



# Paper

## Exploring coachability

When is an employee ready, willing and able for coaching?

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## Introduction

This paper is the fourth in the Coaching Effectiveness Series to explore aspects of business coaching. The series was conceived to generate and reflect on evidence of effectiveness from the perspective of employees and leaders as coachees. This focus on the coachee differentiates it from most other coaching effectiveness research, which has tended to focus on the coach (eg Watling & LaDonna, 2019), what the organisational sponsor/line manager does (eg Blanton & Wasylyshyn, 2018) and the relationship between the coach and coachee (eg Ianiro et al, 2015). Little attention has been given to individual coachees (Carter et al, 2017).

Our previous papers in the series were produced in conjunction with IES' research partners at James Cook University in Australia and cover factors that coachees say make business coaching effective and should be included in the coaching process, barriers faced by coachees during the period of their coaching, which may have derailed or lessened the achievement of successful outcomes and how organisations might remove or minimise these and what employees want from their coach.

This paper considers key coachee characteristics, concepts and findings from the literature that sheds light on the factors which make someone 'coachable' and thereby make best use of the organisation's investment in providing coaching for them. The paper also offers some practical advice to organisations on improving the readiness of their staff and leaders to take part in coaching as a coachee.

The paper is written primarily for coaches, HR professionals and coach trainers. In addition, it may be useful for academics and practitioner-researchers in pointing to potential areas of further research.

We explored three questions:

- What do coaches believe makes individuals ready and able to make the most of coaching at work?
- What do employees and leaders believe makes a difference in terms of the success of the coaching they receive?
- Do the answers to these questions have implications for the way coaching is delivered within organisations?

We used two main information sources to produce this paper. Our primary source was a literature review, to see if there is clear evidence about what makes someone a 'good' or 'effective' coachee. This was supplemented by reviewing data from discussion groups involving 146 coaches to explore their views on what coachee-specific factors affect successful outcomes from coaching.

# What does the literature have to say?

## Personal characteristics

Despite a growing global interest in coaching since its emergence 30 years ago (Bresser, 2013), generally there is little empirical evidence regarding what makes an effective coachee. That said, the importance of coachee characteristics has featured consistently in academic discussions (see Kilburg, 2001; Joo, 2005; Bozer et al, 2013; Jones et al, 2014) and leading practitioners have been putting forward their views on common coachee characteristics conducive to effective coaching (eg Vance, 2017; Haden; 2013). Characteristics include:



## Personality

Much of the literature focusses on personality. In a study of coaches' views by the Corporate Leadership Council (Allen et al, 2016), it was found that coaches view the personality of the coachee as a key factor for coaching effectiveness. This supports previous academic studies which have shown that personality factors impact feedback receptivity and coaching outcomes (eg Joo, 2005). One way academics have studied this is by applying the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality (see McCrae and John, 1992), which is constituted by Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness to Experience. However, the results from these psychology studies are mixed. For example, Jones, Woods and Hutchinson (2014), found that only extraversion had a significant effect on perceived coaching effectiveness, whereas Stewart et al (2008), found no significant relationship between emotional stability and openness, and sustained changes in behaviour over time. However, they did find a

positive relationship between conscientiousness, openness, emotional stability and the transfer of learning from coaching back into the workplace.

The malleability of personality is an interesting debate within psychology, but as Stokes (2015 & 2016) points out; the coachee is a skilled stakeholder, and their skills can be developed. In other words, the coachee can learn the skills needed to make their coaching session more effective. So whilst openness and emotional stability are helpful personal characteristics to bring to coaching engagements, the evidence would **not** support a conclusion that employees and leaders without them should be a lesser priority when it comes to coaching.

## Resilience and emotional intelligence

As the second paper of this coaching effectiveness series revealed, emotions and defensiveness were two of the top four barriers to coaching effectiveness in the view of 300 industry professions/coachees surveyed by James Cook University and IES (Carter, Blackman and Hicks, 2014). This is consistent with previous findings from executive coach and coach trainer, Michael. H Frisch, who lists 'risk tolerance' and 'emotional resilience' as two of five coachee characteristics which can predict the progress of coaching (Frisch, 2005).

Academic Paul Stokes also refers to defensiveness in terms of coachee 'self-protection'. He argues that coachees can resist challenges in four different ways: by diverting the challenge upwards in the organisation, such as their boss; by diverting downwards, such as those they are responsible for; by diverting outwards, such as the market; by de-personalising the challenge, such as to a system or culture. Stokes suggests mitigating these potential barriers through use of an Emotional Capital Report (ECR) (see Newman, 2015). By doing so, Stokes argues, both parties can establish a shared language and a quantifiable framework, which will allow all perspectives, strengths and weaknesses to be shared in an objective way.

A previous IES in-depth review of resilience (Wilson et al, 2014) concluded that it is a myth that the population can be divided into those who are 'resilient types' and those who are not. While people vary hugely in their responses to stress, virtually anyone can become resilient. Wilson argues that resilience can be developed through training, which ideally should be bespoke in nature to ensure the content is relevant to work issues that the participants commonly experience. Providing mindfulness based training is one way organisations seek to boost employees' resilience. A recent major IES research study for the UK Defence sector compared types of mindfulness training for UK Defence and found statistically significant increases in perceived individual resilience following the training (Carter & Tobias-Mortlock, 2019), which supports a conclusion that an individual's resilience can be improved. Once again, there seems no reason for employees or leaders with lower levels of perceived resilience to benefit less from coaching. Indeed coaching itself may increase their resilience.

## Receptiveness to feedback

We know from empirical research that feedback receptivity is central to effective coaching (eg Yukl and Mahsud, 2010) and can be defined as ‘multiple dimensions that work together additively to determine an individual’s overall receptivity to feedback and the extent to which the individual welcomes guidance and coaching’ (London and Smither, 2002). Drawing on this idea, Bozer et al (2013) found that it is positively related to improvement in self-reported job performance, and as reported by the direct supervisor (Bozer et al, 2013). However, these factors are often relational and it has been argued that an individual’s type of goal orientation can impact how they seek and receive feedback.

Motivational factors, such as goal orientation, can also impact coaching effectiveness (Joo, 2005). Moreover, the type of learning goal orientation can affect how coachees seek out and receive feedback. For instance, those with a learning goal orientation may be more likely to seek negative feedback, and interpret that feedback as ‘useful diagnostic information about how to improve performance’ (VandeWalle, 2003: 588). Whereas those with a performance goal orientation could be more likely to seek positive feedback, as they wish to pursue goals which demonstrate their competencies (VandeWalle, 2003). This is supported by Bozer et al (2013) whereby, among those with a high level of feedback receptivity, a significant interaction was found between learning goal orientation and improvement in ‘job affective commitment’ (how much someone wants to stay in their job).

As argued above, such characteristics are malleable and can be developed with the right tools. In other words, receptiveness is as much about context as it is skill. It may be therefore that readiness training for selected coachees, prior to coaching, which includes skills in receiving feedback may be beneficial. There is no need therefore to assess for these skills as criteria for selection to be coached.

## Context

Demographic and contextual factors can also play a significant role in coaching effectiveness. For instance, coaches may draw on unhelpful stereotypes regarding a coachee’s gender or generation (Valerio and Deal, 2011). By doing so, a coach’s perception is likely to have a greater impact than the characteristic itself, whereby an erroneous behavioural characteristic is attributed based on this stereotype. Similarly unhelpful might be where internal coaches may know a potential coachee’s reputation.

In contrast, contextual factors are more useful when determining why a coachee behaves as they do. For instance, familial or personal problems, upheaval, or upset can stifle the effect of a coaching session, as the coachee is likely to be less receptive (Frisch, 2005). In addition, coachees’ career-stage, their level in the organisation, and their culture of origin are all contextual factors which can influence how they engage with coaching in general, or just with a particular coach (Valerio and Deal, 2011). Although this highlights

the importance of coach-coachee matching, it also brings to our attention that characteristics can be perceived, based on our own outlook, rather than being objective.

Trayton Vance, a coach trainer and CEO of Coaching Focus says:

*"I have noticed that in general organisations are not paying as much attention to the selection and preparation of their coachees as they do the coaches."*

Vance, 2017

## Personal effort

The first paper in the series offered a rare view of the coachee perspective from a survey of 296 industry professionals from 34 countries, who either had received or were currently receiving coaching (Blackman et al, 2014), which empirically confirmed what everyone already 'knew' – that coaching works. However, the process of being coached is tough, and not everyone expects that. The survey found that not everyone is willing to put in the required effort. Just under half (46.3%) of participants were prepared to put in 'a lot' of effort to achieve their coaching outcomes. A further 37.5% of coachees were prepared to put in some effort; 8% would put in 'a little' effort or no effort into coaching. Digging deeper into the survey results, the research team also found no difference in perceptions of coaching effectiveness between the survey respondents whose participation in coaching was mandatory or voluntary (Carter et al, 2017). This challenges perceived wisdom among coaches that coaching participation should be entirely a matter of choice.

Coach Stuart Haden in his book (2013) refers often to improving 'coachability' so as to improve the coachee experience. In particular he suggests that employees and leaders (as potential coachees) should be enabled to make informed choices about what coaching will be right for them. He suggests that information and awareness-raising might usefully cover:

- What it is like to be coached.
- The effort you will need to put in.
- Whose purpose it will serve.
- Which delivery mode might suit you best, and whether this is on offer.

## A note of caution about the literature

The literature makes use of a myriad of measures and characteristics, all of which are similar, but not easily comparable. This can be confusing for coaches in the field who need practical solutions for more effective coaching. For example, a paper published by the Centre for Creative Leadership (CCL), implies that 'openness' is separate from 'personality and attitudes', with regard to coachee characteristics (Allen et al, 2016: 9). In contrast, other studies on coachees define 'openness' as something which constitutes personality (see Stewart et al, 2008; Jones, Woods and Hutchinson, 2014). It may be that two unrelated things under the same name are erroneously considered to be the same construct. Alternatively, the same construct can be mistakenly considered to be two

different things under the same name. As a result, the findings of studies may appear similar (or different) when they may not be. Consequently, as the interest in coachee characteristics grows it may be useful to develop a practical conceptual framework. By doing so, researchers could explore different context using the same language-construct relationship, thus improving the accessibility of such research for coaches.

## **What do coaches have to say about coachees?**

We used existing data from eight focus and discussion groups of coaches and HR professionals from 10 countries that we conducted during international conferences and webinars between June 2014 and May 2015.

Attendees discussed a range of issues and, in most cases, they also wrote down their individual views on pre-printed cards. Each attendee was asked to write down any number of characteristics they thought made a good coachee. In total there were 373 written items from 146 attendees.

Initially, it appeared that 'Honest' and 'Commitment' were the two most prevalent characteristics important to our participants, with a total of ten and nine responses respectively (see Figure 1, which shows the Top 50 responses). However, this was before items were coded and did not consider those with multiple clauses such as 'Willing and Engaged'. Accordingly, items with multiple clauses were recorded as two responses, as they contained more than one characteristic. As a result, there were 437 'responses' in total. Thus, whilst 'Honest' and 'Commitment' were popular words, which were directly used by participants, other themes made their way up the ranks later on in the analysis.



Figure 1: A word cloud of the top fifty responses on what coaches thought made a good coachee, (before they were coded).



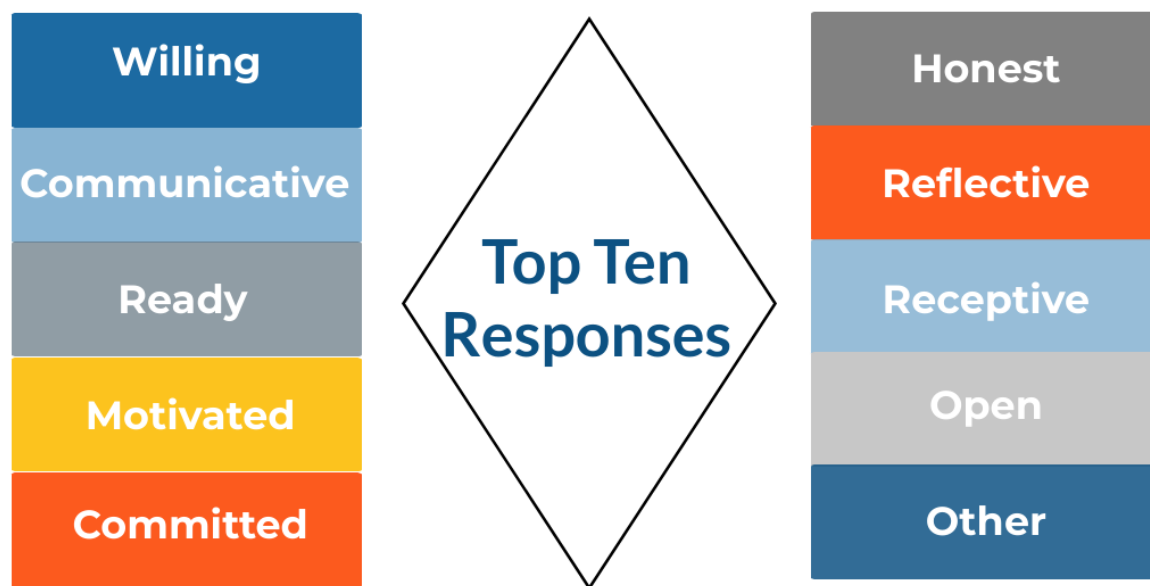
Source: IES, 2020

A coding framework was developed, which allowed the researchers to code responses into themes. For example, 'Ready to take action', 'Takes ownership', 'Accountable', and 'Readiness' were all coded as 'Ready'. This enabled us to pick out key characteristics, and present them in a number of different ways. There are twenty codes in total, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Subsequently, quantitative analysis methods were used to understand the prevalence of each characteristic. Firstly, a frequency analysis was applied, which counted the number of times each coded characteristic had been mentioned (see Figure 2 for Top 10 coded responses). Using that frequency data, the proportion of each code in relation to the total number of responses could be worked out (see Figure 3).



**Figure 2: Top 10 characteristics of a good coachee, from the perspective of coaches (after coding responses).**



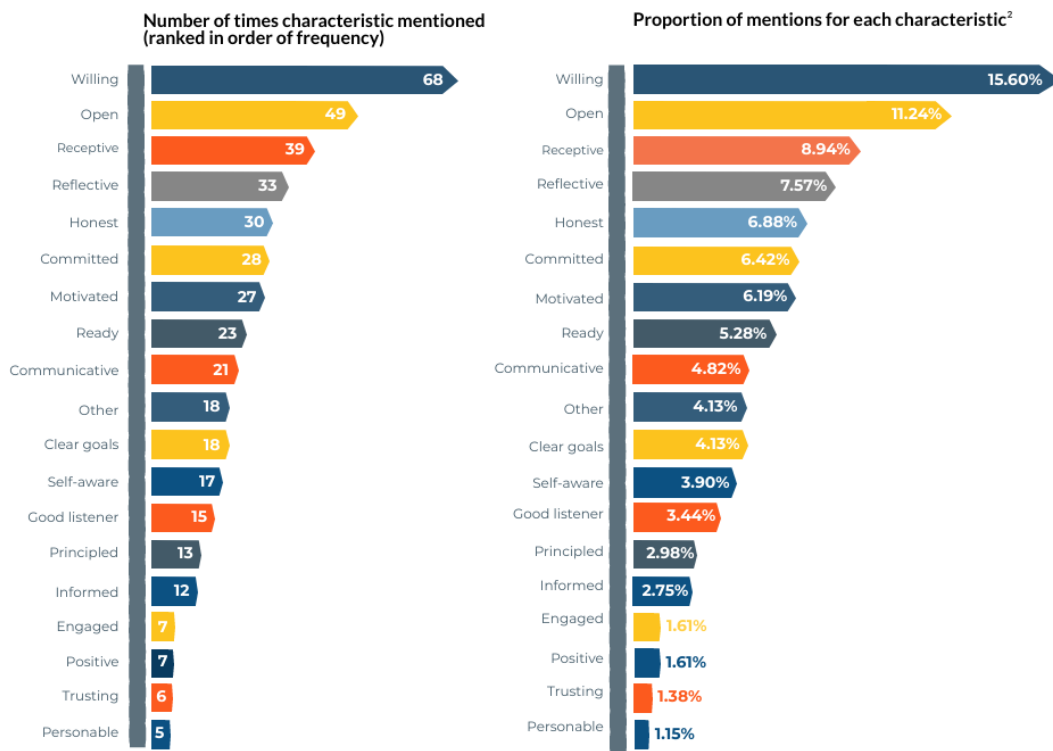
*Source: IES, 2020*

Once coded, other themes started to become more prevalent in participants' thoughts about what makes a good coachee. For instance, 'Honest' and 'Committed' still made it into the top ten; however, they were no longer the most important characteristics. 'Receptive' was in the top five coded responses, which supports the literature, in that feedback receptivity is an important coachee characteristic for effective coaching.

Extraversion was found to be the only significant coachee personality trait that had a positive impact on perceived coaching effectiveness (Jones, Woods and Hutchinson, 2014). However, this was not something expressed as an important coachee characteristic in our research.

The absence of any reference to goal orientation is interesting and supports previous research that 'Clear-goals' is not a coachee characteristic highly rated by coaches (Scriffignano, 2011). The second paper in this series (Carter et al, 2015) found the number one barrier identified by coachees was 'Unclear development goals or lack of agreement with coach about goals'. There is a disconnect, not only between coachees and coaches regarding what is important to effective coaching, but between coaches and academic literature, which empirically demonstrates why this is important.

**Figure 3: Frequency of characteristics that make a good coachee, from the perspective of coaches**



Source: IES, 2020

## What might this mean for organisations and coaches?

Organisations might want to give more thought to how they will know *who* is a 'willing', 'ready' and 'able' coachee and *when* they are likely to be most 'receptive' to coaching. For individuals, it is not just about their personality type; it is important to consider whether they have confidence in the proposed coach, confidence in their organization's motives, and that they are comfortable using the proposed communication channels.

It is important to ensure your employees and leaders are warned about how much effort is required before they begin a coaching engagement. If circumstances or timing really preclude putting in the personal effort required, then perhaps organisations should enable people to wait until the timing is right for them.

The biggest single predictor of less effective coaching outcomes was difficulties with a coach, and a healthy relationship is critical for successful coaching outcomes. So be prepared to let individuals switch to another coach if they are not sure the relationship is working for them. This can be tricky to manage, especially if the coach is a senior manager within the organisation.

In building coaching capacity and capability, be prepared to vary the coaching delivery method. Remotely delivered coaching generally costs less, so an initial face-to-face coaching session (hoping this will help trust and rapport to develop), followed by phone/video calls, is a popular model for workplace coaching. There is some evidence indicating no difference in the outcomes from coaching using different media, but IES argues that this is a personal matter. If someone is less comfortable with a specific form of communication, then don't make it the only means for coaching conversations. You won't know whether someone in general hates using the phone for instance, unless you ask them!

Readiness training can help prepare individuals to make the most of the opportunity a period of coaching provides. Typically, readiness training should include input on exercising choice, collaboration skills, goal setting, and reflective practice skills. This is particularly necessary prior to team coaching so that people can develop or hone the skills necessary to participate effectively.

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