

# **Practical Recommendations for Enhancing Leadership Coaching**

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THE SCIENCE OF PERSONALITY

## Session Abstract

Leadership development coaching is a widely used practice for increasing leader effectiveness within an organization. This symposium provides both research and a practitioner perspective regarding leadership coaching best practices. It presents recommendations from experienced coaches as well as qualitative data documenting suggestions for improving coaching sessions from coaching participants.

## Session Summary

Leadership permeates an organization and can affect everything from the organizational culture to employee retention to lasting success (Anderson, 2013). There are many examples of the impact effective leadership can have on an organization. As head of Amazon, Jeff Bezos offered free shipping at the expense of profits to increase market share, and more recently introduced the Kindle e-reader (Portfolio, 2013a), further driving company profits. Unfortunately, there are just as many examples of the negative consequences of ineffective leadership. Ken Lay's combination of dishonesty and inept leadership sounded the death knell for Enron, effectively ending one of the U.S.'s largest companies (Portfolio, 2013b).

It is not surprising that leadership development coaching has become commonplace in organizations as a strategic tool to maintain competitive advantage. In this symposium, speakers will present results pertaining to both applied work and research on executive coaching, with the primary goal of helping expand our knowledge and effectiveness in a field that is growing in both practice and importance.

The current global leadership development and coaching industry exceeds \$2 billion annually (Hoagland-Smith, 2013). Published literature also suggests that executive coaching has a bright future. Sager (2013) argued that businesses plan to increase either the number of consultants they use or increase their budgets for consulting in the near future. Thompson et al. (2008) suggested that due to leadership gaps created by the retirement of the Baby Boomers, companies will call upon executive coaching at greater rates to train a new generation of leaders.

Results from a 2012 survey conducted by (2014) revealed that 97% of organizations use executive coaching in their leadership development program, 35% use executive coaching to improve leadership performance, and 42% use executive coaching during executive transition. The prevalence of use can be attributed to several factors (Kalman, 2014). First, executive coaching is personalized to each leader and the sessions are often conducted one-on-one, allowing individual leaders to develop a relationship with their coaches and gain understanding of their individual issues. In addition, executive coaching is well-situated to the busy lifestyle of company leaders and can be sustained over long periods of time or through technology at the convenience of the subject (Kalman, 2014). Furthermore, research has shown that executive coaching is a useful tool for increasing leadership effectiveness (Thach, 2002) and raising self-confidence (Nieminen, Smerek, Kotrba, & Denison, 2013). Similarly, Kombarakan, Yang, Baker, and Fernandes (2008) found that executive coaching is effective at honing people management skills, relationships with managers, goal setting and prioritization, engagement and productivity, and dialogue and communication, as well as leadership development and talent management.

Given the prevalence of coaching as a leadership development tool, it is essential to outline best practices. One of the goals of the British Psychological Society's Special Group in Coaching Psychology (SGCP) is to encourage research to advance coaching psychology (Short & Blumberg, 2009). In addition, Lowman (2012) suggests that both scientists and practitioners can narrow the gap between research and practice with coaching. He suggests that scientists make their research more pertinent to practice and that practitioners help assure their work is connected to research and theory. This symposium offers expert opinions from both expert researchers and practitioners.

First, Fuhrmeister and Bolen will describe emergent themes from 423 coaching participant qualitative comments. Specifically, participants make recommendations for enhancing the coaching experience and comment on the most beneficial components of the coaching. Their results highlight the importance trust and honesty in the coaching relationship. Next, Dattner will discuss best practices regarding the role of the coach, drawing on years of experience as a leadership coach. For the sake of the coaching relationship, he suggests coaches avoid playing the role of evaluator, messenger, and advocate. Finally, Neiminen and Del Campo will discuss how coaches work with leaders by integrating three leadership domains: potential, performance, and organizational or team culture. They will use a case study to demonstrate how to apply personality, 360-degree feedback, and an organizational culture assessment in the coaching process. Our discussant, Dr. David Peterson, is recognized as an expert researcher and practitioner in the executive coaching world. He will help synthesize the ideas presented and provide critical commentary before we open the session to audience questions.

## Summary of Hogan's Contribution

Although executive coaching has become a prevalent practice for many organizations, it is common for leadership development programs to go un-evaluated. A 2007 survey reported that only one-third of coaching initiatives are evaluated (McDermott, Levenson, & Newton, 2007). Furthermore, the coaching literature is lacking in regards to systematic evaluation of coaching effectiveness and the factors that lead to effectiveness. A recent review led de Haan, Duckworth, Birch, and Jones (2013) to estimate there are less than 20 robust quantitative assessments of coaching effectiveness in the coaching literature. They argue that future research should focus on identifying the “active ingredients” that impact coaching effectiveness (de Hann et al., 2013).

Many coaching feedback surveys include items used to collect ratings and open ended items where participants provide additional information. Although quantitative ratings can describe effectiveness using an easily understood metric, they may be less useful for identifying themes that are not predetermined prior to development of the survey. Instead, qualitative comments collected upon completion of a coaching program can be a rich source of evaluative information, providing insight into what can be done to improve such programs. Researchers, therefore, have identified and used qualitative themes for a variety of purposes, such as creating coaching models (Augustinjinen, Schitzer, & Van Esbroeck, 2011), assessing how participant characteristics affect the sustainability of results (Bozer, Sarros, & Santora, 2013), and determining if executive coaching produces results (Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker, & Ferdandes, 2008).

In this presentation, we will review and present qualitative data from over 400 coaching participants to identify themes that may contribute to effectiveness. We will explore open ended comments from a standardized feedback survey to uncover emergent themes regarding criticisms and commendations. Based on these themes, we will identify specific actions that either coaches or coaching participants can take to increase effectiveness.

Participants were 423 leaders engaged in coaching with coaches from the Hogan Coaching Network (HCN; Hogan Assessment Systems, 2014). Thus, coaching revolved around insights from participant assessment scores on measures of personality, values, and cognitive ability. For the 155 participants that reported age, values ranged from 25 to 64 with a mean of 43.55 ( $SD = 8.83$ ). Based on data from those reporting gender ( $N = 219$ ), the sample was 46% Female and 54% Male.

We collected qualitative survey data from participants following their coaching session. We analyzed comments using an open coding approach allowing for the themes to emerge (Denzin, 2000; Strauss & Corwin, 1990) and developed a codebook containing emergent themes from the comments (Tables 1 & 2). Next, we examined and categorized each comment according to the codebook (Denzin, 2000). Finally, we calculated frequencies and percentages for each category.

Table 3 shows the frequency and percentage of comments that we coded into each participant recommendation theme. Of the 423 coaching participants that provided comments, 201 made recommendations for improving the coaching experience. Some individuals made more than one recommendation, resulting in 221 comments. We coded these recommendations into 12 categories representing four general themes. The most frequent recommendations revolved

around characteristics of the coaching session ( $n = 94$ ). Within the Session Characteristics theme, participants most frequently requested longer session times ( $n = 57$ ) and for follow-up sessions ( $n = 21$ ) to continue their development through coaching. Comments included “We needed more time with the coaches” and “[The coach] was great and the hour and a half call was very useful. I’d like there to have been at least one more follow up to discuss. Until reviewing the information with her, it was difficult to interpret. Now, having absorbed the information, another session would be beneficial”.

Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage of comments that we coded into each participant effectiveness theme. Of those who provided responses, 258 commented on parts of the coaching experience that contributed to perceived effectiveness. Several individuals made more than one comment, resulting in 264 coded comments. We coded effectiveness comments into the same 12 categories and 4 general themes. Participants most frequently commented on the role of the coach in creating an effective coaching experience ( $N = 107$ ), with the vast majority ( $N = 99$ ) focusing on the Coaching Relationship. For example, one participant commented “Great coach-excellent at building rapport and matching her style to suit my preferences-thanks!”

Almost half (48%) of the respondents had at least one recommendation. These suggestions most commonly focused on the desire for more development. Participants wanted either longer sessions or more sessions. Such recommendations show that participants valued the program and were eager to learn more about how to improve their performance and further advance in their careers.

Our results also emphasize the significance of the coaching relationship. Sixty-one percent of the 423 participants commented on their relationship with the coach. The need for a good relationship between the coach and coaching participant is well established in the coaching literature (Baron & Morin, 2009; de Haan & Duckworth, 2013; de Haan et al, 2013; Grant, 2014). The coach’s ability to make the participant feel comfortable, establish a confidential environment, and accommodate the individual’s needs goes a long way toward the effectiveness of a coaching session. Overall, results highlight the importance of giving participants an outlet for feedback.

In this session, we will present the results outlined in Tables 1-4 and highlight the most commonly cited themes. Furthermore, we will present examples of specific comments and how they tie to specific actions an organization or coach may take to improve the effectiveness of a coaching session. For example, one participant commented “There could be a follow up after 6 months to check progress”, which is a practical recommendation that organizations could implement. Finally, we will outline ideas for future research efforts aimed at examining antecedents to coaching effectiveness.

Table 1

*Coding Dictionary for Participant Responses-Recommended Changes*

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**Session Characteristics**

<i>Time</i>	Expression of the desire for longer sessions
<i>Follow Up</i>	Expression of the desire for follow up sessions (6 months or later)
<i>Language Barrier</i>	Expression of the desire for session in his/her native language
<i>Direct Meeting</i>	Expression of the desire for face to face meetings, rather than on the phone

**Session Content**

<i>Excess of Information</i>	Expression of the desire for covering less material in the session
<i>Supplemental Material</i>	Expression of the desire for supplemental material or exercises
<i>Integrate Material</i>	Expression of the desire for better integration of various materials (i.e., 360 assessments, all three Hogan assessments)
<i>Development Plan</i>	Expression of the desire for action planning at the conclusion of the session
<i>Personalize</i>	Expression of the desire for the coaching content to be tailored to their current work and/or personal environment

**Coach**

<i>Coaching Relationship</i>	Negative affective reaction to the coach/Thought that the development of rapport would have been beneficial
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**General Reactions**

<i>Report Reaction</i>	Negative affective reaction to the assessments or reports
<i>Coaching Experience</i>	Negative affective reaction to the coaching experience/Didn't agree with material being presented/Didn't feel like they gained anything

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Table 2

*Coding Dictionary for Participant Responses-Enhanced Effectiveness*

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**Session Characteristics**

*Time* Commented that coach spent more time than what was allotted  
*Timeliness* Commented that the coaching came at a point when it was really needed (e.g., career transition)

**Session Content**

*Report Insight* Commented on the usefulness of providing insight on the report beyond what they could interpret themselves  
*Supplemental Material* Commented on the helpfulness of supplemental material  
*Integrate Material* Commented on the helpfulness of the integration of various materials (i.e., 360 assessments, three Hogan assessments)  
*Development Plan* Commented on the coach providing action planning and assistance with goal setting  
*Personalize* Commented on the coach linking the coaching to their current work and/or personal environment  
*Discussion* Commented on the usefulness of a 2-way conversation/discussion

**Coach**

*Coaching Relationship* Positive affective reaction to the coach and/or the trust and rapport that was evident during the session  
*Prepared for Session* Commented on the coach being prepared for their session

**General Reactions**

*Report Reactions* Positive affective reaction to the assessments or reports  
*Coaching Experience* Positive affective reaction to the coaching experience/Agreed with the information being presented

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Table 3

*Participant Recommendations*

	Frequency	Overall %	Category %
<b>Session Characteristics</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>42.53%</b>	
<i>Time</i>	57	25.79%	60.64%
<i>Follow Up</i>	21	9.50%	22.34%
<i>Language Barrier</i>	4	1.81%	4.26%
<i>Direct Meeting</i>	12	5.43%	12.77%
<b>Session Content</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>21.27%</b>	
<i>Excess of Information</i>	7	3.17%	14.89%
<i>Supplemental Material</i>	5	2.26%	10.64%
<i>Integrate Material</i>	1	0.45%	2.13%
<i>Development Plan</i>	23	10.41%	48.94%
<i>Personalize</i>	11	4.98%	23.40%
<b>Coach</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2.71%</b>	
<i>Coaching Relationship</i>	6	2.71%	100.00%
<b>General Reactions</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>13.57%</b>	
<i>Report Reactions</i>	19	8.60%	63.33%
<i>Coaching Experience</i>	11	4.98%	36.67%
<b>N/A</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>19.91%</b>	



Table 4

*Effectiveness Comments*

	Frequency	Overall %	Category %
<b>Session Characteristics</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1.87%</b>	
<i>Time</i>	3	1.12%	60.00%
<i>Timeliness</i>	2	0.75%	40.00%
<b>Session Content</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>26.97%</b>	
<i>Report Insight</i>	20	7.49%	27.78%
<i>Supplemental Material</i>	6	2.25%	8.33%
<i>Integrate Material</i>	15	5.62%	20.83%
<i>Development Plan</i>	8	3.00%	11.11%
<i>Personalize</i>	13	4.87%	18.06%
<i>Discussion</i>	10	3.75%	13.89%
<b>Coach</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>40.07%</b>	
<i>Coaching Relationship</i>	99	37.08%	92.52%
<i>Prepared for Session</i>	8	3.00%	7.48%
<b>General Reactions</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>26.97%</b>	
<i>Report Reactions</i>	7	2.62%	9.72%
<i>Coaching Experience</i>	65	24.34%	90.28%
<b>N/A</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>4.12%</b>	

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