



AC Practice Editor Review June 2014

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Welcome to the first practice editor review...

1. Understanding the importance of gender and leader identity formation in executive coaching for senior women. Suzette Skinner.

How important is coachee (and for that matter coach) gender in executive coaching? In this article Suzy Skinner sets out to investigate the experiences of 11 senior female leaders who engaged in executive coaching in Australia. Participants were relatively senior (within 4 levels of the CEO) and had experienced at least 6 coaching sessions in the previous 2 years. Participants were interviewed retrospectively and their experiences were qualitatively analysed using the constructivist grounded theory methodology. Leader identity formation emerged as one of the core constructs from the analysis and there were several enabling factors such as the coach as role model and leading authentically that facilitated the coaching process. This study engages practitioners in a number of ways. Firstly it asks the questions regarding the importance of dichotomous variables in the coachee such as gender in terms of their predictive capacity to highlight probable themes in the coaching engagement. So does gender (or for that matter age, class, race, ethnic origin) require the coach to make assumptions about these factors in the coaching process? I think the evidence is unconvincing – they are too many other conflating variables like seniority and can the impact of these variables really be assessed independent of context? It does however force us to challenge our assumptions about the context and environment of the coachee – what type of culture are they embedded in, what are the implicit assumptions about leadership and how far should the coachee stretch to be congruent with them? Secondly, it challenges the coaching profession to consider the role of advocacy in coaching assignments. Women are significantly under-represented at senior levels within the majority organisations (especially Board and CEO level, Fitzsimmons et al 2014) so does coaching have a role in addressing this (along with all the other inequalities encountered in a coaching context)? These are great questions for the profession as well as the organisations that contract with us. This is an interesting and necessarily exploratory study that poses some challenging hypotheses that can be explored rather than assumed in our coaching engagements. That's what I'll be taking away from this article.

Further Reading:

Fitzsimmons, Callan & Paulsen (2014) Gender disparity in the C-Suite: Do male and female CEO's differ in how they reach the top? *Leadership Quarterly* 25:245-266

Passmore J.(Ed.) (2009) *Diversity in Coaching*. Kogan page

2. Developing a Coaching Culture: A Review of the Literature. Helen Gormley & Christian van Nieuwerburgh.

Why should practitioners be interested in facilitating the development of a coaching culture within organisations rather than focusing on the individual ad hoc level of engagement? This question permeates Gormley and van Nieuwerburgh's timely review of the literature. The review incorporates both industry and educational perspectives and included a search on key terms including coaching cultures and coaching in organisations. The review is structured into five sections including definitions, organisational change, training internal coaches, coaching cultures in educational settings and ways of creating coaching cultures. One of the ways in which coaching cultures are embedded is through the training of internal coaches. Whilst the review is generally positive about the benefits of this, there is insufficient attention drawn to the potential challenges of this approach including coach independence, confidentiality and the political challenges of coaching senior executives internally. A differentiation by coaching level would have been useful here with skill and performance coaching managed effectively internally but executive coaching at senior levels focusing on establishing the leader's identity more likely the domain of the external coach, (Hawkins, 2012). The article also points out the significant convergence by multiple authors on what it takes to create a coaching culture highlighting the necessity of senior level sponsorship, integration with the OD system and the presence of role models. The addition of a compelling rationale for adopting a coaching culture in the first place would have made the review even more engaging from the practitioner perspective. This could include the business rationale and the evidence for a coaching culture positively impacting on the key enablers of performance. This article is a timely reminder that coaching is shifting up the value chain away from the individual assignments and towards the systemic organisational wide interventions. Practitioners who want to take advantage of this profound shift need to position themselves accordingly and be clear about the rationale for doing so.

Further reading:

Clutterbuck D. & Meggison D. (2005) *Making Coaching Work*. CIPD.

Hawkins P.(2012) *Creating a Coaching Culture*. McGraw-Hill.

3. Chief Executive Officers' perceived value of coaching: individual and organisational influences. Stephen Walston.

What value does the CEO see in coaching and how might the coaching practitioner influence this perception? Stephen Walston has analysed the results of 583 surveys from US hospitals in an attempt to find out. The article opens with a strident defence of the use of coaching in the leadership development domain and advocates strongly for the greater prevalence of coaching interventions in the healthcare settings. However, the last paragraph of the introduction is somewhat incongruous with the claim that only "anecdotal evidence exists to its value". This contrasts with the recent meta-analysis by Theeboom et al (2014) that showed significant effect sizes attained over 18 independent studies on coaching outcomes. The participating CEO's were asked four questions about their attitudes to coaching, specifically how important is coaching in improving staff performance, retaining high performing staff, promoting career development and supporting succession planning. The questions themselves appear significantly restricted with no broader data gathered on the impact of coaching on leader development. The results suggest that the typical healthcare CEO perceives a moderate value in coaching and that these perceptions are influenced (or at least correlated with) a number of individual and organisational factors. Individually gender appears to be a significant factor with females more supportive of coaching and curiously the number of direct reports was inversely related to the perceived value of coaching. As a practitioner, it's difficult to draw many generalizable conclusions from this survey. It's a very specific setting both in terms of geography and sector and seems to be picking up on a number of idiosyncrasies in the US healthcare system like the balance between for profit and not for profit hospitals that may not be relevant elsewhere. Also it's based on cross sectional survey data – there is no intervention here so it's unclear how flexible CEO opinions are if the independent variables are manipulated in some way. Finally, did attitudes predict behaviour in this case? How many of the participating CEO's had themselves experienced coaching and did their attitudes and experiences predict their sponsorship of coaching in their organisations. This is an important area as we know senior level sponsorship matters in coaching engagements (Stevens, 2005) but exactly how to influence CEO's around this remains the domain of future research and practitioner intuition.

Further Reading:

Stevens Jr, J. H. (2005). Executive coaching from the executive's perspective. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 57(4), 274.

Theeboom, T., Beersma, B., & van Vianen, A. E. (2014). Does coaching work? A meta-analysis on the effects of coaching on individual level outcomes in an organizational context. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 9(1), 1-18.