# OPTIMIZING CORPORATE CONTROL THROUGH EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT:  THE ROLE OF COACHING

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## Abstract

Executive skills can be enhanced through coaching, thereby optimizing corporate outcomes. This paper reviews academic work in order to develop an integrative framework for understanding executive development through coaching – with specific reference to information and knowledge flow, control and strategy development. Thus, the paper should advance future research in executive coaching by (i) providing a theoretical framework to scaffold scholarly studies; (ii) expanding the conceptual boundaries of executive coaching; and (iii) offering some suggestions for empirical research studies. To guide future research the framework highlights several selected challenges in global executive development. A discussion of possible criteria of executive coaching effectiveness completes the framework.  Practicing executives, practitioner coaches and strategists would benefit from the engagement with key issues with regard to executive coaching within the organization.

**Keywords:** Corporate Control, Executive Coaching, Effectiveness

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## 1 Introduction and Background

Executive skills can be enhanced through coaching, thereby optimizing corporate outcomes. Executive coaching is increasing markedly in popularity and is a growing as a developmental intervention in many organizations (Chandler, Roebuck, Swan, & Brock, 2011; Sherman & Freas, 2004). Fillery-Travis and Lane (2006) reports on a $2bn growth industry; a doubling in value since the $1bn coaching market reported in the Harvard Business Review in 2003. Boyatzis (2002, p. 191) reports in December 2002, at the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations, on this phenomenon and recorded 99 400 web-sites as representative of the "measure of popularity". When a Google web-search using the phrase "executive coach" was executed on 28 November 2010, 1,120 000 sites were found. A repeat of this search on 6 November 2012 resulted in 1,300 000 sites in 15 seconds.  It is clearly an expanding market with more than a ten-fold increase in popularity worldwide over the last ten years! Further evidence of the popularity and growth of the executive coaching industry is reported by Joo (2005, p. 463), who reports on the membership of the International Coach Federation (ICF), "rising from 1,500 in 1999 to more than 8, 200 members as of the end of February 2005". In December 2011 the ICF records a record number of members 17 000 ranging from psychotherapists, to training organizations, sports coaches and larger private executive consultancies.  This rapidly growing market is a well documented, global phenomenon (Bacon & Spear, 2003; Joo, 2005; Kilburg, 1996; Sherman & Freas, 2004; Thompson et al., 2008).

Joo (2005) links the popularity of coaching to increased workplace demands. Even in countries where executive development might have a negative impact on the perception of a person's authority and competence such as Spain, Japan and Italy, "coaching is the fastest growing sector of the human resource development business"(Boyatzis, 2002, p. 1).  Joo (2005) suggests that executive coaching's popularity 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, clients and flatter organizations.  He 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 number of other 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 & Spear, 2003, p. 463).  An organization's ability to reduce complexity, resolve uncertainty and make

sense of the volumes of fast-changing market intelligence (macro and micro environmental factors) - in order to create winning strategies through distinctive competencies and differential benefits - is at the core of its sustainable competitive advantage (Spender, 2003). Directors, CEOs and executive managers need knowledge, skills and attributes (KSAs) to resolve uncertainty, reduce complexity and information to create new know-how and solve problems whilst evolving in pace with marketplace changes (Nicolas, 2004; Nonaka, 1988, 1994). The complex, volatile, ambiguous, uncertain business and highly competitive environment demands highly evolved technical and soft skills such as sense-making decision-making and emotional intelligence of managers (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Greco, 2001; Sherman & Freas, 2004). In addition to the external global factors, managers have to deal with mobile, global workforce issues. To gain and sustain a competitive advantage in this context, organizations are forced to optimize any and every human resource and ensure that all human resources as valuable assets, as expressed in the study by Collings (2009, p. 358): "Human capital is of little economic value unless it is deployed in the implementation of the organization's strategic intent [(Becker & Huselid, 2006) and (Boxall & Purcell, 2008)]."

Most HR directors and practitioners will agree that it takes a long time to develop the requisite executive competencies and that there is a shortage of competencies world-wide. It is difficult to align the competencies with the organizations' strategy. Not only is knowledge transfer a long and iterative process under the best of circumstances, highly organization-specific capabilities, knowledge, skills and attributes are sometimes lost through external and internal transfers, head hunting and retirement. Several authors suggest that coaching is one way to achieve the retention of embedded knowledge and corporate intelligence (Boyatzis, 2002). Executive coaching provides managers and leadership with the opportunity to up-skill in interpersonal skills and become more adept at leading teams through organizational transformation and times of upheaval. This can be achieved through trained senior staff and highly competent, experienced executives trained as internal coaches, who coach novice staff across internal units' borders. In addition, knowledge transfer can be achieved through experienced, external professional highly competent executive coaches who are industry specialists or specialize in functional technical knowledge (Jones & Spooner, 2006). These coaching interventions are especially valuable to underdeveloped talent, key staff or those ear-marked for positions of leadership. Coaching, (and its twin sister mentoring) could achieve these desired results.

Goleman, Boyatis and McKee (2002) stress a major benefit of executive coaching for leaders as the resulting ability to sustain performance despite job-related stress factors and power stress. Given these keenly sought benefits, it is no surprise that organizations are increasingly investing in the systematic competency development process: executive coaching. In a global survey of coaching practices conducted by The Institute for Corporate Productivity, commissioned by The American Management Association (AMA) a 1 000 managers and senior executives who use coaching were surveyed from organizations in North America, Europe and the Middle East (Thompson et al., 2008). The study provides evidence to support increased organizational performance and several areas of benefits to the coach, the coachee and the 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).

Although there is clearly an increase in the demand for and use of executive coaches (McDermot, Levenson, & Newton, 2007), there is a paucity of empirical work on any of the aspects of executive coaching; except for 360° or multi-source feedback (Boyatzis, 2002; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006; Kilburg, 2004; Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker, & Fernandes, 2008) and self-reports from coaches and coached employees (Chandler et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2008). Passmore and Gibbes (2007, p. 117) laments the "scantiness of empirical research" into the impact and effectiveness of executive coaching. In their comprehensive overview of executive coaching research until 2006, they report a mere 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 the ten year period of 1996-2006 is available in their work). 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 & Lane, 2006; Kilburg, 2004)

Academic literature, especially studies from the field of psychology, profess the positive outcomes of career coaching, but a study of peer reviewed literature on the issues of coaching and 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 & Lane, 2006, p. 35). This blanket statement is illustrative of the general message, some

fairly anecdotal, from the majority of literature from 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, illustrative rather than exhaustive review of the purpose and effectiveness of coaching is done later in this study.

This study identifies which circumstances and which behaviors of coaches will result in behavior changes of coachees that will ideally and ultimately lead to improved professional and managerial competencies - which in turn will positively impact on the organizational performance goals where coachees are employed. This study will depart from a review of the literature from two substantial bodies of literature from the fields of training and psychology. A framework for identifying the do's and don'ts of executive coaching is then introduced. The paper concludes with suggestions on how the framework might be applied to executive coaching evaluation and design within the domain of management development within organizations.

**Figure 1.** The Coach, Coachee, Organization Tripartite
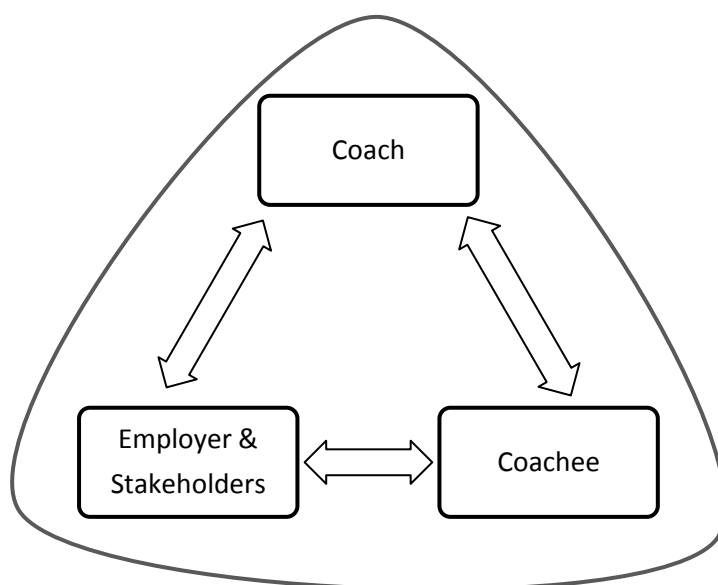


## 2 Definition and categories of executive coaching

Brock and Roebuck (2006, p. 150) define coaching as "a helping relationship where one person, using proven models of human and organizational development, works with others [an individual, team, or organization] to discover, access, and leverage their abilities to achieve excellence [personal, professional, and/or organizational]". Witmore (1992) provides a definition more closely related to performance: Coaching is "unlocking a person's potential to maximize (sic) his or her performance" (Whitmore, 1992, p. 8). Executive coaching is defined as: "a short-term process between a coach and a manager to improve leadership effectiveness by enhancing self-awareness and the practice of new behaviors. The coaching process facilitates the acquisition of new skills, perspectives, tools and knowledge through support, encouragement  and feedback in the organizational context" (Kombarakaran et al., 2008, p. 79). It is the "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". In this broad definition, all teaching can be considered to be coaching; since the generally accepted understanding of teaching is the process whereby a facilitator/(s) assist a student to learn (Boud, 1996). (Stelter, 2007, p. 191). A widely accepted definition by Kilburg (1996, p. 142), acts as the foundation of the further investigation into possible antecedents of positive outcomes of executive coaching: as well as literature on mentoring, 360-degree feedback and training and development: "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 indentified 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 positions coaching and it purpose from a 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: (1) 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). In a comprehensive literature review, Joo (2005) uncovers a long list of definitions for executive coaching from the disciplines of psychology, organizational development, organizational psychology and leadership development; the first one dating back to 1996. 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 so called 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.

Many forms of categorization of coaching are recorded. Three levels of coaching is 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. Kubicek (2002) reports on The School of Coaching survey where three modes of coaching was identified (i) external coaches; (ii) trained internal coaches and (iii) untrained manager coaches. Three categories of agendas (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006, p. 26) for the coaching interventions were also categorized; (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 client or organization's agendas and within the human resource strategy.

## 3 Purpose and Benefits of Coaching

This study/literature review uncovered more than 12 different definitions and 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) increase and improve skills. The aim of all this is to develop as 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 it may be relationship building or career progress (coupled with its financial gain implications).

I 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 learning/coaching interventions; whilst the organization should benefit 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, Roebuck, Swan, and Brock (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: to improve executives' task performance and business relationships, in line with the business objective and SBU's key performance indicators and strategy (Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Sperry, 1993).

From the literature review, coaching is mainly seen as a learning and developmental tool to assist executives who have the desire to improve their workplace performance, and/or some aspect of their behavior or interpersonal relationships in some way. This can be the result of career aspirations, non-performance in the workplace, 360-degree feedback, and transition challenges, the need to acquire specific knowledge and skills related to the workplace or critical insights gained at developmental 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 SBU) 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, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999; Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2008). In addition, people share their emotional intelligence (Goleman, Boyatzis, & 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.

An important contribution coaching could make - that is to the best or our knowledge 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 & Huselid, 2006; Collings, 2009; Tarique & 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 is 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 & 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 5.1.3 of this paper.

### 3.1 Coaching as developmental and sense making aid

Executive coaching is distinct from other, more 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 & Lane, 2006; Sherman & 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 & Freas, 2004, p. 82). One of the key attributes of executive coaching VS other methods of development is that it "engages with people in customized ways that acknowledge and honor their individuality"(Sherman & Freas, 2004, p. 82). A further attribute of coaching as stressed by Stelter (2006) 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 length 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."

Organizations use both internal and manager coaches to assist in developing competencies and improving 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: " 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, more personal 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.

This study defines competency development coaching as: an ongoing, systematic and dynamic developmental process for co-creation of meaning and construction/conceptualization of best practice. It is a triangular system 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 context. The process yields improved managerial competencies and personal effectiveness by enhancing self-awareness and the practice of new behaviors.

### 4 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 & 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 & Lankau, 2005; MacKie, 2007). The tiny portion of unfavorable reports highlight shortcomings of the key role-players, such as 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 more recent study MacKie (2007) reconfirms this lack of rigorous, controlled and verified research studies into the practice and effectiveness of executive coaching and suggest 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 & Lane, 2006; Sherman & Freas, 2004). In the rest of this paragraph I provide an illustrative overview of the current literature. In 2008 Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker and Fernandes (Kombarakaran et al., 2008, p. 78) states 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 I 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 during which one hundred fourteen executives and 42 coaches were surveyed using instruments designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data by Kombarakan et al. (2008) 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 impact areas as well as the triangular nature of the coaching relationships – resulting in three sets of unique expectations of each of the stakeholders - a multiplicity of factors which will influence what is considered "effective" or "successful coaching interventions will need definition. A range of success factors and range of 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 affect of coaching interventions (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; MacKie, 2007).

Although Hall, Otazo and Hollenbeek (Hall et al., 1999) and several other studies report that "executives likes the confidentiality and personal attention; they also like what coaches do for their careers"; and the behavioral outcomes evidenced above, most business enterprises will not consider these reasons as sufficient motivation to invest scarce resources of time and money in executive coaching. 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 many possible measures of strategic and financial performance organizations could use to determine the impact of executive coaching, is does not provide empirical data to quantify the impact of coaching on the studied organization (Levenson, 2009; MacKie, 2007). Levenson, like many authors, 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 problem 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, Vergara, Murphy,Barker, and Warrenfeltz (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 & 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 select respondents or participants in the nature of true experiments, that is with a random assignment (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 the coaching. Non-coached managers might gain benefits from coaching but they might equally gain from other development interventions such as performance management, training, team building assignments and other forms of training. 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. The coaches' qualifications and coaches' knowledge of the client organization all have an effect on the outcome. Motivation, drive and integrity of the focus person, the coaching relationship, psychological mindedness and business culture (Dingman, 2004; Fillery-Travis & 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?"

## 5 Effective Executive Coaching. What does good coaching look like?

If coaching is to become a significant part of the teaching and learning methodology to employ in management development, insight into the key success drivers of the practice of coaching as well as the guiding/underlying theories, as they emerge from previous research, is imperative. Given the triangular nature of the executive coaching relationship, each of the three role-players of coach, coachee and client/organization need to be considered independently and is covered in the sections below.

**Figure 2.** The Coaching Tripartite and its corporate context
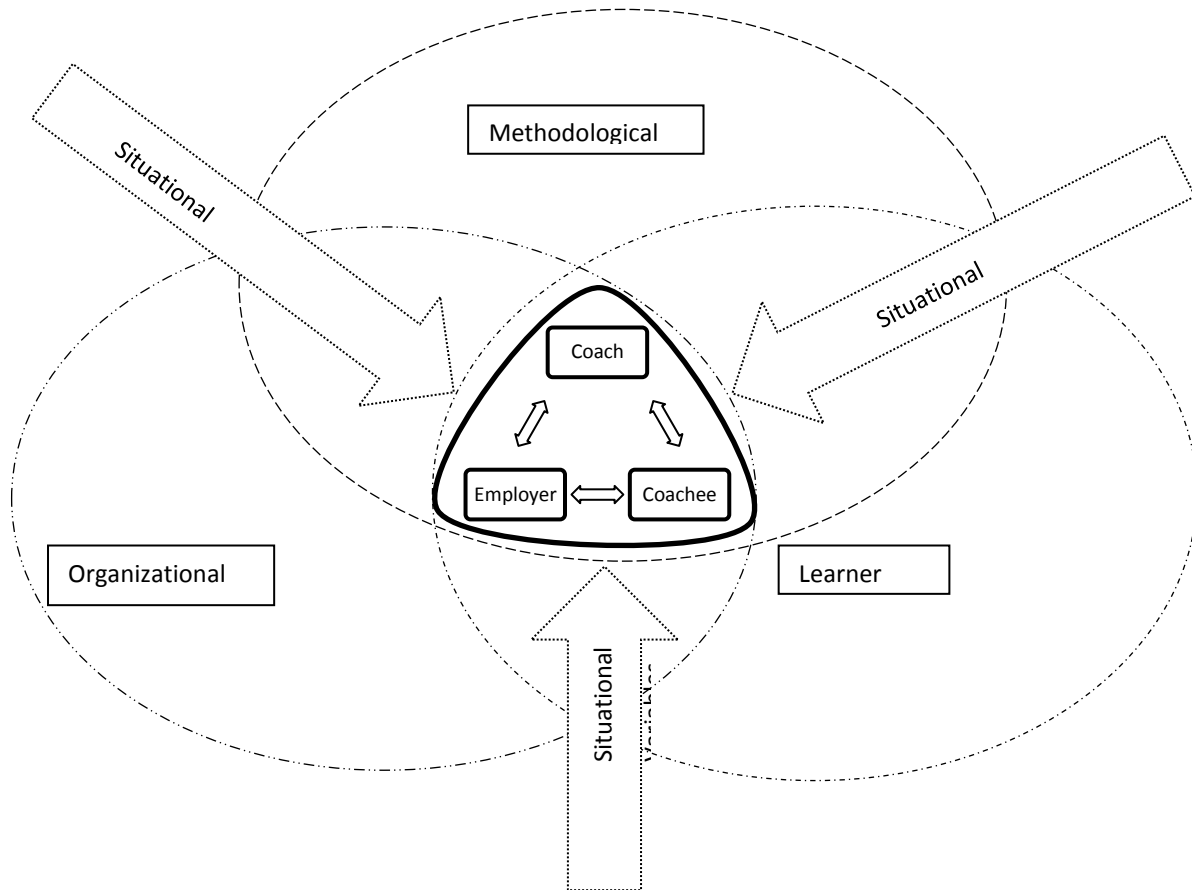


## 5.1 Effective Coaches

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 & McKee, 2005; Coutu & Kauffmann, 2009; Sherman & Freas, 2004; Underhill, McAnally, & Koraith, 2007) as well as scholarly research (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Fillery-Travis & 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, & Leipsic, 2001; Joo, 2005). My view is on coaching as a development intervention, which is more pragmatic, result-orientated and action-based than focusing on 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.) In line with the work of Goldsmith and Laurence (2006), this study focuses on future behaviors rather than learners' past, and psychological issues. Executive' current and future behavior, not their past feelings, inner psyches are of primary concern (Bacon & Spear, 2003).

Rogers (1951, 1961), based on his work in psychotherapy identified 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 uncover and report on attitudes and traits, rather than competencies or approaches: pragmatism, the coach's ability to create a space where the coachee can be heard; offers focusing ability, and the importance of empathy. 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 . Boaytzis (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."

### 5.1.1 Background and training

Washylyn (2003) suggests that executive coaches should not necessarily be certified psychologists, but should be well grounded in both business and psychology. There are two points of view regarding the need to be a certified psychologist with

accumulated business experience (Hart et al., 2001; Joo, 2005; McDermot et al., 2007) or as an 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 & Spear, 2003). . The extant literature search did not uncover empirical studies to determine which backgrounds impact on effectiveness of coaches(Feldman & 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. The literature does not provide a satisfactory answer to the question of what kinds of qualifications and backgrounds help coaches succeed. This is obviously and area for future research. Within the focus of this paper, and with the increasing use of external coaches to work with MBAs and EMBAs(Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Sue-Chan & Latham, 2004), research into matching processes and the effectiveness of executive coaches for "job-less" students is necessary and will make a significant contribution to the body of knowledge.

### 5.1.2 Coaches' Characteristics & Qualities

In this study Wasylyshyn (2003) also 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 & Spear, 2003; Judge & 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, Otazo and Hollenbeek (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 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 & Freas, 2004, p. 85) resulting from a curious nature and keen questioning skills maximize

the opportunities for relevant and appropriate feedback. Hall, Otazo and Hollenbeek (Hall et al., 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.

### 5.1.3 Knowledge and Skills

McDermot reports in on 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 posses (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 & 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 5.3 on the organization for a more detailed discussion.)

### 5.1.4 Success Techniques and Methods

Hall et al. (1999) reports 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. Turner reports (Truner, 2006) on the need for detailed and challenging feedback (The study here expands on the issue of feedback as a coaching methodology later in this article.) Focus and the ability to define clear objectives (Hall et al., 1999) and actionable plans that will achieve rapid results (Jones & Spooner, 2006)."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 & 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 & Lankau, 2005; Hall et al., 1999; Hill & Gudmundsun, 2010; Joo, 2005; Levenson, 2009; Luthans & Peterson, 2003; Sherman & 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).

**Table 1**. Five approaches to Executive Coaching

| Approach to Coaching | Focus | Elements of the Intervention | Criteria for evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Psychodynamic** | Client's unconscious thoughts and internal psychological states | Psychoanalysis – uncovering the gap between "ego" and reality | Increased self-awareness of thoughts, feelings and reactions |
| **Behaviorist** | Client's observable behaviors | Behavioral principles – intrinsic and extrinsic reinforcement; positive and negative reinforcement; punishment | Increased understanding of the antecedents and consequences of behavior; behavior change |
| **Person-Centered** | Client's self-understanding without the direct intervention by the coach | Creating a trusting and empathic therapeutic relationship | Personal growth and change |
| **Cognitive Therapy** | Client's conscious thinking | Cognitive therapy – identification of distorted thinking and irrational thoughts. | New thinking that leads to positive feelings and effective behavior |
| **Systems-orientated** | Individual, group and organizational influences on client's behavior | Data gathering and analysis of client's interactions with other individuals; requirements of roles' group and inter-group relations; direct intervention within the organization | Improved group, job and organizational effectiveness. |

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 & 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 & McKee, 2005, p. 3). As stated much 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) 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 & Lankau (2005, p. 839) analyze five major approaches to coaching: psychodynamic, behaviorist, person-centered, cognitive therapeutic and system-orientated. They summarize the five approaches in the table below.

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 poses 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.

## 5.2 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 & Lankau, 2005).

### 5.2.1 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 indentify and important development need? (iii) Does she have support? (iv) Is she valuable enough to justify the cost of coaching"(Sherman & 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.

### 5.2.2 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 & Lankau, 2005), but this needs more in-depth research.

## 5.3 The Organization

The starting point of the coaching programme is to frame the purpose or objectives (Sherman & Freas, 2004). The coaching methodology should support and advance important goals. To succeed the coaching programme need support from senior management and visible links to the learning outcomes and/or business imperatives (Sherman & 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, I digress briefly to highlight a need for further research into the link between coach selection and the organization.

### 5.3.1 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. Additionally, 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 strategic business units (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 & Doz, 1992; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985) – resulting in either good or bad outcomes. "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. Executives' decisions and actions ultimately align or conflict with, and thus shape the organization's strategy. An abundance of research supports the view what 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, after which 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 a key tacit knowledge on which understanding of the issues is based. 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, & 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. Empirical research to support this logic and provide credibility is required.

I 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 [(Becker & Huselid, 2006)and (Boxall & Purcell, 2008))."

## 6 Conclusion

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, the 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, human resource (HR) practitioners and training and development officers should concern themselves with extracting and retaining maximum benefit from organizations' investment in talent. "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 (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 ear-marked

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. Coaching could assist in achieving these results. Moreover, organizations invest millions of dollars to capture and protect intellectual assets and proprietary information – this paper warns not to overlook the possible affect. In addition the literature clearly supports the view that well-designed and implemented coaching programs can contribute to executive development and retention of talent. 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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