HR^N Paper

Note: the logo above reads "HR" with a superscript "N", followed by "Paper".

What makes a coach effective?

Alison Carter, Institute for Employment Studies
and Anna Blackman and Rachel Hay, James Cook University Australia

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Introduction

This paper is the third in the Coaching Effectiveness Series. The series explores aspects of business coaching and this paper explores the factors that make an effective coach. Much work on coaching to date has highlighted the importance of relationships between coachees and their coaches, so we've looked at both coach factors and coaching relationship factors that affect the achievement of coaching outcomes. The paper also offers some practical advice for organisations and on improving coaching components of everyday work routines for internal coaches and managers.

We explored these questions:

■ What do coaches believe makes them effective?

■ What do employees believe makes a coach effective?

■ What aspects of the coach-coachee relationship make a difference in terms of successful coaching outcomes?

■ Do the answers to these questions have implications for the way coaching is delivered within organisations?

We used these information resources to produce this paper:

■ Research literature – to see if there is clear evidence about what makes a 'good' coach or a 'poor' coach.

■ Discussion group data from 146 coaches – to explore their views on effective coaches' characteristics.

■ Survey responses from almost 300 industry professionals (coachees) – to explore their views on the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of their coaching and what, if anything, their coach did which really contributed to their coaching result.

What does existing research have to say?

Coaching effectiveness does not only depend on the skills and experience of the coach. We know this from the research findings reported in the second paper in the Coaching Effectiveness series (see Carter et al, 2014). There is no definitive evidence about what marks out a 'good' coach from a 'poor' one, or indeed what makes a coach 'effective' rather than 'ineffective'. Nevertheless, academic studies over the last 20 years suggest that all coaches in one-on-one coaching (as summarised by Blackman et al, 2015) should:

■ maintain confidentiality and be honest;

- have experience with coaching ;

- have experience within coachee's industry;

- have a similar personality or similar values to the coachee;

- display empathy and acceptance of coachee;

- be organised and communicate clearly; and

- display self-confidence.

When it comes to managers using coaching skills with their team members (as part of their everyday managerial practice), the findings show a need for generic skills, values and behaviours:

- Effective listening skills.

- Effective questioning techniques.

- Giving, receiving and soliciting feedback.

- Communicating openly.

- Empowering and trusting.

- Setting and communicating clear expectations.

- Valuing people over tasks.

- Accepting the ambiguous nature of the workplace.

- Creating and promoting a supportive environment.

- Challenging employees to stretch themselves.

IES research publications on employee engagement include a description of what 'engaging managers' do when aiding the development of their team members (Marvell et al, 2014). It is interesting that previous IES research (Robinson et al, 2009) shows the skills and behaviours of engaging managers are very similar to those needed for managerial coaching.

Some items in the lists above are controversial, and in this paper we've set out to shed new light on them. One item has been a matter of considerable disagreement in the literature since coaching first arrived in our workplaces: is it necessary (or desirable) for a coach to have experience in the coachee's industry? Surveys of professional coaches consistently find that coaches think industry experience is not relevant and that a coach is not meant to be the expert in the coachee's field. A recent study in the US would seem to

support this idea, as it found no link between a coach's professional or industry background and the attainment of coachee goals (Chinn et al, 2015). Some practitioners suggest that a coach with a different industry background allows them to enhance leadership and managerial effectiveness of a coachee, rather than transfer technical know-how. Others suggest that complementary expertise is needed in an area helpful to the coachees identified problems (Battley, 2006).

We know from case study research that organisations expect coaches to have wide knowledge on a number of matters that have to do with the business environment (Wasylyshyn, 2003), which indicates that experience within a coachee's industry or profession is important. Other literature argues that this depends on the coaching circumstances and context. As one commentator (Franckeiss, 2011) says:

> *'The issue is credibility: faced with a choice of a broad, confident and qualified coach with no experience in your industry or a coach with industry experience, given the scope of the problem, whose advice might you take more seriously?'*

The second area of debate concerns 'compatibility' and the coach-coachee relationship. Many researchers suggest that a high-quality coaching relationship may lead to effective and successful outcomes (Baron and Morin, 2009 and De Haan et al, 2013). Some maintain that this is the single most important factor in coaching effectiveness. There is disagreement on how to achieve a high-quality relationship. Some claim that generic relationship-building skills are important. Others emphasise the importance of matching coaches and coachees so that they share the same profile (gender, age, ethnicity etc.) or have similar personalities or values. Research studies have often come up with lists of generic coach competencies whilst the factors that really lead to coaching effectiveness are under-studied. One notable exception is a study based on interviews with coaches in Europe and Asia which found that 'a focus on the coachee' is a best practice, regardless of whether it comes about by establishing rapport, listening, providing a sense of safety and support, or by building a personal connection or relationship with the coachee (Gentry et al, 2013). However, coachees' views on compatibility are under-researched.

One counter view is that compatibility may not be important. As one research team (Boyce et al, 2010) explain:

> *'Coaching is better when temperaments differ… Coaching may be more successful when the coaching comes from a different perspective, by challenging the coachee more.'*

What do coaches have to say about what makes them effective?

We used data from coaches' and HR professionals' focus and discussion groups that we conducted during international coaching conferences and webinars between June 2014

and May 2015[1]. The eight group discussions included 146 coaches and HR professionals from 10 countries. Two-thirds of the coaches described themselves as 'internal' coaches.

Attendees discussed a range of issues and, in most cases, they also wrote down their individual views on pre-printed cards. We analysed those written views, covering important characteristics for a coach and for the coach-coachee relationship to be effective, for this paper.

Coaches in our discussion groups identified many characteristics of a good coach, as shown in the word cloud in Figure 1 below. The results are broadly similar to characteristics in the research literature: displaying empathy, listening skills, communication skills, trustworthiness and honesty are all strongly present. However, our coaches also identified being 'objective', 'knowledgeable' and 'personable' as important characteristics, whilst being 'confident' and 'organised' were, perhaps, seen as less important by the coaches in our study compared to those in previous literature.

Figure 1: Characteristics of an effective coach (according to coaches)

Source: Institute for Employment Studies (IES)/James Cook University (JCU), 2016

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[1] Conducted with the kind co-operation of: European Mentoring and Coaching Council; Australian Human Resources Institute; Queens University of Charlotte, USA; and Coaching Focus Ltd, UK

Coaches and HR professionals also identified many factors that contribute to their relationship and compatibility with their coaches. Many of these factors were also similar to those in the literature, including:

■ rapport/chemistry;

■ mutual trust and respect;

■ shared understanding what the goals are; and

■ understanding of each other's responsibilities and contributions.

The coaches in our study also identified some factors specific to coachees as important to a good relationship and compatibility that have not been widely reported before. These factors would place a greater responsibility on the coachee for the success of the coaching relationship:

■ Willingness of the coachee to be coached (should be voluntary participation).

■ Reflective ability of the coachee.

■ Openness of the coachee to learn and change.

■ Commitment of the coachee to the coaching process.

■ Receptiveness and willingness of the coachee to act on what comes out of the coaching.

■ Ability of the coach to communicate his/her values, ethics and ways of working.

What did coachees have to say?

We used existing data from the International Coaching Effectiveness Survey[2] that explored coachee perspectives between April 2013 and April 2014. The survey was completed in full by 296 professionals from a variety of industries, and residing in 34 different countries. All had recently been, or were currently being, coached. The survey questions covered views on their coaches, the coach-coachee relationship and the effectiveness of the coaching received. We analysed the results in depth for this paper.

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[2] Conducted jointly by James Cook University (Australia) and IES (UK)

Effectiveness of coaching received

Our coachee respondents were positive about their experiences, with nearly 89 per cent of respondents describing their coaching experience as effective or very effective, while 11 per cent described their coaching as of limited effect or no effect at all.

We were keen to see if perceptions of coaching effectiveness varied depending on what kind of coach they had. Among our coachee respondents, 14 per cent had an internal coach. These were located either within or outside their immediate work area, and their usual roles were identified as HRD specialists, senior managers or an immediate boss. A significantly higher percentage of respondents in their 20s and 30s had an internal coach as opposed to respondents aged over 40. A significantly higher percentage of respondents who worked in large businesses had internal coaches as opposed to those who worked for SMEs and micro-businesses. Further analysis[3] showed no difference in perceptions of coaching effectiveness by coachees with internal or external coaches.
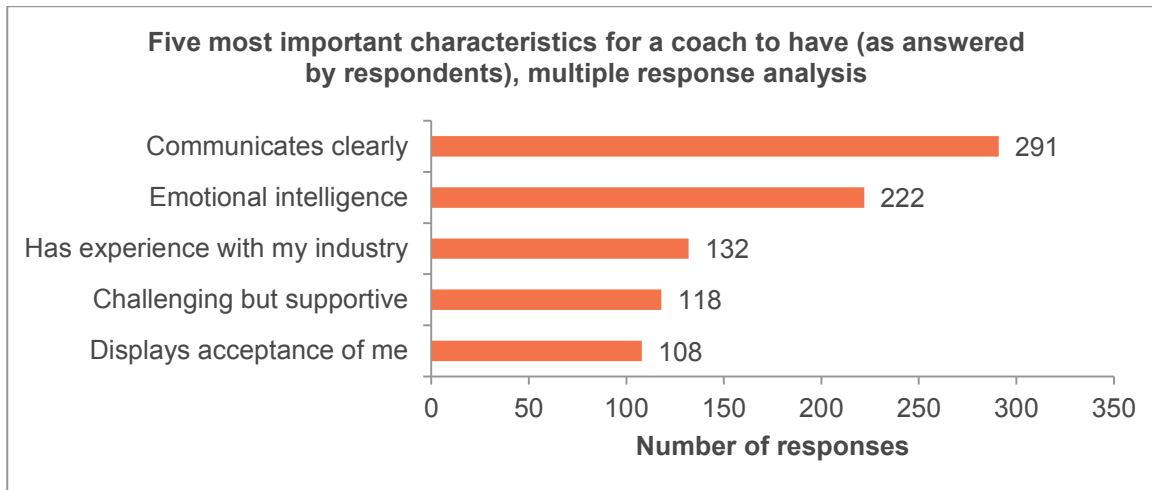
Characteristics of a good coach

Coachees were asked to list and then rank the top five most important characteristics for a coach. No suggestions were made at this stage, so respondents were able to use their own words in compiling their list. The responses were analysed and categorised into 20 factors/characteristics. For example, responses coded to 'emotional intelligence' include 'presence', 'emotionally involved', 'awareness', 'connection', 'sensitive', 'empowering', and 'authentic'[4] , while responses coded to 'communicates clearly' include 'ability to listen', 'ask good questions' and be 'non-directive'.

Figure 2 shows that 'communicates clearly' came out as the most important characteristic of a coach followed by 'emotional intelligence'. The third highest factor was 'the coach has experience within my industry'. Participants also wanted their coach to 'be challenging but supportive' and to 'display acceptance of them [me]'.

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[3] Using Chi-squared tests

[4] Based on Genos Seven Dimensional Model of Emotional intelligence in Gignac, 2010

Figure 2: Top 5 characteristics a coach (according to coachees)

Five most important characteristics for a coach to have (as answered by respondents), multiple response analysis

Characteristic	Number of responses
Communicates clearly	291
Emotional intelligence	222
Has experience with my industry	132
Challenging but supportive	118
Displays acceptance of me	108

Number of responses

Source: IES/JCU, 2016

What characteristics of a coach are important for coaching effectiveness?

Next we asked coachees which features of a coach are most important in the context of achieving successful outcomes from coaching. At this stage we provided a pre-defined list of ten criteria (suggested by the literature) but gave respondents a completely free choice from the features within their own lists or the pre-defined list. We offered a five point importance response scale with responses ranging from 1 (Highly unimportant) to 5 (Highly important). There was also the option of a 'don't know' response. Taken as an average, responses of 3.0 or above can therefore be regarded as important.

This time, our analysis (see Table 1) shows that 'displays acceptance of me' is rated as the most important factor that makes a coach effective, followed by, 'is calm' and 'displays confidence', 'is organised', and 'has experience within my industry'.

Table 1: Top 5 factors of a coach important for the acheivement of successful outcomes from coaching (according to coachees)

Factor	Mean	No. of responses	Standard deviation
Displays acceptance of me	4.85	282	0.830
Is calm	4.47	282	0.814
Displays self-confidence	4.47	281	0.811
Is organised	4.32	281	0.818
Has experience within my industry	3.14	271	1.110

Source: Blackman et al, 2015

While we would expect that it is important for a coach to be organised, calm and to display confidence, our results are interesting in two ways:

■ 'Has experience within my industry' is on the Top 5 most important list. Whatever coaches and researchers may believe, *who* coaches are has importance to coachees, not just *what* they do. A coach with industry experience is perceived as important by coachees for effectiveness in their coaching.

■ 'Is organised', 'Is calm' and 'Displays self-confidence' are also considerably more important to coachees than to coaches.

These results imply that the key to effective coaching lies within the coachee having respect for the coach's ability. A coachee can also derive comfort from the coach's experience in dealing with situations, and in the coach's confidence and manner.

Factors that contribute to the coachee's relationship/compatibility with the coach

Coachees responding to our survey were also asked what factors contributed to their relationship/compatibility with their coach. Our analysis (see Table 2) shows that the coach having 'similar values' was central to a successful coach-coachee relationship. These results highlight this factor in building relationships. Accordingly, these results imply that shared values may promote a sense of connection from the coachee's perspective and this may contribute to the development and maintenance of the coach-coachee relationship. The coach being 'the same gender to me', 'a similar age to me' and having a 'similar personality' were less important factors supporting coach-coachee relationships.

Table 2: Factors that contribute to the coach/coachee relationship/compatability (according to coachees)

Factor	Mean	No. of responses	Standard deviation
Has similar values to me	3.70	275	1.171
Has similar personality to me	2.60	268	0.972
Is a similar age to me	2.51	265	1.019
Is the same gender as me	2.25	257	0.991

Source: Blackman et al, 2015

The survey also indicated important characteristics in terms of the coach-coachee relationship:

■ Closeness in terms of mutual trust and respect in a safe environment.

■ Commitment to developing a lasting partnership.

- A common interest in working well together while understanding the specific roles each has to take.

Moreover, the analysis highlighted that open channels of communication forged a degree of shared feeling in viewing the relationship and the broader issues associated with it.

What might this mean for organisations?

Matching employees with coaches

It is still hard to judge whether a 'match' based on shared industry experience or subject matter is a good idea. Further research needs to identify the appropriate matching criteria that will drive successful achievements through coaching. In the meantime, it may be that shared industry experience helps with credibility from the coachee perspective. In turn this may assist their willingness to engage with coaching, a feature coaches have identified as crucial to achieving a good coaching relationship. However, matching processes can be expensive and may unnecessarily exclude coaches who would otherwise have been a good choice. We can be confident, however, that *who* the coach is has importance to coachees, not just *what* they do. This lends weight to the argument that coachees should be able to exercise some choice over their coach, perhaps being offered a choice from a shortlist (of three?) suggested by the organisation.

Selecting, training and quality assuring internal coaches and manager-coaches

It is very encouraging that there was no difference in coachee perceptions of coaching effectiveness between internal and external coaches. This is a testament to the existing selection, training and quality assurance of internal coaching pools within organisations. However, our sample of internal coaches was small so it would be useful to see if our results will also be found in future studies.

We suggest that coaches need to understand better what they can do during their coaching engagements to get the best outcomes for an organisation's employees. To do this, organisations need to be clear about what differentiates a 'good' coach from a 'poor' coach within their own business context. Organisations need to communicate, to those expected to provide coaching, which specific behaviours make for effective (as opposed to marginally effective or ineffective) coaching, in their particular organisational context.

To gain a better understanding of the coaching components of everyday managerial/leadership practice and to improve the coaching practice of managers, evidence-based diagnostic tools of behaviours can be integrated into general management and leadership development programmes. We would like to see a shift away from 'guru'-led coaching practices to research-informed and evidence-based practices.

Top Tips for Internal Coaches (and Line Managers)

Tip 1 - Don't worry about having less experience than your coachee(s). The catalyst for effective coaching lies within the coachee having respect for your ability and experience in dealing with these situations.

Tip 2 - Do reflect on what you can do during your coaching engagements to get the best coaching outcomes for your coachees. Weave reflection into your everyday coaching practice after each session/encounter, at the end of the engagement with each coachee and by comparing experiences with your other coachees. Ask yourself: what is it that you (as a coach) did to make a difference?

Tip 3 - Do seek your coachees' perspective about what it is you did (as a coach) which made the coaching successful or unsuccessful for them. And do encourage your coachees to contribute to collective feedback mechanisms such as evaluation surveys. Ask the organisers for a copy of the results so you can better understand the perspective of employees who have experienced coaching within your organisation. Make feedback your friend!

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About the authors

Dr Alison Carter

Alison is a Principal Associate at Institute for Employment Studies (IES) in UK. Her current research includes mindfulness applications in the workplace. She also writes, speaks and consults on a range of HR, OD and coaching issues. Alison was a founding Director of European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), Co-Chair of the 2nd Harvard International Coaching Research Forum, Chartered Fellow of CIPD and member of the US Academy of Management.

Dr Anna Blackman

Anna is a Senior Lecturer in the College of Business, Law & Governance at James Cook University in Australia. Her research spans tourism, rural and regional businesses, FIFO, IT and climate change. Anna is a Queensland State Councillor for the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI), a member of EMCC and the Australian Institute of Management.

Rachel Hay

Rachel's work includes business coaching, marketing and rural affairs. Her current research is on the benefits to rural women and families from using technology.

If you are thinking about how to get more organisational benefits from your coaching activities (as well as benefits for individuals), or looking for some CPD for your internal coaches please get in touch with Alison.

Call Alison Carter on 07747 630302 or email alison.carter@employment-studies.co.uk

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T: 01273 763 400
E: penny.tamkin@employment-studies.co.uk