities prior to and starting the training are significantly important for the transfer of learning. It seems from this research that organisations and coaches have adopted these practices into workplace coaching. However, in terms of post training activities the research study conducted by Saks & Belcourt (2006) reports that organisations rarely incorporate follow-up activities into their training initiatives. In relation to this study it appears that some of these practices are in existence within coaching. For example, one of the most frequent types of involvement (37% of respondents) was that their manager discussed with them what they could do to support the coaching goals. However, this may not translate into actual follow up activities. For example, only 9% said their manager followed up with them after coaching sessions to reinforce learning or hold them to account and only 9% said their manager actively created opportunities for them to practice the newly learned skills. In terms of 'accountability', only 10% and 6% respectively, said that their line manager held them to account or rewarded them for demonstrating the goals of the coaching.

The thematic analysis of the interviews with coaches and HR coaching coordinators produced a number of themes; they described how managerial involvement in coaching had increased in their organisation(s) or coaching practice over time. The longer coaching has been in place, the more likely managerial involvement has been formalised into process. This progression, where managerial involvement is seen as part of a maturing coaching culture aligns to the Coaching Culture Framework described by Clutterbuck, Megginson & Bajer (2017) who suggest that there are four stages of developing a coaching culture within organisations; nascent, tactical, strategic and embedded. In this conceptual framework, the strategic stage included activities that educate those in the organisation about coaching and encourage practices to embed and integrate coaching into everyday work activities.

Another theme captured from the feedback from the expert interviewees in this research study, suggested that the extent to which particular methods of involvement are mandated or heavily recommended to the manager also depends on whether the coaching is part of a programme or an ad-hoc intervention instigated by an individual or his/her manager. With regards ad-hoc coaching, the interviewees commented that there was far less process, formality or control put on to the coaching engagement and that what happened in terms of managerial involvement was governed by the experience or willingness of the coachee and/or their manager. Whereas they described the process of the programmatic coaching as much more formalised. In these programmatic coaching initiatives time and effort was taken to ensure that the manager was clear that he/she was expected to be involved in the coaching and specific governance in some cases created to ensure various types of involvement occurred (360 feedback, attendance to coaching sessions for example). This creation of a formal process for managerial involvement is descriptive of being at the strategic stage of the coaching culture development in an organisation, where managers are not using it informally yet because the organisation has not yet reached the embedded stage (Clutterbuck, Megginson & Bajer, 2017).

Impact of Managerial Involvement

Respondents were asked to rate the overall effectiveness of their coaching which was compared to which of the different types of managerial involvement the coachee had recorded as experiencing and how many of the methods they had experienced. The number of methods employed did not have an effect on the perception of the effectiveness of coaching – “more is not more”. However, coachees rated the effectiveness of their coaching more highly for each method when it was employed v’s coachees who did not experience this method. This would suggest that overall, managerial involvement has an impact on improving the effectiveness of coaching. The two largest differences was for the manager rewarding the coachee or for holding the coachee to account for demonstrating changes back in the workplace.

An additional point to note is that the coachees rated the effectiveness of their coaching highly, irrespective of what managerial methods were employed. The average rating from all participants was 6.7 out of a possible 9. For the 20 coachees whose manager was not involved in any of the methods featured in the survey, the average rating for the overall effectiveness of the coaching was 6.15. One could conclude from this that coaching itself is a highly effective intervention in terms of perceived outcomes for those being coached, as is noted by much of the research into coaching effectiveness (Grover & Furnham, 2016) and in the review of 234 studies by Grant (2013). It may be that any additional interventions employed to enhance the outcomes of coaching are only capable of making a small additional impact on what is already a high impact.

Those methods of managerial involvement that were deemed most impactful were;

1. Providing feedback either through 360 or interview to “direct the content of the coaching” and “support the objective setting”
2. Managers being involved in setting the objectives for coaching
3. Following up with the coachee regards progress and where they [the manager] could provide support

Those methods deemed least impactful were:

1. The manager recommending the coaching
2. Rewarding the coachee for achieving the coaching objectives / displaying them back in the work place

These findings align with research regarding the impact of managerial input on the outcomes of training initiatives (Rouiller & Goldstein, 1993, Tracey, Tannenbaum & Kavanagh, 1995). In these studies the types of managerial involvement that had a positive impact on the learning outcomes of the training their direct reports attended included; discussing with the trainee how to apply the training in a work context; reshaping the role to enable practice of these new skills; giving feedback, providing positive reinforcement or rewarding the individual when new skills were used appropriately; or conversely punishing them if the individual failed to use their new skill. These methods are a discretionary act by the manager, there is no formality or structure or instruction to these acts, whereas those methods perceived as less effective, are part of the governance put in by others (i.e. attending one or more of the coaching sessions, completing feedback forms etc.). These highest rated methods by the participants of this survey are in line with the findings by Towler, Watson & Surface (2013), who found that the most impactful methods managers could employ in supporting training outcomes were specifically those that were discretionary as opposed to mandated actions.

Discussion

The findings suggest that managers are involved in coaching in the workplace today in a number of different ways. Most commonly, the methods in which they are involved are; recommending the coaching; providing feedback/input that is used in the coaching and offering support to the coachee in making the changes agreed in the coaching. Those involved in coaching in organisations made reference to the involvement of managers in coaching becoming more routine. Specifically, it was highlighted that with formally organised coaching programmes or development programmes that involve coaching, managerial involvement is now becoming hard-wired into the programme design. Outside of programmatic coaching, the manager's involvement was more varied. According to the expert interviewees, organisations that have been using coaching for some time were more likely to encourage managerial involvement. In addition, those managers that had become accustomed to good practice in coaching were observed to self-instigate proactive involvement with the process, even though the process design did not require this from them. In this regard, there was a similar view that managers who had themselves experienced coaching, were more likely to engage with the coaching of their direct reports. This would help to explain the view that managerial involvement in coaching is increasing, given that workplace coaching has been in existence for some while and continues to increase.

The second research question focused on the perceived impact of managerial involvement in coaching. Overall the coachees' in this study rated the effectiveness of their coaching very highly. This is consistent with the review of research regarding whether coaching is effective, conducted by Grant (2013). Across the board, when the coachee was asked to rate the overall effectiveness of the coaching, the rating was higher for each type of managerial involvement, than when that method was not employed. However, although higher, the difference was not found to be statistically significant in this study.

The coachee's were also asked to rate each type of managerial involvement with respect to their view on the impact this method (if they had experienced it) had on the effectiveness of their coaching. In this question the highest rated methods of managerial involvement were the proactive methods. This finding aligns with the outcomes of studies on workplace training, which discovered that the most impactful methods managers could employ in supporting training outcomes were those that were discretionary as opposed to mandated (Rouiller & Goldstein, 1993, Tracey, Tannenbaum & Kavanagh, 1995, Towler, Watson & Surface, 2013).

The experienced coaches and organisational experts also felt that discretionary involvement was the most impactful method that managers could employ. This emphasis on discretionary actions from managers having a greater impact on the outcomes of coaching aligns to the concept of Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut & Kelley 1959, Kelly & Thibaut 1978, Homan 1961) whereby individuals in some kind of relationship exchange actions or behaviours, in a form of social reciprocity. In the case of improved coaching effectiveness, the improved outcomes could be driven as a result of additional discretionary effort from the coachee which was stimulated from the visible efforts from the manager. This socially reciprocal behaviour results in positive outcomes for both parties. In organisational research by Purcell and Hutchinson (2007), results suggest that additional discretionary effort from managers towards their employee results in their direct reports being more engaged and in turn displaying more discretionary effort for the organisation and resulting in higher performance outcomes. Greater employee engagement and performance outcomes were found when compared to managers who simply followed the organisational processes set out for them. It therefore seems that the choice of supporting and doing so in your own way is better than following the process. In the case of improved coaching effectiveness, this could be stimulated from the visible efforts from the manager, that results in the coachee putting more effort into achieving the goals of the coaching.



The theory doesn't stipulate that the amount of exchange increases discretionary effort, which aligns with there being no correlation between the number of methods being employed and the overall rating of the effectiveness of the coaching. The existence of some kind of exchange facilitates effort from the other party and in the case of discretionary effort, not simply following the processes set out by the organisation or the coach as was found in the case of performance and engagement by Purcell and Hutchinson (2007). This distinction between activities could assist organisations (and coaches) in determining how to prioritise how to involve managers. Given that management time is limited, taking the time to educate and engage managers around the potential benefits of coaching and how their discretionary effort can impact the overall outcomes of coaching, might result in better outcomes.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of this study constrain the extent to which recommendations can be made. The study relied on self-reporting from coachees as opposed to controlling different aspects of the manager's involvement in coaching and comparing outcomes of those who did and did not experience a method. In an attempt to identify whether the self-reported outcomes were reliable, the questionnaire was also shared with the coachees' line managers and their HR managers. Unfortunately only a small number (8) of manager/HR manager to coachee pairs responded and for those that did respond, their answers did not strongly correlate with the answers of the coachee. This unreliability of self-reporting methodology is highlighted by Grant *et al.* (2010) and given as the reason researchers need to conduct more randomised control trials to further our understanding.

Another limitation pertaining to using a self-report questionnaire that is not supported by larger volumes of triangulated perspectives of other viewpoints is that coachees may hold existing beliefs in regards to the effectiveness of coaching and this could influence their responses. Researchers have found that there is not necessarily a very strong relationship between perception and reality, particularly when it comes to objectively assessing performance (Marteau, Johnston, Wynne & Evans, 1989, Dunning, 2005). Critcher and Dunning (2009) for example, found that prior beliefs influenced participant's self-assessment of their own performance in a task. In relation to this study, if coachees had a belief already that their manager's involvement was important and would have a material impact on their coaching they may have scored the impact of each managerial method that their manager did involve themselves in, higher than the actual reality of the impact. These findings also lend support to Grant's position that randomised control design is the gold standard for determining what factors influence the impact of coaching (Grant, 2013).

This study did not ask participants to compare or rank the different types of managerial involvement and therefore, because their perception in general was that they had an effective experience in coaching, they may have rated all methods highly and not discriminated between the different methods employed. In repeating this research it would be beneficial to ask participants to distinguish between the different methods employed in their coaching engagement. Further limitations of this study are that the research focused solely on the role of managerial involvement, one could look at other factors that contribute to a conducive coaching environment. These could include alignment of business goals, peer support and other aspects of the business context or performance for example.

Conclusion

There are two recommendations that could be drawn for coaching within the workplace as a result of these findings. Firstly, formal vs. choice of involvement: Creating check-lists or formal processes that involve the manager are likely to be not as effective as educating managers on the importance of their involvement in the process, outlining various ways that



they can become involved and highlighting that they should choose those that are most meaningful or workable/feasible for them. Secondly, quality over quantity: given managerial time is a scarce resource, encouraging managers to get involved in a few select ways is possibly a better use of time than asking them to engage in numerous different ways and times over the duration of the coaching programme.

More studies are required to further understand what different ways managers get involved in coaching within a workplace setting and how these impact the longer-term behavioural and performance outcomes of coachees. It may be of interest to identify whether the whole range of coaching interventions across the duration of coaching from before, during and after the coaching are necessary and create an additive effect or if some methods are more effective than others, for example comparing 'tell' involvement with 'facilitative engagement'. Given so many different types of managerial involvement were identified in this study as commonplace in organisations today this may help understand if all are required (demonstrating commitment across the coaching period) or if management time can be more efficiently allocated to drive maximum outcomes.

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