

The Case for Coaching



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The growth of coaching

Over the last 30 years, coaching has risen to an industry of over 53,300 coaches worldwide with an annual spend of over \$2 billion (ICF, 2016). The CIPD stated that just over eight out of ten respondents in their 2010 Learning and Development survey reported that they use coaching in their organisations (CIPD, 2010). What potential explanation is there for this sharp increase in coaching?

It is largely agreed that the current business environment is dynamic, volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Businesses compete on a global scale and competitive advantage now relies much less on the uniqueness of the product or service: instead, the role of employee talent has become increasingly important. Factors of organisational competitiveness are consequently linked to the knowledge, skills and abilities of the organisation's human resources. Furthermore, if the business environment is dynamic and volatile, in order to retain any competitive advantage, the employee talent must also adapt in-line with the environmental demands. The role of training, learning and development is to equip employees with the requisite knowledge, skills and abilities to meet dynamic and adapting organisational objectives. Many decades of scholarly research on the impact of training in the workplace has established that it works at improving organisational performance therefore, organisations have the tools necessary to provide effective training to develop employee talent. However, couple the provision of instructional training with today's web-enabled working environment, the challenge for employees is no longer how to access the information they need to improve and perform their job more effectively, instead the challenge is how to make sense of the wealth of information that is readily available at their fingertips – this is where the case for coaching is made.

These factors offer a potential explanation for the rise in popularity of coaching. Swart and Harcup (2013) propose that coaching helps managers to expand their insight and develop their sense-making abilities. If the biggest challenge to employees in today's organisation is not how to access information but instead how to filter this information into what is relevant, then coaching may provide a solution to this challenge. Coaching is a learning and development approach that places the learner at the centre of the learning experience. Coaching provides the employee with the time; mental space; support and guidance the employee may need to make sense of the information available to them and explore how to apply it most effectively in their unique situation. Evidence suggests that most people believe that coaching is beneficial for them and good for their business (Law, Ireland & Hussain, 2007). Thach and Heinselman (1999) outline a number of benefits of coaching. These include positive behaviour change, enhanced skills and knowledge, decrease in stress, a high return on investment and increased employee satisfaction due to the awareness of the investment the employer is placing in the executive. Coaching is also viewed favourably by the learners as it provides them with one to one support from a respected individual, it can be done on-site so is convenient, fits in with the learner's timeframe and schedule and often results can be seen relatively quickly. One-to-one coaching provides a tailored approach to help understand and apply work-based learning, ensuring that the employee has the

capabilities to move with and adapt to a dynamic working environment. Therefore, in this challenging, volatile business environment, coaching provides an adaptable learning and development solution to facilitate sense-making from other more instructional forms of training. This context helps to explain why the use of coaching has seen such a meteoric increase in recent years.

What is coaching?

Coaching is a one-to-one learning and development intervention that uses a collaborative, reflective, goal-focused relationship to achieve professional outcomes that are valued by the coachee (Smither, 2011). The role of the coach is not to give instruction to the coachee: coaches generally avoid providing instructional or prescriptive solutions to coachees, often because they are not technical experts in the coachee's occupational area of speciality. Neither is the coach a passive participant whose only role is to listen or be a sounding board. Instead the coach and coachee should work collaboratively together on an equal standing to aid the coachee's learning and development. Reflection is an essential component of coaching as it allows the coachee to take a mirror to their work life and examine the successes and dissect the failures. Coaching is inherently goal-bound with goals generally forming the starting point of any coaching session, and the goal setting gives the coaching focus and purpose.

In terms of practical utility, keeping coaching distinct from other organisational performance management and development relationships offers potential advantages. Sherman and Freas (2004) report that the relational nature of coaching provides an individual, customised feel to coaching, with coaches providing candour, and honest feedback to the coachee in relation to their performance and behaviour. This is frequently supplemented with feedback from the coachee's organisation (e.g. through multi-source feedback). However, the privacy, non-judgmental perspective, and confidentiality of the coaching session provide a safe environment for the coachee to reflect on that feedback and work on improving areas of weakness. The coach may discuss suggested tools and techniques to help the coachee develop and improve, the content of which is dependent on the background and approach of the coach.

Does coaching work?

As a researcher, the question: 'Does coaching work?' is one which has preoccupied me for a number of years. I sought to address this very question with my colleagues in our recent research project (Jones, Woods & Guillaume, 2016).

In order to answer this question, we adopted a meta-analytic approach to our research. Meta-analysis is a particularly useful technique as it allows the researcher to review a whole body of research evidence and draw conclusions (based on statistical analysis) that allows us to objectively determine what the effect is of the intervention being examined (in this case coaching) and what factors or moderators may also influence that effect. Effect size is of particular importance because this tells us the size of the difference in the outcomes from coaching (e.g. improvement in performance). For example, most coaching practitioners would hope that their coaching intervention generated a large improvement in performance for the coachee, in research terms this would translate into a large effect size. Therefore, meta-analytic results are likely to give us a clearer, more robust answer to the question 'Does coaching work?'

Following a comprehensive review of the coaching literature, a total of 17 studies meet our criteria to be included in our meta-analysis (i.e. that explored workplace coaching with a working sample of coachees (i.e. not students). We set out to firstly understand whether coaching works and if so what kind of effect size can we expect from coaching (i.e. what is the magnitude of change that a coachee would experience from coaching). We grouped coaching outcomes in a similar way to training outcomes. So, for example, we suggest that coaching can result in:

- Affective outcomes which includes changes to the coachee's attitudes or motivations;

- Cognitive outcomes which includes changes in the coachee's knowledge or their cognitive strategies such as problem-solving techniques;
- Skills-based outcomes such as development of new leadership skills or other competencies
- Results outcomes either at the individual, team or even organisational performance level.

We found that coaching had a positive impact on all three outcomes assessed (affective, skill-based and results) (we were unable to test for the impact of cognitive outcomes in our study), however, interestingly it was the results outcome where coaching had the greatest impact (or the largest effect size). This contrasts with meta-analytic results on the impact of managerial training interventions which has demonstrated that the impact on results is often smaller than other types of outcomes. This is often attributed to potential training transfer issues (Powell & Yalcin, 2010). In our meta-analysis, we suggest that the high impact of coaching on results is perhaps indicative of the fact that the individualised nature of coaching actually promotes the transfer of learning from coaching back to the coachee's workplace. This finding is really important in terms of answering the question 'Does coaching work?' Not only do our findings provide clear evidence that coaching does work, furthermore the largest effect was for changes in performance which is arguably (at least from an organisation's perspective) one of the most important outcomes.

The role of coaching training

The evidence clearly indicates that there is a need for coaching to support employee learning and development in the demanding business environment and that coaching is an effective methodology at enhancing a variety of outcomes in the workplace including bottom-line results. However, effective coaching is a complex and challenging skill. The coaching profession is largely unregulated and as such there is a proliferation of coaching accreditation providers. Berglas (2002) writes for the Harvard Business Review on the very real dangers of executive coaching, which he summarises include a desire for a quick-fix solution and an absence of understanding of the role of deep-rooted issues.

At Henley, we have a firm understanding of the potential benefits and pitfalls of coaching. This informs our programmes where we equip individuals with the skills they need to become effective coaches, who are able to enable their coachees achieve the increased self-awareness, sense-making and ultimately positive impact on results that coachees generally seek via coaching.

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About the author

Dr Rebecca J Jones is an Associate Professor in Coaching and Programme Director for Henley's MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change. Rebecca has a BSc (hons) in psychology and an MSc in occupational psychology; she completed her PhD on coaching effectiveness at Aston University in 2016. Her research interests lie in examining the factors that influence coaching effectiveness. Rebecca is particularly interested in using quantitative research methodology to explore the efficacy of coaching. Passionate about evidence-based practice and teaching, she incorporates her research into her teaching practice at Henley's Centre for Coaching.

Rebecca is a frequent contributor to practitioner and professional bodies and publications, in addition to communicating her research to academic audiences. She is actively working on a range of research and consultancy projects evaluating coaching effectiveness. You can connect with Rebecca on twitter @coach_research

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