Examining the Effectiveness of Executive Coaching on Executives

Helen Paige
Flinders University School of Education *helen.paige@flinders.edu.au*

Executive coaching is one of the fastest growing executive development processes in adult learning. While it has been suggested by some authors that executive coaching has developed into an industry overnight, the process appears to have been more gradual. There is general agreement however, that as a learning process, executive coaching is still 'forming its identity'.

Due to new organisational cultures and structures placing a premium on the executives who head public and private corporations, executives must expand their knowledge base to analyse and comprehend the many changes that are happening around them. Not all executives are able to adjust easily to these expectations, or balance the many competing demands and pressures their position may entail. In such circumstances organisations are often willing to provide an executive coach for senior managers.

While the field of one-to-one executive coaching is expanding quickly, there is a dearth of research on this subject. This paper seeks to explore the impact of executive coaching on five executives, and takes two broad directions. Firstly, conversations with executives were examined to identify the views that emerged from the data. Secondly, the conversations were examined in the light of a model of evaluation devised by Guskey. Both perspectives combined to provide an overview of the executives, their work, and what learning may have occurred.

Learning, executive coaching, professional development, effectiveness/evaluation

INTRODUCTION

A number of authors (Goldsmith, Lyons and Freas 2000; Zeus and Skiffington, 2000), have suggested that coaching is an expanding area of executive development. In recent years there has been a rapid growth in the use of one-to-one executive coaching according to Burdett (1998); Koonce (1994); Peterson (1996); Redshaw (2000); Saporito (1996); Stratford (2001); and Synder (1995) cited in Olivero, Bane & Kopelman, (1997:461). The preferred definition of executive coaching for this study is that of Kilburg (1996). In his review of the executive coaching literature Kilburg as cited in Brotman, Liberi and Wasylyshyn, (1998:41) defined executive coaching as:

> a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and, consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client's organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement.

Lately organisational transformations as a result of mergers, downsizing, acquisitions, and various other pressures have become common place (Giglio, Diamante and Urban, 1998). Problems occur when executives who may be having difficulty with change or its related organisational impacts such as the need for enhanced skills, performance and development, require assistance.

To date the study of executive coaching has typically centred around the various types of coaching. Such studies have examined the characteristics of successful coaches Hall, Otazo and Hollenbeck (1999); business coaching McGovern, Lindemann, Vergara, Murphy, Barker & Warrenfeltz (2001); executive coaching, Bowerman and Collins (1999); the practice and techniques of coaching Thach and Heinselman (1999); coaching and learning and so on (Goldsmith, Lyons and Freas 2000; Zeus and Skiffington 2000).

Thomas Guskey has been writing for some time about the importance of seeking evidence of effectiveness in professional development programmes (see Guskey 1985; Guskey 1986; Guskey 1990; Guskey 1991; Guskey and Sparks 1996; Guskey 1998). While Guskey's focus has been on professional development for teachers and schools, his research on accountability and evaluation also have application beyond the school environment. This study adopted Guskey's (1998:2-3) summative evaluation stage (or evaluation which is conducted at the completion of a programme or activity). The present study sought to explore the impact of executive coaching on five executives and their work.

METHOD

Subjects

The participants in the study were five executives employed in the public or private sectors in South Australia, and who had undertaken executive coaching six to twelve months ago. The participants were informed that their responses would be confidential and that aliases would be assigned to them.

'Tony' was a senior executive in a very high profile and important industry in South Australia. He was nominated by colleagues as a young, progressive member of that industry. 'Susan' was a very senior member of the public sector who had worked in executive roles in a number of government agencies. She was nominated by colleagues due to her experience and enthusiasm. 'Ian' was the managing director of a very long standing and successful business. He was nominated by colleagues due to his foresight and willingness to share information and ideas. 'Kay' was a senior member of the public sector who held an important and strategic role in a government agency. She was nominated by colleagues as a helpful and cooperative member of her organisation. 'Ben' was a senior member of the public sector who had recently moved agencies in order to undertake a new role. He was nominated due to his motivation and ability to encourage other colleagues.

The five critical levels of Guskey's professional development evaluation: *participants' reactions; participants' learning; organisational support and change; participants' use of new knowledge and skills;* and *learning outcomes* will be applied to the data emerging from the participant interviews.

Procedure

The data were collected by conducting taped interviews with the participants using a set of question prompts arising from the research question and the literature. Two interviews were undertaken with each participant.

During the first interview the researcher used question probes and follow-up questions to explore the participants' stories about the context of their coaching experiences, the relationships that developed with their coaches, and to appraise the impact of the coaching on the participants and their work. Between one to three weeks after the first interview a second interview then took place with each participant. In this interview specific themes, ideas and concepts arising from the participants' first interview were further explored, and the participant's reactions to events were used as a means of obtaining more in-depth information on matters already discussed. After the interviews were completed and interview transcripts prepared, the transcripts were forwarded to each participant to review, critique, check for accuracy and to determine whether any matters raised required clarification. Follow-up contact was made with two participants to clarify some specific points.

Analysis

Data analysis strategies consisted of noting major ideas and concepts and the emergence of recurring patterns. Initially one transcript was examined and noted specifically for codes, concepts, themes and ideas in order to develop and compare major coding categories. Codes and themes were added, dropped, or refined as necessary during subsequent readings of the transcripts. Issues of interest and importance, key words, and the identification of direct quotes all of which could be used in the reporting of the study were also noted. The same coding process was then applied to the balance of the interview transcripts and seventeen major themes eventually emerged.

The data were analysed from two perspectives. Firstly, searching for themes and sub-themes, which were then further refined and collapsed into six overarching themes and then into three principal categories with a series of sub-themes. Secondly, by reference to Guskey's (1998) five critical levels of professional development evaluation namely: participants' reactions; participants' learning; organisational support and change; participants' use of new knowledge and skills; and learning outcomes.

RESULTS

The results are presented under the headings of The Themes, and Guskey's Model of Evaluation.

The Themes

During analysis of the interview data three major themes emerged. These themes were labelled ***the context of coaching; the experience of coaching; and reflections.*** Each of the major themes was an umbrella for a number of sub-themes.

Theme 1- The context of coaching

This theme was an umbrella for the following sub-themes: *'getting started'; familiarity with, and expectations of executive coaching; culture of the organisation; the coaches' familiarity with the organisational culture; and the use of internal or external coaches.*

'Getting started'

The first issue to be discussed related to how the participants were introduced to executive coaching. Involvement was by way of internal advertisements, introductions by managers or human resource personnel or by attending other courses that led to coaching. The motivation for undertaking coaching varied for the participants and comments such as: "*...I was looking*

for something different. I was looking for something that was really working with me on some job issues that I had specifically at that time,' and '[Something] *that could be offered at a time when I needed it, and focussed on my specific needs, and it met all of those requirements"(Susan),* provide an indication of the participants' aspirations for undertaking coaching.

Familiarity with, and expectations of executive coaching

Prior to commencing coaching only two out of the five participants had some comprehension of the idea of executive coaching, either from colleagues who had undertaken executive coaching, or from being introduced to the idea by their employer.

Four of the five participants appeared to have some expectations of the executive coaching experience. Susan explained, "*I wanted it to be fairly pragmatic...I didn't want lots of holding my hand and going along. ...I wanted someone who was fairly challenging...*". Kay expected for instance, "*...a structured discussion; a purpose-driven process*", and Ben "*...someone I could talk to and explore ideas with....*".

Understanding the culture

The culture of the coaching environment into which an executive coach entered particularly an external coach, played an influential role in the participants' undertaking of coaching, and their feelings of accomplishment or otherwise with the coaching programme. The individual coach's familiarity with the participant's organisational culture also played a major role in the coaching experience. Discussion about 'culture' revealed two major issues: (a) the organisational culture that the participants were in: "*There certainly is a culture here that coaching is a good thing to do*" *(Susan);* and (b) a coaches' familiarity with the organisational culture: "*Yes – because they might need to change the culture*" *(Ian).*

Internal and External Coaches

All participants agreed that it was more appropriate to use an external, rather than an internal coach. This view primarily related to issues of the suitability of internal coaches, and confidentiality.

Theme 2 – The coaching experience

The major issues raised in this theme *were the focus of the coaching; the coaches' process, style, skills and technique; timing; and the potential threats or risks of executive coaching to the respondents.*

The focus of coaching

The overarching purpose of the participants' coaching tended to centre on the broad headings of leadership and management. Common areas of concentration for all participants were on time management and supervision and delegation skills. Other leadership and management skills that emerged were the development of higher level administrative skills, handling conflict, being more proactive in management and articulating a business vision to staff.

The Coaches' process and style, skills and techniques

The coaching process for each participant, although variable revealed a similar procedure of: engagement of the coach, the undertaking of psychological or related assessments (if used), negotiating the areas for coaching, and then commencing the coaching. Some elements appeared common such as the coach's encouragement of wider reading of reference books or other reading material which included specific learning models, and an expectation of 'homework', individual reflection and reporting back.

The coaches' style tended to vary depending on their background, which included psychology, consultancy, business or education. One coach used special language or phrases to convey simplified messages about potential strategies, which then acted like behavioural cues for the participants. Susan summarised the situation as follows: "*...there are triggers to trigger my remembering of the framework...*", and "*...another one was about looking at problem solving situations. If you are going to fail, fail early.... Now what that is about is a process of analysis or risk-assessment in a situation...*".

Comments about the skills and techniques used by the coach were particularly relevant. The four main points that arose during the interviews were a coach's ability to listen carefully; to communicate well and maintain a coaching focus; to develop trust with their client, and to challenge their 'comfort zone'. The ability for the coach to develop and maintain a trusting relationship was of high importance, and was explained in this way: "*You've got to trust your coach, I think that's important; ...because some of the stuff got pretty close to home...*" (Ben), and "*I think that it was very important because it* [the coaching] *wouldn't have worked without it*" (Susan).

Timing

A further decisive issue for the participants was the timeliness of the coaching experience both in terms of the participants' readiness and acceptance of the products of their coaching, and also the importance of the presentation of 'just-in-time' skills.

Just as one participant saw the timeliness of his coaching being critical: "*...it all sort of happened at the right time...*"(Ben), another participant questioned her readiness for coaching: '*...I think...executive coaching is often offered at the stage where a manager thinks someone is ready for the next step...I was presumed to be at the next step*" (Kay).

Potential threats or risks of executive coaching to the respondents

Comments about the potential threats or risks of executive coaching were also mentioned: "*You need to have broad enough shoulders to accept the potential criticism that comes from it,* [executive coaching], *and some people do that better than others*" (Tony).

Theme 3 – Reflections

The issues raised in this theme covered the *positives and negatives of coaching* and *some possible effects of the investigation on the participants.*

The positives and negatives of coaching

Comments about the positive aspects of coaching were described as: "*The opportunity to do it* [coaching]*, to expand and think further*" (Ben); "*I guess I learnt a lot about myself*" (Kay), and "*...you have someone who has an interest in you, but has no investment in you other than*

successful outcomes"(Ian). Negatives of coaching were described as follows: *"…*[coaching] *eliminated other* [developmental] *opportunities, because I have been seen to have been given some training and support"(Kay),* and *"I actually found the homework quite taxing…"(Susan).*

Some possible effects of the investigation on the participants

Two participants described some possible effects of the investigation on them: *"I think, at the time, I didn't think of* [the potential value of coaching], *a lot, and now I think through the conversations with you* [the researcher] *I can pick out some of the good bits and some real positives and I shouldn't undersell those…" (Kay);* and *"…the only thing I want to say is to thank you* [to the researcher] *for the opportunity of sitting down after…12 months and be*[ing] *required to think about it again (Ben).*

While a range of positives of the coaching experience were acknowledged such as new ways of thinking, exposure to recent information, personal growth, and development of self-worth and self-awareness, a range of negatives were also outlined. The negatives of coaching identified are important, as often they receive little exposure in the literature. For participants, negative issues were vagueness; a coach's unfamiliarity with the organisational culture; a lack of time for reflection, or transferability of skills; limited respect for the coach; learning only at the abstract level; the personal exposure of coaching; and the 'coaching envy' of colleagues. These are important factors to be identified, as they can detract from coaching effectiveness.

Guskey's Model of Evaluation

As outlined previously the five critical levels of Guskey's professional development evaluation were applied to the data emerging from the participant interviews.

Level One - Participants' reactions to executive coaching

All participants expressed the view that their executive coaching was meaningful. Several key reactions emerged. Most participants commented how coaching had made them more aware of the delicate balance between their work and family life. Other reactions were the potential of coaching to provide intellectual input and new personal and professional insights; that the individual tailoring of coaching encouraged successful learning; and that the personal relationship developed between the coach and the participants relied heavily on the issue of mutual trust.

Level Two – The participants' learning

The participants revealed that both personal and organisational learning occurred during the coaching process. One participant discovered that personal and organisational learning were really indistinguishable, and that if a person's personal repertoire of skills was increased, these skills would inevitably be used in the workplace as well as personally. Other participants found that such learning was, *"…empowering you to virtually go into any organisation" (Ben),* and could be applied in their day-to-day lifestyle. Specific learning for one participant included exposure to new information technology applications, a "comfortableness" about her style of operating, and learning how she liked to learn.

Level Three – Organisational support and change

One particular matter was that all participants suggested that they had not necessarily felt organisational support in endeavouring to *immediately* implement the new learning they had

acquired through coaching. Factors which impacted on this were identified as their organisational culture or policies, the lack of engaging other personnel in their office in their coaching experience, and changing roles within their work environment. Although some participants suggested that coaching gave them the impetus and motivation to confront change in their work place one participant also described what she saw as the necessary exclusivity of executive coaching and thought that as "…*the model and material is given on a personal basis, the opportunity to have generic discussions about it is not so readily available*" (Kay).

Level Four – Participants' use of new knowledge and skills

The question of whether the participants were using what they had learned in coaching was a critical factor of the coaching evaluation. As previously identified in Level One, two participants referred to the impact that coaching had on more than one component of their life. For Susan it was the balance between her work "compulsion", and home and family life; and for Tony a recognition that "…*you have to mange your life as well as your career*". Susan explained that she was taking her coaching learning into the broader environment of an external committee, and Tony reflected that coaching had made him more aware of the difficulties involved in endeavouring to implement change too quickly, as well as the balance expected between technical and managerial skills.

Level Five – Participants' learning outcomes

All participants were unanimous that some specific elements of executive coaching had considerable impact on them. Comments were from both a personal and organisational perspective, and included: development of a self-belief, self-awareness, and confidence; the ability to reflect on what was learnt using an adult learning model; a realisation of inherent talent, and an ability to maximise personal potential. Other learning outcomes were described as promoting new thinking, and looking at things from a very different perspective. Three participants thought that the coaching was cost effective either due to the added return to their organisation on its investment; or that coaching could be applied to specific areas requiring development. The participants also stated that they preferred a style of learning that occurred outside of attending a course.

DISCUSSION

The participants commented about various aspects of coaching that had an impact on them both professionally and personally. As a result of her coaching experience one participant had changed both her professional and personal mode of operating by confronting some habits or patterns of relating and seeing the world. Another participant realised the necessity and importance of balancing the 'human' side of senior management with the technical skills required.

The findings that emerged from the data themselves and the application of Guskey's model provided a close examination of the personal and professional impact of executive coaching on the participants.

Several critical issues arose from the data. These were that there is an interplay between the organisational culture of the environment of the person being coached and the outcomes of the coaching process at a variety of levels. One of these is that a coach needs to be familiar with the organisational culture of their client in order to understand the key challenges and issues facing the person being coached. Related to this is the assertion that all of the participants in this study felt that coaching should be undertaken by a coach external to the organisation.

External coaches therefore have to either have a knowledge of the organisational culture they are entering or quickly gain that knowledge.

The abilities and skills of a coach to develop and maintain a trusting relationship with their client was described as being of the greatest importance by all participants. If such a relationship was established, this enabled the coach to challenge the participants' 'comfort zone', and move them to behavioural change and transformation not only in their working lives, but also on occasions in their personal lives. If a sufficient level of trust was not developed, this had a major impact on the coaching outcomes.

The timeliness of coaching from a range of perspectives was also seen as an important component of the coaching experience. Timeliness was seen in relation to an executive's career, personal or organisational needs, their own availability, and the opportune acquisition of 'just-in-time' skills. The importance of individualised and one-to-one coaching as a preferred method of adult learning was also identified.

A range of positives and negatives of the coaching experience were noted. The positives of coaching included an introduction to new ways of thinking and personal growth, and exposure to recent information. The negatives of coaching included unfamiliarity of a coach with the organisational culture, lack of time for reflection and the personal exposure of coaching.

In this study, application of Guskey's model of evaluation aided analysis of the findings, and revealed a deeper level of understanding of the impact of coaching on the executives. At the same time, an interrelationship between the data from both sources was revealed.

At Level One – participants' reactions to executive coaching - this study questioned whether the Guskey Model, which is usually classified into three broad categories: planning, formative and summative evaluation, should be applied in its entirety rather than using only one of its categories. The concern was that by undertaking a summative evaluation only the participants' coaching needs, desires or motivations for instance, which might have been outlined at the planning evaluation stage, may not have been revealed.

Application of Level Two – Participants' learning - strengthened the view that coaches need to provide clear, specific and achievable learning goals and an on-going measurement and de-briefing of learning or behaviour change against those goals. In evaluating at Level Three – Organisational support and change - it was clear that executive coaching needs to place emphasis on the cultural context of organisations. Whether or not coaching participants can influence this culture, or at least align any personal or professional change with the organisation's mission to a large degree depends on consideration of the crucial nature of an organisation's culture and environment.

As stated in Level Two, on-going measurement of achievement is very important. Evaluation of Level Four – the participants' use of new knowledge and skills - clearly emphasised the significance of the process of measuring professional development at various time intervals. This procedure could readily be woven into coaching programmes. Level Five – The participants' learning outcomes - endeavoured to determine the impact of programme learning. The participants all agreed that varying aspects of the coaching experience had a great learning impact professionally and for some, personally. The key strength of Guskey's model lay in its ability to follow a staged and systematic evaluation that is thoughtful, intentional and purposeful.

CONCLUSION

The role of the organisational culture, and the support or otherwise of the organisation and its people is critical to coaching success. As evidenced by the Guskey evaluation, unless coaching is accepted within an organisation as a viable personal development programme, and an adult learning model, the learning that has been undertaken, and the behaviour change that might have occurred, may be in vain.

Of the four key coaching skills identified by the participants, the most crucial ones were the skill of developing and maintaining a trusting relationship, and a coach's ability to challenge thinking and move people out of their 'comfort zone'.

The challenge to executives, organisations and coaches, is to recognise that executive coaching as a formal executive development activity is a young professional practice that is 'still forming its identity' (Pinchot & Pinchot, 2000). For this reason scope exists for organizations and individuals to acknowledge that as a growing area of human resource development, executive coaching is still developing the appropriate behavioural techniques and methods to improve professional performance, personal satisfaction and organisational effectiveness (Kilburg, 1966).

Based on the findings of this research, it is important that the Guskey model be used to examine the views of other personnel such as Board members, peer directors, managers, clients, personal assistants and other related staff of the participating executives in this study. Additional research also needs to be undertaken in the areas of the impact of executive coaching and organisational change, and coaching standards, ethics and values.

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