

The experience of executive group coaching – A qualitative study

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Introduction: *The aim of this study was to explore managers' experiences of participating in executive group coaching in a municipality in Sweden.*

Methods: *A qualitative methodology was used in the study. Managers that had participated in executive group coaching were invited to participate. Individual interviews were used to collect the data, and ten individuals took part in the study. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to analyse the interviews.*

Results: *Four main themes emerged from the analysis. The first theme 'group engagement' highlighted that the group format helped to create a high level of activity. The second theme 'a space for reflection and creativity' described how the coaching provided a space for thinking about strategic issues. The third theme 'taking different perspectives' showed, and 'increased self-awareness and courage'.*

Discussion: *The members of the executive group coaching were highly engaged in the process, it provided an opportunity for reflection and creativity, increased self-awareness, and the ability to think in new and different ways.*

Conclusion: *The findings highlight that executive group coaching can be useful in helping managers to develop skills that are useful in leadership practice, and can also provide an opportunity for managers to give and receive well needed peer support.*

Objectives: *To explore managers' experiences of participating in executive group coaching.*

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT is big business. A growing part of leadership development is executive coaching that is often used to develop the executive's psychological and behavioural skills, needed to reach work-related goals and dealing with organisational turbulence (Grant et al., 2010). Executive coaching is frequently used by organisations, and can be described as a helping relationship between a coachee, who has leadership, managerial or supervisory responsibility and authority within an organisation, and a coach who uses a range of theories and techniques in order to support the coachee to achieve a defined set of goals related to leadership, performance, wellbeing and the effectiveness of the organisation (Grant, 2014). Organisational change is part of

everyday experience in many organisations, and executive coaching can be useful in helping managers to function more effectively in times with organisational turbulence or uncertainty (Grant et al., 2009).

Different leadership theories can be used in executive coaching, and a leadership theory that has been popular in leadership research during the last decades is the full range leadership model (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Avolio, 2011), where transformational leadership has been found to be effective in relation to follower performance, commitment and satisfaction (Avolio, 2011). Transformational leadership has four dimensions: intellectual stimulation, individualised consideration, inspirational motivation and idealised influence. Leadership behaviours that has been found to be transformational

include to be good role model, to create a common vision, to continuously challenge and question processes, and to encourage employees doing a good job (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). A study with school principals (Cerni et al., 2010) investigated whether a coaching intervention could bring about changes in transformational leadership. It was found that after the intervention there was a significant increase in transformational leadership scores, this change was not found in the control group. Executive coaching has been found to be an effective method in leadership development (Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Tach, 2002), and to improve skills and performance (De Meuse et al., 2009). In a review of the literature on executive coaching Grant (2014) states that although the emerging evidence-base suggests that executive coaching can be effective more empirical research is needed.

Most coaching is conducted in a one-to-one format, but recently there has been an increased interest in 'group' or 'team' coaching. For example, Brown and Grant (2010) argue for the increased use of group coaching in organisational settings. There are different approaches to group coaching. For example, team coaching is a type of group coaching where members of an existing team are coached together to reach a common goal (Thornton, 2010). Another type is group coaching in learning groups; it can also be called individual coaching in group. Each group member is coached individually in accordance with their personal goals, and take turns being coached. In this approach the group members can contribute with peer perspectives and experiences. The coaching is organised around one or several common coaching areas that are relevant for all the group members. These coaching groups can consist of members from the same organisation or the same area of business (Nicholas & Twaddell, 2008). There are mostly theoretical articles on the topic of group coaching, and a lack of outcome studies on the effects (Britton, 2013; Brown &

Grant, 2010). Nevertheless, a few studies have evaluated the effectiveness of team coaching and found that it was related to successful innovation in work teams, and team learning behaviours (Rousseau et al., 2013; Edmondson, 1999).

Executive coaching is frequently used by organisations, and has been found to be effective but more research is needed. The use of group coaching is increasing and executive group coaching could be a cost-effective alternative to individual coaching. In addition, it has the potential for positive group effects such as the development of support within the group, improved listening and communication skills, and knowledge transfer between group members. However, there is a lack of research investigating the effectiveness and experiences of group coaching. Therefore, the aim of this qualitative study was to explore managers' experiences of participating in executive group coaching.

Methods

Background

During the years 2012–2013 a municipality in Sweden offered group executive coaching to all heads of the departments/units (approximately 70 managers) in the city district administration. The coaching buyer specified that the coaching should take place in a group setting, both because of cost-effectiveness and because it was viewed as an opportunity to create a shared vision of leadership. The buyer set some overarching goals for the coaching which included improved ability to handle organisational change and improved leadership skills.

Executive group coaching method

The group coaching took place during a six months period and consisted of four sessions. All coaching was done in groups and each coaching group consisted of six group members and one coach. The group members set their own specific goal/goals within the overarching goals set by the buyer. During the sessions the group members took

turns to be coached in the group. The coach was in charge of the coaching structure, and the group members that were not being coached, could offer reflections and suggestions when they were invited to do so. The coaching was conducted by psychologists working at occupational health care who had coaching training and experience in leadership development.

The group coaching process contained the following steps:

- *First session* – Personal presentations, focus on the general aims of the coaching, personal goals and development of action-plan.
- *Second/third session* – Follow-up on action-plan, planning the next steps.
- *Fourth session* – Follow-up on the initial goals, plan for continuing the work, evaluation of the process.

Participants

The participants in the current study were selected for the interviews on the basis that they had completed the executive group coaching. The researchers aimed to explore a range of experiences of the group coaching and wanted to interview participants with different backgrounds. The participants had been in different coaching groups (with different coaches), had varying ages and came from different departments. Overall, ten individuals participated in the study, seven women and three men, aged 41–65 years with a mean age of 52 years.

Procedure

Individual semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data, and two of the authors conducted the interviews (CH & GJ), which took between 40 and 60 minutes. The interview schedule was used as a guide and contained open questions on the coaching process, the role of the group and the coaching alliance. Examples of questions included: ‘What was effective in promoting change during the coaching?’, ‘What hindered change in the coaching?’, ‘What role did the group play in the coaching

process?’, ‘What role did the coach play?’, ‘Was there anything you wished the would have done differently?’. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants signed a consent form that included information regarding the fact that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw from the study, and that the data would be anonymised and confidential.

Analysis

The interviews were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in accordance with the guidelines presented by Smith et al. (1999). IPA is phenomenological as it aims to explore in detail how participants make sense of the world and capture the participants’ experiences of the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, it was suitable for the current study because the aim was to explore the participants’ experiences of participating in the group coaching. The approach is also interpretative, because the researcher is trying to understand the experience of the participant through a process of interpretative activity. In a first step, the interview data were coded using pen and paper, line by line in the transcript. From this first set of codes preliminary themes were condensed for each interview. Then a list of themes from all interviews was created, and themes were grouped together, revised or deleted. After this process a final list of main themes was developed (see Table 2).

Results

In the analysis of the data four main themes were developed:

- Group engagement.
- A space for reflection and creativity.
- Taking different perspectives.
- Increased self-awareness and courage.

Group engagement

There was a high level of activity and engagement among the members in the group coaching. The coach instructed the group that when someone was being coached everyone should reflect on whether

this was relevant in their own leadership and be prepared to provide input to the colleague. The group members were eager to contribute to the coaching process:

There were occasions during the coaching when we could ask questions or give advice to the coachee. And that was an exciting moment, to think about how I could contribute to someone else. And it created engagement in a good way.

There was a positive engagement in the other group members problems and development. The tasks and steps that were going to be performed between the sessions were described by one participant as ‘cliff-hangers’. There was an anticipation to find out what had happened with the situation that the colleague had discussed in the previous coaching session:

We often got a homework task to carry out between the coaching sessions. I discussed something I had to do, got a related task and reported the outcome at every session. We got so engaged in each other, so it became personal coaching, not only from the coach.

A space for reflection and creativity

The group members had a very busy schedule and found it difficult to find time for reflection in their daily working lives. Many participants expressed that the coaching gave them a much needed opportunity to reflect on strategies and priorities in their leadership. Having the time to reflect on situations often lead to new solutions:

If I had a small problem, I talked about this and somehow, I had the answer to how I wanted to handle the situation, and I got a little confirmation that my thinking was right.

The fact that the group consisted of other managers in a similar situation was viewed as very valuable and the group atmosphere was described as very supportive. According to the participants the coaching group was a good place to find new solutions:

So, you have a better chance to find different solutions while sitting in this group, it is six times more likely since normally you only have access to your own thoughts.

The coaching was experienced as a creative space, where they participants were encouraged to find their own solutions. The coaching process was flexible and was viewed as different from other leadership courses that promoted a specific way of thinking:

We got to find the solutions ourselves. Otherwise, it is often the case that... one should adapt to a way of thinking that is promoted by a course. Here it was more flexible, here we created the solution together.

Taking different perspectives

The coaching aimed to help the coachees to view problems from different perspectives, and the participants described that the coaching had helped them to think in new ways. It was also useful that other group members shared their experiences of similar situations:

The questions that were asked in the coaching got me thinking in new ways. And the other participants had sometimes experienced something similar or thought about it in a different way. It got me thinking in new ways, different ways.

The group members learned from observing other managers being coached in the group, and one participant described how they could apply the coaching that was given to someone else:

Sometimes I got an epiphany when others got coached... it was possible to directly apply it to what I was facing.

One manager had told the group that he had changed his leadership style as a consequence of taking part in the coaching. The coaching had helped him to develop his listening skills:

During our last coaching session one manager said that he had changed his leadership style during the coaching. That is what he said... He said that he had been doing it wrong before, that he didn't use to listen to his staff. Now he was asking his staff about their ideas and thoughts and said that it had changed the atmosphere at work.

Self-awareness

The coaching sessions included reflective questions regarding leadership, which gave the participants opportunities to explore, define and redefine their own leadership. The process of the group coaching appeared to increase the group-members self-awareness:

The group coaching is relevant for my work function. What role do I have, how can I take that role, and how can I work with my agenda?

One participant described how the group contributed to an increased awareness of self/their development needs:

The group contributed to me seeing certain things in myself, and I had both positive and negative things that I needed to work with...

The participants became inspired and learned from each other, and one participant described how they became really inspired by the communication skills of another group member:

I realised that I can be a bit more direct, I learned this from one person in particular to say 'this is how it is...', to say it loud and clear. I really learnt from that. It was an important moment.

The participants talked about increased courage in their leadership as a consequence of the coaching. This could mean courage to trust ones self and to be open about intentions and values:

I have more courage, and I dare to trust myself...

Discussion

The aim with this qualitative study was to explore managers' experiences of participating in executive group coaching. Four main themes emerged from the analysis: 'group engagement', 'a space for reflection and creativity', 'taking different perspectives', and 'increased self-awareness and courage'.

In the main theme 'group engagement' the participants described that they were mentally active during the coaching sessions, even when they themselves were not being coached. They became engaged in other coachees' problems and issues and wanted to contribute to the coaching process with questions and reflections. Interest in other coachees' processes also created an interest for taking part in the following coaching session in order to find out how things worked out. This description of engagement could be related to the theory about workplace engagement that has been proposed to be the opposite state to burnout. It can be defined as a state of high energy and strong sense of commitment to work functions and their performance (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998).

The main theme 'space for reflection and creativity' highlighted that the coaching provided an opportunity for reflection that was missing in the busy everyday life of the managers. Reflection was encouraged through discussions about goals and strategies. There was an openness and supportive atmosphere between the members in the group that was facilitated by the coaches. Brown and Grant (2010) have suggested that group coaches need to have an understanding of group-based dialogue processes, or group dynamics in order to create a good atmosphere in the group.

A further main theme was 'taking different perspectives', and the participants described that the coaching had helped them to view their problems in new and different ways. They had learned more flexible ways of thinking, more solution-focused thinking. The fact that everyone in the group was a manager, facing similar situ-

ations and problems, was viewed as very positive and helped the coachees to change their thinking. Previous research has found that coaching can improve the ability to revise unhelpful thinking (Gyllensten et al., 2010) and Grant (2014) has found that executive coaching can enhance solution-focused thinking.

The final main theme was 'increased self-awareness and courage'. According to the participants, the coaching had helped them to become more aware of their leadership practice. This increased self-awareness led to some changes in their behaviour, such as more clear and direct communication. They also expressed that they had become braver in their role as leaders. Similarly to these results, a previous study found that a group of managers taking part in a coaching intervention increased their transformational leadership techniques and became more aware and reflective about their leadership (Cerni et al., 2010). Effective leadership requires good personal awareness of one's own personal feelings, thoughts and behaviour (Gill, 2002), and studies have found that coaching can increase self-awareness (Grant, 2007; Grant et al., 2009; Gyllensten et al., 2010). Executive coaching has been found to increase leadership self-efficacy and resilience (Grant, 2014). This is similar to the current study where the participants reported that the coaching had helped them to increase courage and trust in themselves.

The implications of the results from the current study are that executive group coaching can provide a well needed opportunity for executives to increase their self-awareness, and reflect on their leadership skills and behaviours. It can increase the ability to take different perspectives which can improve problem solving. These are important skills for executives that are useful in their everyday leadership practice.

Group coaching requires a different set of skills by the coach compared individual coaching. The group coach has to be able to structure the coaching session to meet with the needs of the group, get everyone

engaged and deal with group dynamics. Indeed, the coach can act as an important role model, by structuring the sessions fairly, asking open questions, using active listening, and focus on goals and solutions. If the coach and the group members create an open and non-judgmental atmosphere, the group can become an important support for executives. Support from a group of peers can be valuable, as this kind of support can be difficult to find for executives. Regarding transferability of the findings, it could be said that the themes can be relevant to executive group coaching in a similar context. For the current study, it is also important to relate the findings to previous research (see above), and thereby add to the accumulation of results regarding group coaching.

Regarding limitations, the participants received coaching from different coaches. The coaching was based on the same structure, but coaches have different personal approaches that will influence the coaching. The participants in the current study were selected on the basis that they had received group coaching in this particular municipality. And it is possible that the individuals that agreed to take part in the interviews were particularly positive towards the coaching. It may be less likely that individuals with negative experiences would volunteer to take part in an interview.

There is a need for more research on group coaching, and executive group coaching. Future research should involve qualitative exploratory studies of the experiences of the coaching, and larger scale studies focusing on individual or organisational outcomes. Qualitative studies and case studies can provide rich data on what actually happens in the coaching, but larger outcome studies are needed to measure the effects of the group coaching.

In summary, the present study explored participants' experiences of taking part in executive group coaching in the workplace. It was found that the coaching group members were highly engaged in the process; that the coaching provided an opportu-

nity for reflection and creativity, increased self-awareness, and the ability to think in new and different ways. These are important skills in leadership practice. In the group coaching the coach can become a role model for useful leadership behaviours such as active listening, asking open questions and focus on goals and solutions. Finally, the executive group coaching can also provide opportunities for giving and receiving peer support.

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