

# What clients say about our coaching

**Anna Duckworth and Erik de Haan ask how close coaches get to the truth of whether they really deliver what clients want**

**W**hat's really important for each of our clients? Recent research has shown that one of the most important factors in influencing the success of executive coaching for all clients is the quality of the relationship between the client and his coach.

For the first time at Ashridge, we have embarked on an ambitious research project to collect quantitative data from clients, on the coaching outcome and on their coaching relationships. Our aim is to make the findings available so that we as a profession can use them to optimise the coaching service we provide for each of our unique and wonderful clients.

We kicked off the research in autumn 2007, intending to find around 30 experienced coaches with clients who would participate and who knew their own MBTI type. A survey questionnaire was designed and piloted for both coach and client so that each individual relationship could be analysed from both perspectives.

Key areas of interest included measures of the outcome (as judged by the client), the quality of the relationship (judged by both client and coach and measured for the client by an adapted version of

the Working Alliance Inventory), the personality profiles of both coach and client (measured using previously-established MBTI profiles), the types of coaching interventions as perceived by clients and the self-efficacy of the client (measured using another well-established and substantiated tool – Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory).

With an interim sample size of 152 professional business clients and 31 experienced coaches who were all engaged in proper, paid executive contracts, we are now at the stage where some fascinating and statistically significant results are emerging. The detailed research is continuing on through the summer and will be reported in full this autumn.

## What did we look at?

It is worth spending a bit of time explaining the different aspects we've looked at so you can understand the patterns we've found. The 'outcome' for the client was measured for several different areas (adding value, impact on performance at work, helping you achieve what you want and overall coaching experience) and the sum of these is the 'aggregate outcome'.

The Working Alliance Inventory is a well-established

tool for obtaining a reliable measure of the quality of the client-therapist relationship in therapeutic counselling. Despite that, very few professional coaches know of its existence or, indeed, its usefulness. We obtained permission to adapt it so that the questions would be appropriate for the coaching relationship. It measures the quality of the coaching relationship in three areas: task, bond and goal.

A prerequisite for participation was that both coach and client knew, and were confident of, their MBTI type description. It goes without saying, and all experienced coaches know, that each person who comes to them is shaped by a multitude of things, of which innate personality is only a part. Nonetheless, most of the coaches with whom we spoke believed that they provided a better service when they shaped their offering to suit the different personality types.

The Myers Briggs profile was chosen as a way to characterise the personalities because, of all the personality profiling tools available, it is the most widespread in business and is very well substantiated by research evidence.

In terms of types of intervention delivered in coaching, our questions explored what clients get at the moment in their coaching and the

extent to which they would value different interventions. For this, we used the six descriptions of client interventions defined by John Heron: to be advised, informed, challenged, helped to make discoveries, supported and helped to release emotions.

We also asked some questions that were biased towards either side of two of the personality dichotomies, two questions around 'doing' or 'being' and a final question about explicit focus on goals.

The self-efficacy of the client was measured by the Social Cognitive Theory, another well-founded tool that is supported in the literature.

In addition, data was gathered from the coaches about their coaching preferences and whether they adapt their style, consciously or unconsciously, to suit different client personalities.

We also gathered data about their views on the quality of their coaching relationship with each of their clients.

#### **What were we looking for?**

We started by looking to see whether our quantitative data would provide statistically valid evidence in support of the research

showing that the quality of the relationship was a vital factor in the success of coaching.

For this, we looked to see how the measures of outcome as viewed by the client depended on the quality of the coaching relationship measured using the WAI. We also looked to see how that outcome related to the coach's view of the relationship and whether his intuitive view compared usefully with the client's recorded view. We expected to see some positive correlation in both cases.

We then explored the significance of client personality type differences with respect to outcome, ie do certain personality types respond better to coaching generally? We went on to explore the impact of different

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combinations of personality in coach and client, to assess whether, for example, it is better to match or mismatch elements of personality in client and coach. Previous research by Anne Scoular and Alex Linley indicated that a mismatch in the MBTI 'temperaments' leads to a better outcome for the client and we hoped to replicate and substantiate their findings.

In the next analysis, we explored how the outcome was affected by the different kinds of interventions the clients got during their coaching sessions. This produced some fascinating comparative information showing what the client found to be most useful and which things were deemed to be of little or no use at all. We went on to explore how what people wanted from coaching varied depending on the different aspects of their personality type.

Finally, in this early inspection of the data, we looked at the impact of the self-efficacy of the client on the coaching outcome. We also took the opportunity to answer some other interesting questions, such as whether men and women perceive the effectiveness of their coaching in the same way, the extent to which the client's perception of support from his



organisation supports the coaching outcome and the relationship between outcome and the client's prior expectation.

### What did we find?

We were thrilled to find that our data shows a statistically significant, moderate to high correlation between the quality of the coaching relationship and the outcome for the client as assessed with the modified WAI. It was great to see such convincing data to support all the qualitative evidence of the importance of the strength of that coaching relationship from the client's perspective.

In contrast, there appears to be no correlation at all between outcome and the strength of the coaching relationship as assessed by the coach! Similar results have been reported in therapeutic counselling but it still seemed surprising that the coach's view of the strength of the relationship could be so different to that of the client.

We then looked to see what the personality information for the client might tell us. To our surprise, we found no particular patterns relating the success of coaching to particular client preferences. All personality types seem to appraise it equally highly, which is interesting because we had perhaps expected the more 'touchy-feely' or 'intuitive' managers to have a higher regard for it.

Contrary to our expectation, bearing in mind the previous research, we found no statistical evidence for particularly stronger or weaker combinations of personality in the coach-client relationship. There are several possible reasons for this, which we shall present in more detail with our full findings.

We were keen to find out how all our clients rated our different coaching interventions and looked to see whether there was any statistically-significant correlation with outcome for each of these. Often, in this kind of study, if clients value their coaching, they rate highly everything the coach



does with them. But what was fascinating here was that we found pronounced differences in the results for different types of intervention.

Three of the six interventions described by Heron produced statistically-significant positive correlation with the coaching outcome. The strongest positive correlation was for 'my coach to help me make discoveries', the second strongest was for 'my coach to challenge my thoughts and actions' and the third was for 'my coach to support me'.

The other three interventions (providing information, helping with releasing emotions and being advised, or told what to do, by the coach) had no statistically-significant correlation with a positive coaching outcome and, if anything, the impact of advising and telling appears to be slightly negative for the client.

We also found statistically-significant correlation with outcome when the clients experienced significant progress on their issues during critical moments of insight or realisation, when they got significant growth around outcomes/doing or behaviours/being, and when they received explicit focus on their most important goals.

Following on from this, we looked to see whether the client figures supported our expectation that clients of different MBTI personality preferences would value different things in their coaching. As statistically-significant results, we found that clients with a preference for 'extraversion' (E) tended to say that they would place more value on the coach helping them release emotions, significant progress by step-by-step change and significant growth around outcomes/doing than those with a preference for 'introversion' (I).

Clients with a preference for 'sensing' (S) expressed more of a wish for support from the coach and significant progress on issues through step-by-step change than clients with an 'intuition' (N) preference. Those with a 'feeling' (F) preference for making decisions said they would value more support, help with releasing emotions and progress through step-by-step change than clients with a 'thinking' (T) preference.

There were no statistically-significant differences in what 'judging' (J) and 'perceiving' (P) types said they would value in their coaching.

Finally, we found a significantly weak correlation between the outcome and the self-efficacy of the client, which also ties up with established results found from the use of the self-efficacy diagnostic and outcomes in therapy.

In terms of other interesting things we took the opportunity to look at, we found that both men and women appear to rate their coaching equally highly. Perhaps not surprisingly, we found a statistically-significant weak correlation between the extent to which the client believes his organisational context supports the coaching objectives and the coaching outcome.

We also found some correlation between outcome and prior expectation for the client.

### What does it mean for coaching?

It is perhaps too soon to be drawing conclusions from our research but it is difficult not to respond to these early indications.

The results found using the modified WAI, which gave the strongest positive correlation with outcome of all the aspects explored, provide quantitative evidence that a strong coaching relationship is the most powerful key to coaching success. In other words, building strong relationships is more likely to lead to coaching success than introducing clever interventions. This can be hugely reassuring and encouraging for newly-qualified coaches.

The other very significant conclusion here is that we coaches generally seem to have a pretty biased view of the quality of the coaching relationship and possibly also a weak sense of coaching outcome. One option here might be to use this adapted WAI as a key to assessing and improving our coaching relationships with clients.

It is great to see that all personality types seem to benefit equally from coaching. This might reassure many coaches (with an abundance of intuitive and feeling preferences!) and also their managerial clients (with an abundance of sensing and thinking preferences) that those who like detail and logic will value it just as much as their colleagues.

Since our results about the impact of matching or mismatching coach and client personalities were different to previous research in this area, they are worth some further thought. We repeated the data analysis after removing from the sample clients of those coaches who said that they modified their natural style once they knew the personality profile of their client, but still found nothing of significance.

Analysis in this area is not straightforward because our coach sample illustrates what previous research has shown: that there is a strong bias in the distribution

of coaches towards 'N' personality types rather than 'S'.

A possible reason for the difference in results is that the previous research was based on 30-minute sessions with unknown clients, so the relationship was very new, whereas our data comes from established coaching relationships. Most of the experienced coaches in our survey said they either consciously or unconsciously adapted their style to suit their client, so it may be that, as the relationship grows, the coach senses what style a client needs to reach the best outcome.

The results for the different types of interventions as perceived by the client speak to us about

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how we might improve our practice to help them. We need to add a strong word of caution here in that the client's perception of an intervention may very well be completely different to that of the coach, and different again from that of an independent observer.

On the face of it, the results appear to confirm what coaching theory repeatedly tells us: advising or telling the client what to do is not helpful. A combination of what feels to the client like challenge, support and helping to make new discoveries seems to be the most potent. In addition, a sense of progressing on issues through critical moments of insight or realisation shows a much stronger correlation than progress through step-by-step change. There is also positive correlation when the client feels he gets explicit focus on his most important goals.

Because this link with positive outcome has been made using

the clients' own perceptions of our interventions, we can use the results as a powerful platform to start individual conversations about specifically what we could do more or less of with each of them in future.

The different results for what people with different MBTI preferences say they would value in their coaching help us build on the theory of using MBTI Type in coaching presented by Sandra Krebs Hirsh and Jane Kise, and to consider further how we might consciously adapt our coaching to suit different needs. For example, while the intervention 'helping to release emotions' produces no statistically-significant correlation with outcome for the sample as a whole, it seems that clients with E and F preferences would value this more than those with I and T preferences.

Given a large enough data sample, we can explore such avenues further in the final analysis.

Finally, there may be ways that we can anticipate and predict how effective coaching is likely to be for a prospective client, based on indicators such as his prior expectation, the extent to which his organisation will support his coaching goals and his own self-efficacy. Heads-up information like that could be useful in all sorts of ways!

In summary, we believe these are some fascinating results and we plan to report the findings in full when all the data has been gathered and analysed this autumn.

We would like to express heartfelt thanks to those coaches and clients who have already contributed to our valuable survey. ■

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