

THE IMPACT OF SKILLS DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS ON CORPORATE CONTROL: EXECUTIVES' & DIRECTORS' COACHING

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Abstract

Senior decision-makers require knowledge, skills and attributes to pro-actively navigate the business environment in search of optimal organizational outcomes. Increasingly executive coaches are employed to develop these leadership competencies. The paper integrates literature findings from human resource development, organizational behavior, management and psychology disciplines and posits a framework for effective triadic coaching relationships. The model includes requirements for positive performance results, corporate governance, strategy and organizational change outcomes. The study concludes with a number of detailed suggestions for better practice of executive coaching for non-executive directors, practicing executives and consultants. The cautionary notes regarding limitations and impact of coaching and incompetency training on strategy and proprietary intelligence make an important contribution to the body of knowledge regarding executive coaching.

Keywords: Director Development, Coaching, Executive Coaching, Incompetency Training, Knowledge Flow, Performance Evaluation, Strategy Development, Talent

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1. Introduction

Executive coaching is a growing phenomenon worldwide – both as developmental activity in organizations and as a professional service offering. More than 80% of UK-based organizations and more than 90% of US-based Global 100 companies use executive coaches (Grant et al., 2010; Bono et al., 2009). Although there is clearly an increase in the demand for and use of executive coaches (McDermot et al., 2007), there is a paucity of empirical work on many of the aspects of executive coaching.

Many scholars lament the lack of scientific studies on the process and the outcome of executive coaching (Baron and Morin, 2009; Grant et al., 2010; Lowman, 2005; Sue-Chan and Latham, 2004). Some empirical work has been done on 360-degree or multi-source feedback (Boyatzis, 2002; Feldman and Lankau, 2005; Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006; Kilburg, 2004; Kombarakaran et al., 2008) and self-reports from coaches and coached employees (Chandler et al. 2011; Thompson et al., 2008). Passmore and Gibbes (2007, p. 117) express concern over the “scantiness of empirical research” into the impact and effectiveness of executive coaching. In their comprehensive overview of executive coaching research for the period up to 2006, they report a sum total of seven studies up to 2000 - dating only as far back as 1996. (A more thorough review of the state of executive coaching research over a ten year period of 1996-2006 is available in their work and in the study by Grant et al., 2010). A number of studies assert that the rate of research, investigation and evidence has not kept pace with the rate of increase in practice (Boyatzis, 2002; Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006; Kilburg, 2004). A recent study by Grant et al. (2010) profess that the majority of priori research is contextual or survey-based and focused on the delivery and characteristics of coaching services, as opposed to outcome research that examine the efficacy of coaching as developmental intervention for creating individual or organizational change.

Academic literature, especially studies from the field of psychology, profess the positive outcomes of career coaching, but this study of the prior literature on the issues of executive coaching, uncovered minimal empirical data to support any particular, positive or negative viewpoint. In answer to the question whether executive coaching is effective, Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006), answer with a resounding “yes” for internal, external and manager modes of coaching. They summarize their study of practitioner and academic research literature by stating: “in all the studies undertaken, investigating whatever mode of coaching, the conclusion was the same – everyone likes to be coached and perceives that it impacts positively upon their effectiveness” (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006, p. 35). This blanket statement is illustrative of the general message, mostly anecdotal, from the majority of literature in the fields of psychology and training and is insufficient to guide the practitioner about factors which will contribute or distract from effective coaching. Thus, a more thorough review of the purpose and effectiveness of coaching is done in this study.

Further, to the best of our knowledge no author addresses the impact of executive coaching on the mind-set, perspectives and motives of coached executives and thus ultimately on the strategy of client organizations. This study identifies which contextual circumstances, coaching behaviors, coaching methods, and coachee traits will result in behavior changes that will lead to organizational improvement. This study starts with a review of two substantial bodies of literature, specifically from the training and the psychology disciplines. This leads to the construction of a framework for identifying the do’s and don’ts of executive coaching. The paper concludes with suggestions on how the framework might be applied to executive coaching evaluation and design within the domain of executive competency development in organizations.

2. The popularity and growth of executive coaching

Executive coaching can improve workplace performance, assist in goal attainment, promote work-life balance and resilience to change, improve inter-personal and leadership skills and thus optimize corporate outcomes (Grant et al., 2009; Sue-Chan and Latham, 2004; Boyatzis, et al., 2006). Executive development relies increasingly on coaching in three areas, namely skills coaching; performance coaching, and developmental coaching (Grant et al., 2010) and thus there has been a marked increase in popularity in many organizations (Chandler et al., 2011; Sherman and Freas, 2004). A Google web-search using the phrase “executive coach” executed on 28 November 2010 delivered 1,1 million sites. A repeat of this search on 6 November 2012 resulted in 1,3 million sites and our most recent search (2013) delivered 32,6 million hits. Bono and co-authors (2009) report further evidence of the popularity and growth of the executive coaching, stating 93% of US-based Global 100 companies use executive coaches in development interventions. This rapidly growing market is a well-documented, global phenomenon (Bacon and Spear, 2003; Bono et al., 2009; Joo, 2005; Kilburg, 1996; Sherman and Freas, 2004; Thompson et al., 2008).

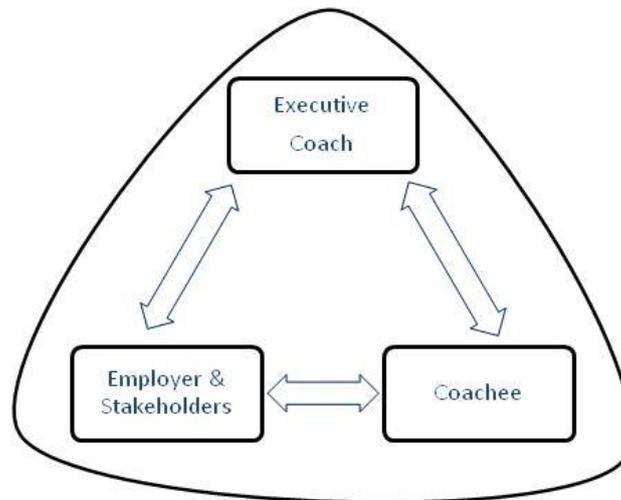
Scholars (Joo, 2005; Boyatzis et al., 2006) suggest that the popularity of executive coaching is organizations’ response to develop and grow managers’ competencies in dealing with: the increased workplace demands for improved productivity; growing complexity due to globalization; fast changing information technology; rapid changes in products, processes and systems; changes in the demographics of the workforce and key clients; and flatter organizations. A number of learning and development interventions failed in this purpose and the lack of “sustained behavioral change pointed toward the need for more individualized, more engaged, more context-specific learning” (Bacon and Spear, 2003, p. 463). Botes and Valla (2003) report on the growing popularity of coaching to address the need for African managers in a post-apartheid South Africa. De Villiers (2010, 2013) reiterates and confirms the assessment by Sherman and Freas (2004) that organizations recognize the need for executives to possess highly developed emotional intelligence and soft skill competencies to deal with organizational changes. A related recent development is the emergence of the Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) movement (Cameron et al., 2003) whose aims are to understand the organizational dynamics that foster well-being and resilience in the fast-changing business environment and to explore ways to facilitate positive human change in organizational settings (Boyatzis et al., 2006; Grant et al. 2009).

The volatile and highly competitive environment demands highly evolved technical and soft skills such as sense-making, decision-making and emotional intelligence of managers, executives and non-executive directors (Grant and Cavanagh, 2004; Greco, 2001; Sherman and Freas, 2004). Executives need the competencies to reduce complexity and resolve uncertainty in order to evolve at the same pace as

marketplace changes (Nicolas, 2004; McNulty et al., 2011) and create winning strategies through distinctive competencies and differential benefits in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Spender, 2003). In addition to the pivotal external factors, managers have to deal with mobile, global workforce issues. Knowledge transfer is a long and iterative process under the best of circumstances, but to complicate matters, highly organization-specific competencies are sometimes lost through external and internal transfers, head hunting, retirement and death. In addition, competencies need to be aligned with organizations' strategies. Several authors suggest that coaching is one way to achieve the retention and alignment of embedded knowledge and corporate intelligence (Boyatzis, 2002; Kilburg, 2000; Grant et al., 2009). Executive coaching provides managers and leaders with the opportunity to up-skill, transfer knowledge and become more adept at leading teams through organizational transformation and times of upheaval. This can be achieved through highly competent, experienced executives trained as internal coaches, who coach novice staff across internal units' borders (Kubicek 2002). Typically though, executive coaching is offered by external coaches who tend to provide a combination of coaching, training and consulting, as opposed to pure coaching services (Binstead and Grant, 2008; Clegg et al., 2005, Grant et al. 2010).

Knowledge transfer can also be achieved through external professional executive coaches who are industry specialists or specialize in functional technical knowledge (Jones and Spooner, 2006). These coaching interventions are especially valuable to underdeveloped talent, key staff or those ear-marked for positions of leadership. Botes and Valla (2003) indicate that organizations use executive coaching to meet the increasing demand for fair representation of minority groups, especially females, in governance and leadership positions and the scholars posit that coaching may aid in fast-tracking and developing employees to achieve the desired demographic representation at senior level.

Figure 1. Triadic Relationship: Coach, Coachee and Organization



3. Definition and categories of executive coaching

In the words of Grant and co-authors (2010, p.131) “Executive coaching encompasses a vast range of services and specialties; coaching for enhanced strategic planning; presentation skills; anger and stress management; executive management team building; and leadership development”. Executive coaching is distinct from other, more well-known types of coaching: psychotherapy; athletic and sports coaching; and life coaching. It is a triangular relationship between the coach (the one who provides the professional service), the coachee (person or executive who receives the service) and the client (the organization and key stakeholders such as HR officers the coachee works with). The expected outcome is improved performance of mutual benefit for the coached employee (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006; Sherman and Freas, 2004) and the employer. “[A]t the most basic level coaches serve as out-sourced suppliers of candor, providing individual leaders with the objective feedback needed to nourish their growth” (Sherman and Freas, 2004, p. 82).

A widely accepted definition by Kilburg (1996, p. 142), acts as the foundation of the further investigation into possible antecedents of executive coaching: “Executive coaching is defined as a helping relationship

formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioral 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 organization within a formally defined coaching agreement.”

Stelter (2007) positions coaching and its purpose from an experience-based and social constructivist-relational point of view and declares the aim to be to provide the “focus person [coachee] a developmental space and thereby the possibility of reflection and renewed understanding: (i) about his/her experiences in relation to a specific context, (ii) about specific relationships, coordinated actions with others and about the process of negotiations in a specific social situation” (Stelter, 2007, p. 191). Most definitions in popular and peer-reviewed literature stress the one-on-one nature of coaching relationships, but Kets de Vries (2005) stresses the benefit of coaching in groups and even presents it as the preferred tool to affect behavioral change. Team members and other stakeholders such as peers and subordinates can play similar roles to executive coaches, when using behavioral tools and methodologies to provide formative feedback to coachees. The one key differential may be the lack of continuation or the once-off nature of the feedback.

This study defines *executive coaching* as an ongoing, systematic and dynamic developmental process for co-creation of meaning and conceptualization of best practice. It is a triadic relationship between a coach, the coachee and other contributors to facilitate the acquisition of new or refined competencies, capabilities, perspectives and motives through a wide variety of behavioral techniques such as feedback, in-depth reflection, dialogue and guidance within the simulated and real organizational contexts. The process yields improved managerial competencies and personal effectiveness by enhancing self-awareness and the practice of new behaviors.

4. Purpose and Benefits of Coaching

Many forms of categorization of coaching are recorded. Three levels of coaching are identified by Grant and Cavanagh (2004): (i) short-term skills coaching focusing on behavioral change; (ii) performance management and goal-setting; and (iii) holistic, intimate and long-term developmental coaching to deal with personal and or professional issues. Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006, p.26) identify three categories of agendas for coaching interventions: (i) coaching of senior executives to their own agendas (“free-agenda coaching”); (ii) coaching of managers after training to consolidate knowledge acquisition; and (iii) coaching of staff to the organization's agenda and within the human resource strategy.

The literature review uncovered more than 12 different purpose statements (Joo, 2005; Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Stelter, 2007). Although there are many slight differences in the various purpose statements, the common purpose of executive coaching as expressed throughout the literature is to: (i) instill behavioral change; (ii) increase self-awareness; (iii) increase knowledge or produce learning; and (iv) to increase and improve skills. The overall aim is to develop professionals to achieve personal effectiveness, organizational performance goals and career advancement. It is best captured in the words of Sherman and Freas (2004, p. 84): “Its purpose is to produce learning, behavioral change, and growth in the coachee for the economic benefit of a third party – the client that employs the coachee.” This purpose statement does not capture the benefit for the coachee, which might be financial in nature, or career progress (coupled with its financial gain implications), or it may be relationship building. We highlight the key aspect of mutual benefit, since within the developmental domain; the coachee is often keenly interested in the long-term career enhancing benefit of the coaching interventions; whilst the organization benefits from the improved performance and the retention of talent.

On an individual basis, each and every coachee will have his/her own unique set of objectives and purpose for engaging in any coaching intervention; thus no attempt will be made to list them all here. A small survey by Feggetter (2007, p. 138) identifies an illustrative list, ranging from vague personal issues such as “less anxiety”, through particular skills development such as “listening skills” and “time management”, to “thinking and operating strategically”. Chandler and co-authors (2011) identified four outcome areas for the coachee: (i) problem solving awareness and abilities; (ii) developing multiple-approach problem analysis competencies; (iii) improved inter-personal skills; and (iv) increased job performance and satisfaction. Opposed to these individual objectives, most organizations employ internal and external coaches to facilitate professional development: (i) improve internal and external business

relationships, (ii) to improve executives' task performance; in line with the business objective and strategic business unit's (SBU) key performance indicators and strategy (Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Sperry, 1993) and (iii) to fast-track the development of key executive competencies.

Organizations use internal and manager coaches not only to assist in developing competencies and improve performance levels, but also to consolidate training and behavioral change. A case study by Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006, p. 27) quotes a respondent expressing a key learning and organizational benefit of coaching as: "the business environment is changing too fast so we cannot continually retrain everyone – we need to use coaching to constantly update and upgrade." Executive coaching impacts on development on a personal level but is often intent on the development of the focus person's skills, attitudes and attributes in a broader sense. When coaching is done by the internal manager though, the focus is normally much narrower and more intently focused on expected performance outcomes and improved behavior at work.

Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) stress a major result of executive coaching for leaders as the ability to sustain performance despite job-related stress factors and power stress. Given these arduous aspirations and keenly sought benefits, it is no surprise that organizations are increasingly investing in the systematic competency development process of executive coaching. A study by Chandler et al. (2011) provides evidence to support increased organizational performance and several areas of benefits to the coaching triad of coach, coachee and organization. "Respondents reported that they are more likely to report that their organizations have higher levels of success in the area of coaching and that they are more likely to say that their organizations are performing well in the market, as determined by self-reports in the combined areas of revenue growth, market share, profitability, and customer satisfaction" (Chandler et al., 2011, p. 52).

Executive coaching is indicated as a result of career aspirations, non-performance in the workplace, 360-degree feedback, transition challenges, the need to acquire specific knowledge and skills related to the workplace or critical insights gained at training and development interventions. "The coaching environment offers the executive the opportunity to reflect and consider the issues that may be barriers to performance" (Kombarakaran et al., 2008, p. 79). The objective outsider viewpoint offered by a coach (internal or external to the organization) is of key benefit to executives. This feedback can assist the executive to develop new insights and modify perspectives without sacrificing self-esteem or peer esteem (Kombarakaran et al., 2008). An expert executive coach will facilitate many opportunities for iterative learning and on-going feedback (Diedericks, 1996). Executive coaching allows focus people to achieve goals previously out of reach or difficult to attain — due to new skills, renewed perspectives and an increase the coachee's awareness of the impact of behavior (Chandler et al., 2011; Diedericks, 1996; Hall et al., 1999; Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2008). In addition, people share their emotional intelligence (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 2002) to move knowledge from the individual to the collective and back, thus benefitting the organization through the development and sharing of implicit and tacit knowledge.

One of the key attributes of executive coaching versus other methods of development is that it "engages with people in customized ways that acknowledge and honor their individuality" (Sherman and Freas, 2004, p. 82). A further attribute of coaching as stressed by Stelter (2007) is the facilitating role coaches (should) play in "unraveling" the coachee's current view of his/her reality by promoting in-depth reflection and dialogue in order to co-create meaning. Stelter (2007, p. 192) goes to great lengths to stress the centrality of meaning in coaching. He states that people find events "meaningful when [they] understand and make sense of their way of thinking, feeling and acting. ... [U]nderstanding is a continuous interpretive process which is, amongst other things, based on the individual's previous knowledge, experiences, emotions, beliefs and attitude towards an actual situation."

An important contribution coaching could make — which, to the best of our knowledge is overlooked and not addressed in the literature — is the long-term impact on strategy and internal climate development. Authors recognize the direct link between talent management and strategy (Becker and Huselid, 2006; Collings, 2009; Tarique and Schuler 2010), and talent management and internal culture, but fail to explicitly link the use of internal (trained or untrained; incidental or planned) and external coaches to the strategy of the organization. Organizations recognize that recruitment and development of staff are imperative to gain and sustain a global competitive advantage, regardless of the size of the organization, the shifts in environmental factors and internal workforce conditions (Tarique and Schuler 2010), but fail

to investigate or to report on the impact of external coaches on the culture and climate of the organization and on knowledge flow into and out of the organization. Since no empirical work is available on the impact of coaching on either corporate culture or strategy — either of the SBU of the coachee or the overall organizational strategy, future in-depth research into the antecedent conditions as well as the impact, positive or negative, will be the next step. The links between managerial behavior and strategy is covered in section 6.3.1 of this paper.

5. Evidence of the effectiveness of coaching

Almost all of the academic literature, especially from the field of human resource development and psychology, profess the positive outcomes of career coaching (Kampa-Kokesh and Anderson, 2001), but a study of peer reviewed literature on the issues of coaching and executive coaching uncovered minimal empirical data other than self-report surveys to support any particular, positive or negative viewpoint (Dagley, 2006; Feldman and Lankau, 2005; MacKie, 2007). The tiny portion of unfavorable reports highlight shortcomings of the key role-players, such as a lack of managerial experience of the coach, non-receptiveness of the coachee or unclear agendas of the clients, as the contributing factors. (These factors will be discussed in more depth in the section on role-players and their attributes.) Many studies on the effectiveness of executive coaching miss key information and important aspects of the methodology and are therefore not reliable. The majority of published studies is anecdotal (Dagley, 2006; Kilburg, 2004). In a study by MacKie (2007) this lack of rigorous, controlled and verified research studies into the practice and effectiveness of executive coaching is reconfirmed and the author suggests future research in the form of controlled trials and case studies. He suggests that a large number of the current research from the field of psychology is little more than “collected anecdotes” and “simply report perceptions of effectiveness and areas of perceived efficacy” (MacKie, 2007, p. 311). Related to this, Boyatzis (2002, p. 2), an authority on the issues of competency development through management education, states: “... [of] the less formally prepared providers of executive or managerial coaching services, we still do not know much. Many explorations focus on effectiveness of the coaching. But few studies actually try to predict behavior change”.

In the field of psychology there is a host of anecdotal evidence that executive coaching works, but as stated earlier, a large number of these studies provide limited empirical data to support these claims (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006; Sherman and Freas, 2004). In the rest of this paragraph we provide an illustrative overview of the current literature. In 2008 Kombarakaran, et al. (2008, p. 78) state categorically that “[executive coaching] works”. They base this broad statement on evidence of executive change as reported by both coaches and executive coachees in a survey completed in January 2003. 114 Executives and 42 different coaches, who coached the participating executives over a period of 6 months during 12 one-on-one sessions, participated in the survey. Five areas of executive change are recorded as: “effective people management; increased engagement and productivity, improved goal setting and prioritizing; more effective dialogue and communication”. Since the survey was qualitative and no control groups were set up, these results lack the rigor expected from applied management studies and are used in an illustrative and guiding manner. As in many other disciplines, popularity seems to be confused with effectiveness. “Coaching may be popular because it provides needed expertise, an objective viewpoint and is integrated into the executive’s routine” (Kombarakaran et al., 2008, p. 78)

This raises three questions: (i) is executive coaching making a real, measurable and positive contribution to the behavior of coached business executives; and (ii) do these changes result in measurable, positive impact on organizational goals; and finally, (iii) if so, what is the measured return on the investment in time and other resources? Empirical, quantitative studies related to our original questions are rather sparse, but we highlight a few key findings as summarized from the comprehensive and broad literature review by MacKie (2007). Only those findings directly related to this study of competency development coaching to improve performance will be covered. MacKie (2007) reviews empirical studies ranging from surveys, to case studies, uncontrolled studies, to controlled studies and the coaching process itself. He uncovers the following evidence-based benefits: positive changes in self-esteem; self-efficacy and locus control; improved confidence; specific goal setting as reported in 360-degree feedback; improved leadership effectiveness; improved team-effectiveness; positive change in management style; self-efficacy beliefs to act in a balanced way and set own goals; team effectiveness and a change in management style. An in-depth mixed method study (Kombarakaran et al., 2008) during which one hundred fourteen executives and 42 coaches were surveyed, quantifies the effect of executive coaching on a number of key performance indicators. Five areas of executive change are reported on: (i) effective people management;

(ii) better relationships with managers; (iii) improved goal setting and prioritizing; (iv) more effective dialogue and communication; and finally, more directly related to the bottom-line (v) increased engagement and productivity. (Qualitative and quantitative evidence of impact is available in this study.) Kobarakanran and co-authors (2008, p. 88) expand on performance benefits by stating: “For organizations to perform effectively and efficiently, retention of talented and trained managers is critical. This study demonstrated that coaching has increased executive engagement. Research has provided evidence that the more engaged a manager is, the more productive he or she is. Therefore, coaching leads to increased productivity. Coaching is a viable method of leadership development, especially for companies that are challenged in retaining high-potential employees”.

Given this wide range of possible areas of impact and the triangular nature of the coaching relationships (resulting in three sets of unique expectations of each of the stakeholders) as well as a multiplicity of factors which will influence the coaching triad, “effective or successful coaching interventions” will need to be defined. A range of success factors and perspectives on these factors need be considered when assessing the outcomes of coaching interventions. It is apparent that it is a real challenge for the profession to find generic criteria that will accurately measure the impact of coaching interventions (Feldman and Lankau, 2005; MacKie, 2007).

Although Hall and co-authors (Hall et al., 1999) and several other studies report that “executives like the confidentiality and personal attention; they also like what coaches do for their careers”; the behavioral outcomes evidenced above, but most business enterprises will not consider these reasons as sufficient motivation to invest scarce resources of time and money in executive coaching. Phillips and co-authors (2012) assert that stakeholders who fund training initiatives are increasingly interested in results which demonstrate exactly how the expenditure contributes to the organization. Studies reporting on quantifiable business performance measures, such as productivity, ROI, sales performance and turnover, which can be directly related to the impact of executive coaching, are very hard to find. Levenson (2009, p. 108) establishes a framework of people-related factors that contribute to organizational effectiveness; which includes amongst the 20+ factors strategic and financial performance measures quantifiable: process improvements such as customer satisfaction and margins; strategic performance such as market growth and product innovation and human capital initiatives such as performance management and team building. Although this study is very useful in demonstrating both the complexity and the numerous possible measures of strategic and financial performance organizations could use to determine the impact of executive coaching, it does not provide empirical data to quantify the impact of coaching on the observed organizations (Levenson, 2009; MacKie, 2007). Levenson comments on the difficulty of making a direct link between the executives’ behavioral change and measured business performance outcomes. Levenson (2009, p. 110) laments that “competency models that are closely tied to behaviors that are the true barriers for improving business performance, the right chain of causation needs to be established between changes in an executive’s behavior and improved business results. To date there are no frameworks to achieve this.

A limitation of a number of the published articles is that they focus on self-reported estimates by the coachee and or their colleagues and reports. McGovern, Lindemann and co-authors (2001) quote a figure of 5.7 for ROI in terms of quantifiable output such as increased productivity. This figure was determined by estimations of the coached executives themselves and therefore lacks reliability, but it does provide an indication of how the clients perceive the behavioral impact. Philips (2004) of the ROI institute, quotes a ROI of 2.21, but this is not a validated study and is once again a mere indication of magnitude. In a study exploring ROI for 100 executives in the US who received coaching, a value of 545 percent or a contribution to the business of \$5.45 for every dollar spent on executive coaching was estimated by the executives. Luthans and Peterson (2003) report on reduced turnover and increased sales following coaching interventions and regular feedback; using multi-source assessment. It is important to note though, that “these are systems level indicators and were not sufficiently controlled to link directly to the executive coaching interventions” (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006). Objective performance rating such as sales performance is reported to be positively affected. “The Sales Executive Council reported a 19% team performance improvement for teams who had effective coaching” (Chandler et al., 2011, p. 52).

As stated earlier, this literature review covered a wide range of studies from multiple disciplines, which profess the positive impact of executive coaching on behavior and learning, but it is important to note some limitations of these studies in particular the limited empirical support on the impact of coaching managers and executives. The majority of studies do not utilize random assignment of participants, as is

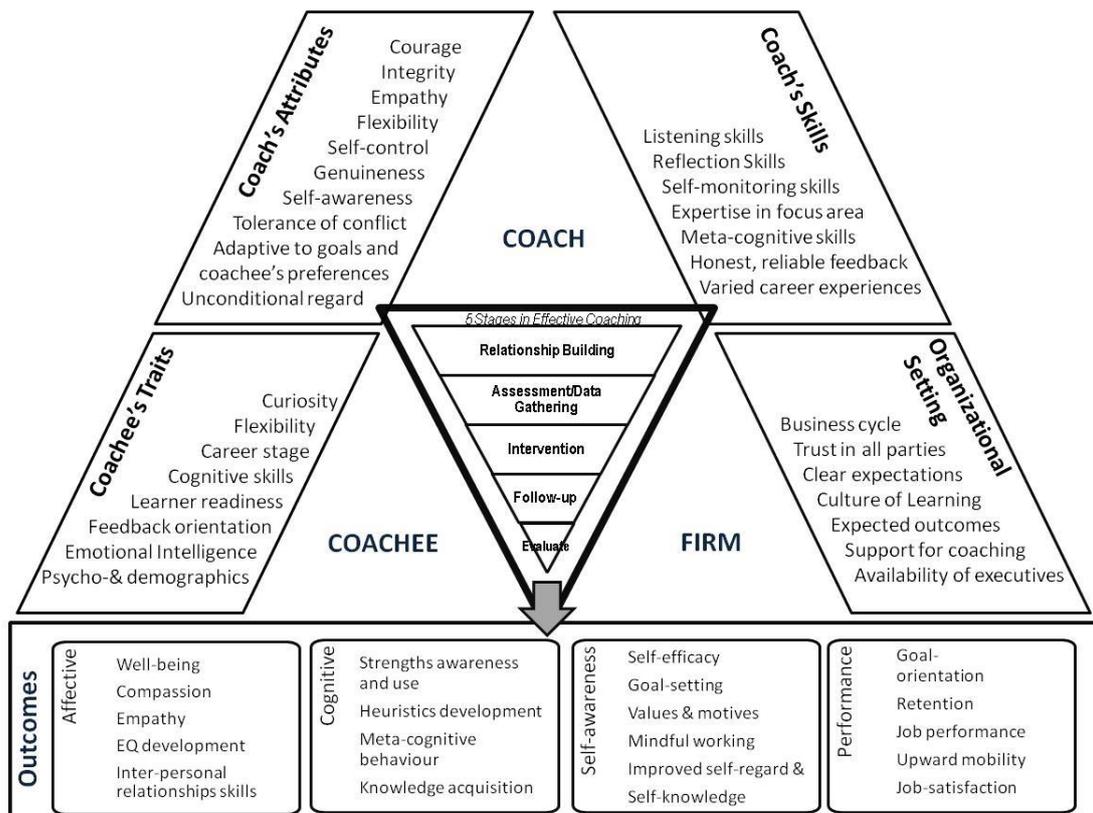
expected for true experiments (Levenson, 2009). “Thus the coaching engagements that are evaluated are more likely to have positive outcomes because executives are selected to receive coaching based on criteria designed to maximize the impact of coaching” (Levenson, 2009, p. 105). This factor limits the generalization to people who have not received coaching. Managers who have not been coached, might gain benefits from coaching, but they might equally obtain advantage from other developmental interventions such as performance management, training or team building assignments. Similarly the coached executives might have achieved learning and behavioral outcomes similar to those achieved by coaching as a result of human resource development, organizational psychology of training interventions. There is not enough empirical research to report on this.

Several studies report directly or indirectly on moderating and mediating factors on executive coaching’s effectiveness. Coaches’ qualifications and their knowledge of the client’s organization all have an effect on the outcome. Motivation, drive and integrity of coachee, the coaching relationship, psychological mindedness and business culture (Dingman, 2004; Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006; Kilburg, 2000; MacKie, 2007). Based on limited existing empirical research available on the impact of coaching leaders, the need for developing clear theoretical model(s) for coaching practices is evident. This brings us the next section on: “What does good coaching look like?”

6. Effective Executive Coaching. What does good executive coaching look like?

Insight into the key success drivers of effective executive coaching and the underlying theories is imperative, if coaching is to become a significant part of the learning methodology employed in executive development. Given the triadic nature of executive coaching relationships, each of the three need to be considered independently and is addressed in the sections below.

Figure 2. The Coaching Tripartite, Requirements & Outcomes



6.1 Effective Coaches

The importance of coach selection and early identification of coaches’ critical competencies are highlighted by a number of studies, particularly from the discipline of psychology. Popular literature

(Boyatzis and McKee, 2005; Coutu and Kauffmann, 2009; Sherman and Freas, 2004; Underhill et al. 2007) as well as scholarly research (Feldman and Lankau, 2005; Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006) highlights the important role coaches, mentors and counselors play in the progress of leaders and managers. The importance of the role of the coach cannot be overemphasized and this study takes a consulting rather than counseling approach to coaching. The latter approach is often taken by scholars with backgrounds in counseling psychology (Hart, Blattner, and Leipsic, 2001; Joo, 2005). Our view is that coaching is a result-orientated and action-based development intervention, rather than wellness and remedial work. This study will therefore not cover remedial coaching or counseling. (Scholars interested in the distinctions can find an overview in Joo, 2010.) Learners' future behavior, skills and attitudes rather than learners' past, feelings, inner psyches are of primary concern (Goldsmith and Laurence, 2006; Bacon and Spear, 2003).

Rogers (1983), based on his work in psychotherapy identifies three key characteristics of coaches to achieve effective coaching outcomes: (i) empathy, (ii) unconditional positive reward and (iii) genuineness. Boyatzis (2002) reviews the earliest works related to coaching effectiveness, uncovers and reports on attitudes and traits, rather than competencies or approaches. Boyatzis (2002) deduce from a study of counselors that effective executive coaches will need (i) empathy and (ii) emotional self-awareness as manifested in the ability to separate own values and feelings from that of the client ... ability to manage and control feelings and reactions... only possible with a high degree of self-awareness and self-monitoring (p17)- for executive coaches. Boyatzis (2002, p.18): "To be effective as ... an executive coach, a person must be sensitive to others. To be sensitive to others, [executive coaches] must be sensitive to themselves."

6.1.1. Coaches' Background and Training

There are two points of view regarding the need for executive coaches to be certified psychologists. Some authors demand certified psychologists with accumulated business experience (Hart et al., 2001; Joo, 2005; McDermot et al., 2007) whilst others suggest as alternative background, a trained coach with some sound insight into psychological factors and general psychological skills including adaptability, patience, empathy for different groups and interpersonal effectiveness (Bacon and Spear, 2003). Washylyn (2003) suggests that executive coaches should not necessarily be certified psychologists, but should be well grounded in both business and psychology. The extant literature search did not uncover empirical studies to determine which backgrounds impact on effectiveness of coaches (Feldman and Lankau, 2005). Some studies allude to the impact of background on credibility and therefore the clients' openness to being coached, but it lacks further insight. This is obviously an area for future research. Within the focus of this paper and with the increasing use of external coaches to work with executives (Feldman and Lankau, 2005; Sue-Chan and Latham, 2004) research into matching processes, educational background and the effectiveness of executive coaches will make a significant contribution to the body of knowledge.

6.1.2. Coaches' Characteristics & Qualities

Wasylyshyn (2003) reports on the credibility of the coach having a measurable impact on the success of coaching. There is a high degree of agreement in the published literature about the importance of coaches' knowledge and their credibility, resulting in coachees' confidence and trust (Bacon and Spear, 2003; Judge and Cowell, 1997). A recent study by Kombarakaran and colleagues (2008) concludes that coaching programmes' success depends partly on the coaches' professionalism and ethical standards.

Linked to the issue of credibility is integrity and as argued by Sherman and Freas (2004), successful coaches are those who practice sound judgment, have acute perceptive powers and are able to resolve conflicts effectively and with integrity. The moral character requirements for a good coach is further unpacked in the study by Hall et al. (1999) as: commitment to the coachee's success; demonstrating integrity; openness and honesty. Stelter (2007) confirms the importance of self-knowledge and self-control when coaches facilitate the personal reflection and self-exposing narratives of the coachee. Stelter (2007) refers to the facilitation role coaches play in the "unraveling" of the current reality view of the focus person through stimulated dialogue and conversations. He states: "this self-knowledge of the coach is the basis for a professional attitude and work ethics which help to prevent an uncontrollable influence of coach interventions in the progress of the conversation" (Stelter, 2007, p. 191). This ability to "sniff out hidden truths" (Sherman and Freas, 2004, p. 85) resulting from a curious nature and keen questioning skills maximize the opportunities for relevant and appropriate feedback. Hall and co-authors (1999) list

reflecting, caring, connecting with the coachee, knowing the unwritten rules and challenging the coachee when necessary as best practices for effective executive coaching as identified by coaches themselves.

6.1.3. Coaches' Knowledge and Skills

McDermot and co-authors report in their empirical study (2007, p. 36) that executives rate “professional certification”, “unique subject matter expertise” and “a degree in psychology” as positive impacting factors on the effectiveness of the coaching engagement. Prior coaching experience and business experience in the coachee’s company is rated of slight positive impact. Many authors report on the importance of either industry or organization knowledge or experience as relevant and important competencies for coaches to possess (Kilburg, 2000; Kombarakaran et al., 2008; MacKie, 2007; McDermot et al., 2007). “The best [coaches] ground their work in the coachee’s environment: relationships at all levels plus the values, goals and dynamics of the clients’ business” (Sherman and Freas, 2004, p. 85). Kilburg (2000) noted that poor outcomes result from a lack of expertise in the focus area of concern to the coachee and poor technique. In a study by Kombarakaran and colleagues (2008, p. 89) the authors highlight several areas of knowledge: “in addition to business acumen, the strategies and techniques employed in this study assume that coaches also possess a solid background and understanding of the psychological sciences. Part of the success of this coaching program was the coaches’ professionalism and ethical standards.”

This paper suggests the likely importance of three key knowledge areas to the nominated coach: insight into key long-term implications, specifically corporate strategic direction; organizational culture and overall organizational orientation. The coach is likely to affect the attitude, thinking and ultimately the behavior of the coachee, and thereby the strategic actions of the coachee’s SBU. Thus, it is imperative to select coaches that are well versed and thoroughly briefed in the organization’s strategy, culture and orientation. (See the discussion in section 6.3.1 on the organization for a more detailed discussion.)

6.1.4. Coaches' Gender

Botes and Valla (2003) indicate that gender plays an important role in executive coaching and that interventions often fail as a result of insufficient consideration for this aspect. The authors (Botes and Valla, 2003) indicate that women in developing economies have a lot more to contend during their search for an appropriate coach. With fewer women in positions of power; fewer coaches are available to women. Women often have to accept male coaches to fulfill this requirement, despite a preference for a female coach. Women report to be hesitant to initiate such a coachee-coach relationship for fear that their initiative may be misconstrued as sexual advancement by the coach or others in the organization. This opposite gender coaching may also perpetuate existing male dominated behavior or not adequately address female non-executive directors’ or executives’ issues because they do not understand the unique needs of and problems women executives might grapple with.

6.1.5 Success Techniques and Methods

Hall et al. (1999) report on qualitative interviews done with 74 executives and 15 coaches, and the importance of coaches’ ability to provide honest but challenging feedback and helpful suggestions. The ability to provide useful and challenging feedback hinges on appropriate experience in a variety of business backgrounds and an in-depth knowledge of technical and soft skills required to perform in managerial roles.

To expand on the issue of actionable ideas and feedback, Diedericks (1996) suggests that an expert executive coach will facilitate many opportunities for iterative learning and on-going feedback. Truner reports (2006) on the need for detailed and challenging feedback. (Our study expands on the issue of feedback as a coaching methodology later in this article.) In addition, focus, the ability to define clear objectives (Hall et al., 1999) and actionable plans that will achieve rapid results (Jones and Spooner, 2006) are successful methodologies. “An effective coach helps a coachee achieve agreed-upon goals, while also transferring the knowledge and skills needed to sustain ongoing development. Like good parents good coaches foster independence (Sherman and Freas, 2004, p. 85)”.

A number of papers and journal articles which inform this study, highlights the importance of reflection stimulated by a coach (Stelter, 2007) and regular, honest, objective and challenging feedback provided by

either a coach and or sources exposed to the behavior of the coached executive (Feldman and Lankau, 2005; Hall et al., 1999; Hill and Gudmundsun, 2010; Joo, 2005; Levenson, 2009; Luthans and Peterson, 2003; Sherman and Freas, 2004; Thach, 2002). Executives value the space where confronting, but non-threatening feedback and dialogue, prompts self-analysis and review. This type of honest performance and behavior feedback is generally not readily available from the colleagues since they fear repercussions, are uncomfortable to provide honest feedback about behavior, will not provide accurate observations feedback to seniors and “are afraid of hurting others’ feelings and otherwise upsetting them” (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 94).

One of the key outcomes of coaching, as reported earlier, is improved relationships and behavioral change as well as greater levels of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998). In order to grow these capabilities, managers need “honest information on leadership capabilities [which] is vital to a leaders’ self-awareness and, therefore, his growth and effectiveness” (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 95). Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2005, p. 104) continue to explore the likelihood of behavioral changes and the development of emotional intelligence. They report that interventions should target the limbic areas which “research shows are best learned through motivation, extended practice and feedback”. Another key benefit of feedback is the promotion of self-awareness (reported before) and mindfulness (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005; Goleman et al., 2002). “Great leaders are awake, aware and attuned to themselves, to others and to the world around them ... Great leaders are emotionally intelligent and they are *mindful*: they seek to live in full consciousness of self, others, nature and society” (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005, p. 3). As stated earlier in this article, self-awareness, in other words being keenly aware of one’s own behavior and the consequences, is a key outcome of coaching. Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002, p. 103) highlight that “[m]indfulness is a skill that helps people keenly focus on the present moment and drop distracting thoughts (such as worries) rather than getting lost in them, thus producing a calming effect. As we know mild anxiety can focus the mind, but prolonged stress can sabotage ... relationships, erode mental abilities and hamper work performance” (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 12). So following the logic, feedback allows mindfulness and create a safe place for executives to unlearn ingrained patters and habits and replace them with more effective new ones. Unfortunately, following the same logic, executives could be thought patterns and habits that do not align with the strategic intent or culture of the organization, thus affecting the coachee’s impact on strategy in their SBUs negatively. Further research is required.

A doctoral thesis by Dawdy (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006) reports on the perceived effectiveness of different coaching methodologies. The sixty two respondents were coached male executives (between 40 and 50) and 87 % of these respondents rated coaches’ encouragement as positively contributing to effective coaching. Feldman and Lankau (2005, p. 839) analyze five major approaches to coaching: psychodynamic, behaviorist, person-centered, cognitive therapeutic and system-orientated (see Feldman and Lankau, 2005 for a detailed summary).

A study by Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006) reports on the perception of success of different coaching tools such as feedback, interview techniques and various others and found “no significant difference” in the success perception of the various tools. The question of which method applies best to which circumstances and which executive profile as well as the related purpose remains unanswered. Also unanswered is the overall impact of the coaching tools on the strategic orientation of the coachee and thus ultimately on the organizational effectiveness.

In summary: good coaches possess the qualities of integrity, ethical and moral values, self-confidence and insight, resulting as much from formal academic training as from real-world experience. In addition coaches need problem solving and andragogical skills in order to select the best method to achieve the desired results.

6.2. The Coachee or Executive-in-training

Very little research is available to enlighten this study regarding the nature, profile or disposition of candidates who are likely to be more or less receptive to coaching (Feldman and Lankau, 2005).

6.2.1 Coachees’ Readiness:

A study by Laske (1999) purports that executive need to be ready for training. This broad statement does not add much to identify how executives should be qualified, but it highlights the need to assess for

and/or prepare managers for coaching interventions. According to Sherman and Freas (2004), the best way to maximize the likelihood of good results is to “qualify all three parties”, referring to the coach, the coachee and the organization/client. The authors suggest that executives should not be permitted to be coached until a panel of seniors has evaluated candidate readiness and suitability. Unfortunately they provide limited guidance as to how to achieve the suggested readiness assessment, other than providing four basic questions to be investigated by the decision-maker: “(i) Is the executive motivated? (ii) Can we identify an important development need? (iii) Does she have support? (iv) Is she valuable enough to justify the cost of coaching?” (Sherman and Freas, 2004, p. 86). Further research is required into the way HR practitioners qualify coachees to determine if coaching is an effective and appropriate technique to use and to determine the antecedents of managers’ readiness for executive development through coaching.

6.2.2 Coachees’ EQ and Feedback Orientation

Goleman (1998) and London (London, 2002) suggest that emotional intelligence and a high feedback orientation may influence the efficacy of the coaching intervention. Cognitive abilities such as the ability to identify learning opportunities and the ability for the coachee to self-identify ineffective behavior patterns are suggested as predictors of positive coaching outcomes (Feldman and Lankau, 2005), but this needs more in-depth research.

6.3 The Organization

The starting point of any coaching programme is to frame the purpose or objectives (Sherman and Freas, 2004). The coaching methodology should support and advance important goals. To succeed, coaching programmes need support from senior management and visible links to the learning outcomes and/or business imperatives (Sherman and Freas, 2004). Very little else is reported in the literature on the role of the organization in the success (or failure) of coaching interventions. In the light of the focus of this paper of corporate control over knowledge, culture and strategy, we digress briefly to highlight a need for further research into the link between coach selection and the organization.

6.3.1. Organizational strategy

One school of thought is that corporate strategy is based on how executives scan and interpret information from the business environment (Weick, 1995) and then activate core competencies in response to the opportunities and threats. Knowledge provided by the coach and the interpretation of market intelligence affected by the coach may thus be significant. A second school of thought recognizes the instability, volatility and unbounded nature of information; where executives use heuristics and draw upon imperfect knowledge and schemas to create new, refined knowledge as the basis of strategic thought. Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel (1998) label this approach the “learning approach” to strategy and knowledge creation forms the basis for strategic planning and implementation. Instead of strategy involving political thought, based on shared information; the strategy formulation process is dynamic and ongoing, resulting in a collective cognition by managers evolving from ongoing learning from the actions of different SBUs within the organization. “That means that strategy can emerge from the random actions of managers coupled with some trial and error learning” (Nicolas, 2004, p. 21). Although independent and autonomous decision-making by managers of different SBUs have the advantage of improving the responsiveness of the organization to its fast-changing environment; the more autonomous managers are, the more possible it is that the strategic direction of the organization is influenced by their actions over time (Chakravarthy and Doz, 1992; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). “It might be possible for the organization to learn about new strategic opportunities through the decentralized strategic option taken by autonomous managers. When strategic planning and autonomous action are congruent, they are complementary elements of strategy formation that facilitate learning and adaptation across the organization” (Nicolas, 2004, p. 21). This approach to strategy formulation and implementation elevates the importance of selection and briefing (training and development) of internal and external coaches, since their guidance ultimately aligns or conflict with, and thus shape the organization’s strategy.

The latter approach to strategy formulation and implementation elevates the importance of managers’ ability to use available (explicit and tacit) knowledge to align their actions with the strategic intent and the organizational orientation towards key issues. Directives from non-executive directors, executives’ decisions and managers’ actions ultimately align or conflict with, and thus shape the organization’s

strategy. Our research supports the view that executives resort to implicit and tacit knowledge to make sense of issues and make decisions in complex situations. “[E]xplicit knowledge helps to argue the definition and to nurture the problem, but tacit knowledge is essentially mobilized to understand the interactions between the elements that define the complex situation (Simon, 1987) and is driven by beliefs and aims to develop sense making (Weick, 1995)” (Nicolas, 2004, p. 24). Nicolas’s (2004) empirical study, involving 92 firms, found a breaking point at which people cannot deal with the volumes of explicit information. At a particular tipping point, they base their reflections and deliberations more on tacit knowledge and past experiences. Spender (2003) adds to the discussion on the role of attitude and orientation by stating that emotion and perception are key tacit bases for understanding the issues. Simon (1977) demonstrates that, when faced with highly complex and ambiguous situations, people are not able to deal with all the useful explicit knowledge and resort to tacit knowledge. In addition, executives share their emotional intelligence (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 2002) to move knowledge from the individual to the collective and back. Our argument that coaching builds both explicit and tacit knowledge thus leads to the conclusion that coaching will affect strategy formulation.

This logic results in a disquiet about the impact of personal orientation, motives, and principles of the appointed external coach(es) on executive coachees. As stated earlier, altering coachees’ philosophies and perspectives could in due course impact the organization as a whole. Empirical research to support this logic and provide credibility is required. Several authors share the concern that the accreditation of coaches are questionable and lacks binding ethical and practice standards (Sherman and Freas, 2004; Seligman 2007; Grant and O’Hara, 2006). “Anyone can call themselves a coach, or set up a coach training school, and coaching practice is currently unregulated” (Grant et al., 2010, p.133). Authors report on the questionable nature of qualifications, which may range from none at all, to brief online training, through masters degrees in psychology to doctorates in philosophy (Bono et al., 2009; Seligman 2007). The concern is further exacerbated when the process and outcome of executive coaching is captured as: “[a] process of personal and social meaning making...This process creates the foundation for new, alternative or revised narratives of the focus person’s personal and professional life” (Kombarakaran et al., 2008, p. 79). In addition, scholars Woodside (2012), Armstrong and Callopy (1996) and De Villiers (2013) raise concerns regarding the intended or unintended use of “incompetency training” in executive decision competency development. Empirical research studies and field experiments confirm that some training methods may inadvertently result in less effective, unexpected or ineffectual performance outcomes – specifically in the domains of executive decision-making and management sense-making competencies (De Villiers, 2013). Further in-depth research into incompetency training by executive coaches is necessary.

We conclude this section with a quote from Collings (2009, p. 307): “Human capital is of little economic value unless it is deployed in the implementation of the organization’s strategic intent.”

Conclusions

This study shows that coaching can be an effective methodology to develop executives and can have positive outcomes for the individual and the organization. The findings also corroborate practitioners’ experience that coaching really contributes to transfer knowledge and educate individuals. However, data and literature studied are mostly limited to the reports of coaches and coachees and focuses mostly on immediate gains in knowledge, skills and behavioral changes. Future research should include the perspectives of managers, peers, direct reports, and customers and should particularly investigate perspectives regarding the long-term impact on executives’ mind-shift and orientation changes as brought about by coaching. The impact on corporate culture and organizational strategy across the boundaries of the SBUs should be studied in order to improve understanding of better coaching program selection, design and implementation, aligned with corporate culture and strategy.

Similar to the responsibility of CFOs to extract the maximum return on any investment the organization makes, HR practitioners and training and development officers should concern themselves with extracting and retaining maximum benefit from organizations’ investment in talent. To gain and sustain a competitive advantage in this volatile, ambiguous and complex context, organizations are forced to optimize all human resources and ensure that all resources are valuable assets, as expressed in the study by Collings (2009, p. 358). “Indeed, the Economist Intelligence Unit found that most CEOs explicitly argued that talent management was too important to be left to HR alone”, while a Boston Consulting Group (2007) report identified talent management as one of five critical challenges for HR in the

European context. The BCG findings were based “not only on those capabilities that executives expect to be most important in managing human capital, but tellingly are also those they perceive their organizations to be weakest at” (Collings, 2009, p. 305). One possible way to achieve this is through knowledge transfer from experienced, trained senior staff and highly competent executives to underdeveloped talent, key staff or those earmarked for positions of leadership. Knowledge retention is specifically critical as it relates to knowledge, insight and experience in strategy formulation, decisions, implementation, control and re-engineering. The literature clearly supports the view that well-designed and implemented coaching programs can contribute to executive development and retention of talent. In contrast, the paper also warns readers of the possible impact of incompetency training on the organizations’ talent pool. Coaches need to be carefully qualified and their credentials checked, not merely as educationalists or development officers, but also in terms of their perspectives, philosophies and values. The mal-alignment of external coaches’ orientation with that of the organization, might result in unanticipated harm. Moreover, organizations invest millions of dollars to capture and protect intellectual assets and proprietary information – this paper warns not to overlook the possible negative effect of using unqualified external coaches. This paper expresses some concern and offer warnings about the direction in which talent and leadership are developed. The paper highlights the possibility of positive or negative impact of the transfer of knowledge – explicit, coded and implicit or tacit knowledge – on corporate culture and long-term strategy.

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