

Executive Summary

The coach-coachee relationship in a cross-cultural context – an exploratory study

The situation

Executive coaching has firmly established itself in the array of leadership and organizational development tools. Simultaneously, ongoing globalization and the emergence of new technologies has led to an ever more diverse workforce and communication processes without borders. Thus, cross-cultural interactions¹ are more likely to be the rule than the exception in today's business world – and in the area of executive coaching.

Though cultural differences are likely to have a significant impact on human interactions, too often past research within the field of coaching has not taken this into consideration. Building the coaching relationship is considered to be the most important factor when it comes to coaching effectiveness. Little is known, however, about the complex dynamics that affect the relationship in cross-cultural settings

The goal of this research project is to deepen knowledge in this area and build a stronger understanding of how coaches can support the relationship with their coachees in a cross-cultural setting.

The study

For the purpose of the exploratory study, 10 ICF coaches were interviewed via skype/telephone with the help of a semi-structured questionnaire between the 5th and the 15th of January 2015. The 6 female and 4 male coaches come from eight different countries (Algeria, Brazil, Germany, India, Israel, Malaysia, Switzerland and USA), but the majority live and work in foreign countries today.

The analysis was performed with an inductive/deductive developed category system ($\kappa = .82$) and according to the principles of a qualitative content analysis as proposed by Mayring.

The main findings

The main findings of the study can be summarized in four major statements, which will be explained in brief.

1. Culture is only one possible focus

Throughout the interviews, coaches mentioned a broad variety of categories when they were referring to critical coaching situations with their clients. Besides cultural aspects, gender, profession or personality type were specifically used by coaches to distinguish between and to characterize different clients. Thus, the results indicate that, for the coach, culture does not need to have an influence on coaching automatically –

¹ In order to reduce complexity cross-cultural interactions have been defined as interactions between two counterparts from different countries for this study.

moreover, to reduce the client to culturally-bound characteristics may even hinder the coach in seeing the client as a whole human being. What turns out to be crucial is to recognize *when* culture does play a role and then shift the focus accordingly. Intercultural sensitivity and culture-specific and theoretical knowledge may allow coaches to assess those situations more effectively. However, knowledge alone may not be sufficient or may lead to reductionist stereotyping at worst. The interviews indicate that above all, the coach should maintain an open and self-aware stance

2. Creating a shared 'coaching culture'

Coaches building cross-cultural relationships successfully follow certain practices that create a shared coaching context. This includes an inquiry about expectations, the definition of roles and an agreement on how the two parties want to work together. In this way, a new and shared understanding about the coaching process is created, which becomes a cultural framework from which the relationship itself can develop. It is important that this shared understanding be developed co-evolutionarily, respecting the preferences of both coach and coachee, in a reciprocal process. However, this may take some time, and the results indicate that the cultural influence is strongest in the first session(s) and then diminishes over the course of the process. Once established, the 'cultural framework' can reduce possible cultural obstacles and provide safety for both parties and therefore ultimately foster the development of trust.

3. Trust is the most valuable goal and outcome of any coaching relationship

Trust is essential to creating the openness required for coaching to be able to "go deep." Kühlmann (2008) distinguishes between 'trust in person' and 'trust in context.' Trust in context can be gained by creating a common cultural framework as mentioned above. However, trust in a person is built up over time and contact and can be strongly influenced by cross-cultural differences, as some interviewees indicated. Therefore, the number of coaching sessions needed to build up a sufficient level of trust can vary between cultures. Cross-cultural coaches are challenged to deal with those differences. Addressing the topic of trust early on may help to foster its development from the beginning of the coaching relationship.

4. Shared reflection of the relationship can be a savior and powerful tool

The coaching relationship develops in a dynamic and ongoing way. It changes constantly and requires coach and coachee to ask each other and themselves – *Where are we in the process and how do we stand towards each other?* Especially if there are some adjustments needed (e.g. different ideas about how criticism should be addressed), shared reflection may head off core misunderstandings and safeguard the level of trust. Timely clarifications may even strengthen the alliance and support the client's development and the coaching process.

Implications for practitioners at a glance

- Having cross-cultural experiences by yourself are highly recommended and allow coaches to transmit real empathy
- Be aware, culture *may* have an impact on your coaching – especially in the beginning of the process.
- Chemistry-sessions, where coach und the potential coach figure out if they want to work together, appear to be a good tool for successful matchmaking
- Try to build a common coaching culture for the sessions
- Reflect on the shared relationship regularly
- Finally, coaching training curricula need to address cross-cultural aspects intensively

Implications for future research

Further research in the field is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the complex processes in relationship building across cultures. Based on the insights of this study, the following questions may be interesting for future research projects:

- When does culture become salient in cross-cultural coaching processes? How important is the “cultural distance” between coach and coachee?
- How does the coachee experience cultural differences?
- Does the quality of an “ideal coaching relationship” differ between cultures?
- Which factors indicate a good coach-coachee match? Which role does the chemistry session play for the selection process and the later development of the relationship?

Coaching research – especially in the area of relationship issues – still lacks quantitative approaches. Therefore, future research should aim at gaining bigger and more diverse samples in order to achieve robust data.

Suggestions for further readings

Among extensive literature on the topic, the following articles and research reports contributed greatly to the author's understanding of cross-cultural coaching and relationship building and are recommended to anyone interested in the topic.

Edwards, A. & Graham, P. (2014). Creating a New Normal: When Coaches and Clients have Different Cultural Backgrounds. *Review of Social Studies, Law and Psychology*, 8 (2), 67–75.

Milner, J., Ostmeier, E. & Franke, R. (2013). Critical incidents in cross-cultural coaching: The view from German coaches. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 11 (2), 19–32.

Nangalia, L. & Nangalia, A. (2010). The Coach in Asian Society: Impact of social hierarchy on the coaching relationship. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 8 (1), 51–66.

O'Broin, A. & Palmer, S. (2010). Exploring key aspects in the formation of coaching relationships: initial indicators from the perspective of the coachee and the coach. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 3 (2), 124–143.

Peterson, D. B. (2007). Executive coaching in a cross-cultural context. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 59 (4), 261–271.

Sun, B. J., Deane, F. P., Crowe, T. P., Andresen, R., Oades, L. & Ciarrochi, J. (2013). A preliminary exploration of the working alliance and 'real relationship' in two coaching approaches with mental health workers. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 8 (2), 6–17.

The author



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