

Evidence-Based Workplace Coaching – Are We There Yet?

Dr. Annika Nübold

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Workplace coaching is one of the fastest growing fields within consulting (Liljenstrand & Nebeker, 2008) and has become an integral part of human resource development portfolios in many organizations (Bozer & Delegach, 2019). Workplace coaching can be defined as a developmental, tailor-made intervention in which a professional coach (internal or external; Bozer & Jones, 2018; Passmore & Lai, 2020; Smither, 2011) utilizes collaborative, reflective, and goal-oriented strategies to facilitate the development and performance of individuals or groups in organizations (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Bozer & Jones, 2018; Grant, 2017). Workplace coaching has become a multibillion-dollar global market (Armstrong, 2011) with an estimated 71,000 professional coaches in 2019 worldwide, an increase of 33% on the 2015 estimate (International Coach Federation, 2020). Whereas coaches had mainly been hired to address toxic issues in leadership, they are nowadays mostly hired to develop high-potential performers or support the transition to a leadership role (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Coutu et al., 2009).

Despite the high demand and popularity of workplace coaching, the field is still in the process of gaining professional credibility, partly due to stark differences in coaching practices and coaches' background (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Drake, 2008). This issue is also reflected in research where the field has long been criticized for its lack of robust study designs and rigorous empirical evidence (Silzer et al., 2008). The majority of articles still consist of case studies or descriptive papers that highlight the benefits of a certain approach or technique (De Meuse et al., 2009). In a recent systematic review by Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018), only 32 out of 110 peer-reviewed studies on executive coaching were published in journals with an impact factor and only 15 used a robust quantitative research design, such as randomized controlled trials (RCTs) or quasi-experimental designs.

EVIDENCE ON WORKPLACE COACHING

Although the quality of research has increased considerably during the past five to ten years (Bachkirova, 2017; Kotte, 2019), further theoretical grounding and knowledge, particularly on the mechanisms and contextual boundary conditions that drive and influence coaching effectiveness, are highly needed (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Bozer & Jones, 2018; Grover & Furnham, 2016). For example, there is still a lack of clarity regarding the drivers of coaching effectiveness (i.e., the psychological mechanisms) and the boundary conditions that boost or hinder coaching success (e.g., coach and coachee characteristics, the role of the organizational context; Bozer & Jones, 2018; Jones et al., 2016). To date, the field has been preoccupied with the question *whether* coaching works but has largely ignored the questions of *why* and *when* it works (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018). Furthermore, the field is still not entirely clear about what factors define coaching effectiveness, i.e., what outcomes should be measured and evaluated (De Haan et al., 2013). While most research has focused on outcomes on the individual level of analysis (e.g., improvements in coachees' self-efficacy or behavior), benefits on a group or organizational level (e.g., team satisfaction, productivity) have rarely been considered yet.

In the present work, after providing a more extensive definition of workplace coaching, I will review and summarize the current state of research regarding its effectiveness. Then, I will shortly discuss potential unwanted side effects of workplace coaching that may occur during or after the coaching process. I will conclude with a set of open and yet unresolved questions in this field of inquiry and suggestions for future research which could help to further increase the field's credibility and scientific maturity.

Workplace Coaching – A Definition

Generally, coaching can be defined as a “result-oriented, systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of life experience and goal-attainment in the personal and/or professional life of normal, non-clinical clients” (Grant, 2003, p. 254). Thus, coaching

EVIDENCE ON WORKPLACE COACHING

differs from therapy as it does not address mental health problems (De Haan et al., 2013) but also from mentoring, counselling and other conversation-based approaches to change as coaching helps individuals to learn rather than teaching them (Passmore et al., 2018; Whitmore, 2002). Coaching is a systematic learning and development approach that is characterized by a collaborative, reflective, goal-focused relationship between coach and coachee. Coaching puts coachees as learners at the center of the coaching experience, thereby aiming to promote their self-awareness and personal responsibility and unlock their full potential (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). In general, coaches use a wide variety of cognitive, motivational, and behavioral techniques to help the coachee achieve a mutually identified goal. Those techniques typically facilitate goal attainment by asking open questions (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Passmore et al., 2018).

Whereas coaching as a general concept can be applied to a multitude of domains (e.g., the private sphere, sport contexts, occupational settings), workplace coaching specifically relates to the coaching process in a professional environment where a custom-made, learning and development intervention is applied to achieve professional outcomes that are valued by the coachee and the organization (Smither, 2011). Workplace coaching subsumes different terminologies which are often used interchangeably in the literature, including executive coaching, leadership coaching, and business coaching (e.g., Blackman et al., 2016; Theeboom et al., 2014). Following Jones et al. (2016), workplace coaching is provided by an internal or external coach who does not have formal supervisory authority over the to be coached employee, who may stem from all possible hierarchy levels not only the executive level. Workplace coaching is typically of triadic nature and, as such, not only involves the partnership of coach and coachee but also the coachee's sponsoring organization as a key stakeholder (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018). In general, workplace coaching is characterized by a high context-sensitivity comprising a "unique mix of environments,

EVIDENCE ON WORKPLACE COACHING

characteristics, motivations and attitudes of stakeholders who have direct effects on coaching outcomes” which is further amplified by the variety of coaches’ backgrounds and coaching approaches (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018, p. 71).

Empirical Evidence on Workplace Coaching

In the past years, several meta-analyses (e.g., Jones et al., 2016; Sonesh, Coultas, Marlow, et al., 2015; Theeboom et al., 2014) on coaching effectiveness have been published, yielding complementary but also contradictory results (Kotte, 2019). Those meta-analyses have spanned about 65 primary studies, showing that, overall, coaching is successful in improving a wide range of outcomes, including well-being, work-related attitudes, and behavior change. For example, both the meta-analyses of Theeboom et al. (2014) and Jones et al. (2016), comprising 18 and 17 studies, suggest that workplace coaching has positive effects on learning and performance outcomes. The strongest effects were shown for individual-level performance ($d = .60-1.24$; e.g., goal achievement, productivity), followed by attitudinal and motivational outcomes ($d = 0.43-.74$; e.g., self-efficacy, self-regulation, well-being), and skill-development ($d = 0.28$; technical skills, leadership skills). Furthermore, Sonesh, Coultas, Lacerenza, et al. (2015) could show in their meta-analysis that coaching has moderate effects on the coach-coachee relationship itself ($d = .33$).

Predictors and Moderators of Coaching Effectiveness

Recent reviews have also begun to highlight factors and processes that impact upon the effectiveness of workplace coaching, including coach and coachee characteristics, coaching settings, and the quality of the working alliance (e.g., Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Blackman et al., 2016; Bozer & Jones, 2018; Graßmann et al., 2020; Grover & Furnham, 2016; Kotte, 2019; Myers, 2017; Sonesh, Coultas, Lacerenza, et al., 2015). A recent systematic literature review by Bozer and Jones (2018), including 117 qualitative and quantitative studies on workplace coaching, identified a number of key determinants of

EVIDENCE ON WORKPLACE COACHING

coaching effectiveness. Three of the most consistent antecedents of coaching success identified in their review were self-efficacy, coaching motivation, and goal orientation of the coachee. Furthermore, their synthesis of the evidence consistently indicated that trust in the coaching relationship is an important factor influencing coaching outcomes. In contrast, the role of feedback and supervisory support were less clear, due to the low overall quality of studies exploring these construct in the coaching process. A growing number of studies has also emphasized the importance of the working alliance between the coach and coachee. In a recent meta-analysis by Graßmann et al. (2020) including 27 samples, a moderate relationship between a high-quality working alliance and coaching outcomes was found ($r = .41$, ranging from .32 to .64). The strongest relationships were found for attitudinal and motivational outcomes (e.g., satisfaction with and perceived effectiveness of the coaching process, self-efficacy) as well as cognitive coaching outcomes (e.g., self-reflection and insight). Coaches' professional experience and the number of coaching sessions (up to 5 vs. more than 5) did not lead to differences in coaching effectiveness. These findings emphasize that a high-quality relationship is a robust key predictor of coaching success, similar to other helping contexts like psychotherapy and mentoring.

Furthermore, recent meta-analyses have provided quantitative evidence on the existence of moderators of coaching effectiveness by showing that effect sizes across studies showed great variability, due to different boundary conditions. For example, the meta-analyses by Jones et al. (2016) and Theeboom et al. (2014) have indicated that a number of factors related to the format and procedure of the coaching process significantly influenced the strength of the effect of coaching on different outcome variables. For example, a significant moderation effect was found for the type of coach, yielding stronger effects when the coach was internal rather than external, and the use of multisource feedback in the coaching process, surprisingly resulting in smaller effects when it was integrated in the

EVIDENCE ON WORKPLACE COACHING

coaching process (Jones et al., 2016). Furthermore, the type of sample and study design used to investigate coaching success were also significant moderators. Specifically, within-subject designs (i.e., exploring the development of coaches over time without comparison to a control group) and student samples yielded stronger effects than mixed designs including another experimental condition and field samples of professionals (Sonesh, Coultas, Lacerenza, et al., 2015; Theeboom et al., 2014). The format of the coaching intervention (i.e., face-to-face versus face-to-face blended with e-coaching) and its duration (i.e., the number of sessions) did not matter in terms of coaching effectiveness (Jones et al., 2016; Theeboom et al., 2014). In the meta-analysis by Sonesh, Coultas, Lacerenza, et al. (2015) the professional background of the coach and the number of coaching sessions did emerge as significant moderators of coaching success, yielding stronger effects when coaches had a mixed background as compared to a pure psychological or non-psychological background and when coaching duration was shorter (i.e., 1-3 sessions).

Mediators of Coaching Effectiveness

Although the above reviewed literature suggests that workplace coaching is effective, it is, to date, not well understood yet *why* or *how* it works. A systematic review of the empirical and practitioner literature by Grover and Furnham (2016) only identified a handful of studies that truly tested the mechanisms underlying coaching effectiveness. A study by De Haan et al. (2013) found that the relationship between coachees' self-efficacy as well as their perception of the range of applied coaching techniques on the one hand and their perception of coaching effectiveness on the other hand could be explained by the quality of the client-coach relationship. This further confirms that the alliance between coach and coachee may be a key factor in determining clients' perceptions of coaching success. This has also been found by Baron and Morin (2009), showing that the quality of the coach-coachee relationship explained the relationship between coaching input and coachees' self-efficacy. Also

EVIDENCE ON WORKPLACE COACHING

Crompton (2012) could show that coaches who were responsive, gave empathic feedback and possessed expert knowledge had coachees' with higher levels of self-efficacy which, in turn, was related to firm growth of small to medium enterprises. Finally, in a study by Ladegård (2011), who investigated how coachees' learning experiences during coaching affect their perceptions of stress, found that a perceived decrease in job demands mediated the relationship between planning skills and the experience of stress, both in the short and long term. Furthermore, an increase in social support could explain the relationship between coachees' level of insight and their stress perceptions.

In summary, the aforementioned studies indicate that the quality of the coach-coachee relationship (i.e., working alliance), the level of self-efficacy and the learning experiences acquired during the coaching process seem to be among the explanatory mechanisms that translate coaching into outcomes of coaching success. Despite these promising initial studies, research on the mediating factors in the coaching process is still in its infancy and needs thorough further exploration and testing.

Side Effects of Workplace Coaching

As noted in a recent literature review by Schermuly and Graßmann (2020), although workplace coaching has been shown to lead to a variety of positive outcomes, there may also be a number of side effects for its constituents (i.e., coach, coachee, and the organization). Yet, to date, research has paid little attention to the possibility that coaching may also result in a number of unwanted outcomes. In their review, comprising nine studies with a variety of different research designs, Schermuly and Graßmann (2020) found that negative effects were quite frequent, but usually not severe and low in intensity. Examples of side effects for coachees were related to, for example, psychological health, social interactions, and performance at work, include the triggering of in-depth problems that could not be dealt with, decreased relationship quality, decreased job satisfaction and dependency towards the coach.

EVIDENCE ON WORKPLACE COACHING

Interestingly, negative effects for coachees typically co-occurred with negative effects for coaches. Unpleasant consequences for coaches included aspects related to psychological health (e.g., being personally affected by coaching topics), but also unpleasant feelings towards the coachee (e.g., guilt, anger, or boredom) or results-related disappointment (e.g., about not observing long-term success). Importantly, also in this review, the key role of the coach-coachee relationship was supported, indicating that a higher relationship quality was associated with fewer negative effects. While the potential negative consequences of workplace coaching have been the focus of a number of studies, negative effects of coaching for organizations have rarely been considered. Undesired side effects reported by one study were, for example, a misfit between the coachee's development and organizational goals, conflicts with the coachee's supervisor, and coachees' overly high demands after the coaching process (Oellerich, 2016).

Future Directions

While some of the main effects of workplace coaching seem to be well supported by now, a variety of open questions remains, thus, providing directions for future research. One of the most pressing questions is related to the unique contribution of different coaching techniques to coaching success but also the relative effectiveness of coaching as a development approach compared to other types of interventions aiming to improve learning and performance in organizations (e.g. training, feedback or mentoring; see Bozer & Jones, 2018). Typically, single coaching techniques have rather been explored in isolation, leaving it unclear how these techniques interact and jointly influence different outcomes of coaching effectiveness. In a survey study by De Haan et al. (2011) the role of a specific coaching technique for coaching effectiveness was judged as less important by coachees than other more generic factors like the coaching relationship and empathic understanding. Thus, it seems that not a specific technique per se but the ability to use the right technique at the right

EVIDENCE ON WORKPLACE COACHING

moment is important. However, the relative importance of different techniques still needs to be tested in a rigorous quantitative fashion. Similarly, coaching has rarely been compared to other organizational interventions which would provide further information about its relative utility as a tool for development and learning.

Furthermore, on the one hand, workplace coaching research chronically suffers from a lack of (coaching specific) theoretical grounding (Bozer & Jones, 2018). This not only concerns the relationship between the proposed constructs per se, but also the conceptual role of time and the question how effects unfold over time (Fischer et al., 2017). Thus, future studies on workplace coaching should try to theoretically ground their proposed models more thoroughly, for example by applying or extending existing theories from neighboring fields. On the other hand, further empirical testing of theoretical considerations about the nature and effectiveness of coaching is also needed. For example, although common definitions of workplace coaching (e.g., Smither, 2011) explicitly incorporate constructs like reflection and goal-setting, recent reviews (e.g., Bozer & Jones, 2018) had not been able to identify any study which directly examined the influence of either construct on different coaching outcomes.

Finally, although the field has seen more and more rigorous research during the past years (Bachkirova, 2017), the choice of appropriate research designs warrants further attention in order to increase the reliability and validity of reported findings (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018). For example, many studies still use simple within-subjects designs without a control group and randomization and typically solely rely on self-reports, either by the coachee and/or the coach. Future studies could, for example, use a longitudinal diary design combined with a randomized controlled trial in the field involving an active control group receiving a different intervention (e.g., mentoring). This would allow scholars to track the outcomes of the coaching intervention in coachees' over time, make causal conclusions about

EVIDENCE ON WORKPLACE COACHING

the effectiveness of coaching and compare its relative utility with other types of developmental interventions. This approach could be complemented by making use of other ratings (e.g., from the coachees' supervisor or subordinates) on the coachees' progress, reducing the risks of common method bias and conflated results.

Conclusion

This review aimed to summarize the main evidence regarding the effectiveness of workplace coaching in organizational settings. In general, although the results of extant meta-analyses show considerable variability in findings, the overall picture seems to be positive and supports the notion that workplace coaching is a promising approach to employee learning and development in organizations. Similar to other helping professions, the quality of the relationship between coachee and coach seems to play a key role for coaching success. Despite these promising results and the recent positive changes with regard to the quality of empirical studies in the area of workplace coaching, the field is still in the process of gaining professional credibility and scientific maturity. This is also reflected in open questions regarding the relative utility of different coaching techniques, the specific boundary conditions that influence coaching success and the underlying psychological mechanisms that translate coaching practices into valued outcomes for coachees. Thus, the question whether we have reached a stage of evidence-based workplace coaching yet has to be answered with *yes and no*.

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EVIDENCE ON WORKPLACE COACHING

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