
Evaluation of West Midlands Regional Coaching Pool

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Summary of findings

In April 2008 Improvement and Efficiency West Midlands, acting on behalf of the West Midlands Regional Coaching Pool, commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to undertake a comprehensive external evaluation of the Coaching Pool Partnership coaching activities. The timing of the research work in August – December 2008 was shortly after the Coaching Pool completed its development and start-up phases and commenced full operations.

The work consisted of two main elements: in-depth telephone interviews with a sample of 'matched trios' of client, coach and line manager/sponsor; and web-based impact surveys of all accredited coaches, all clients and selected line managers/sponsors.

This paper summarises the research findings.

Individual behaviour and performance outcomes

A considerable number of benefits from the coaching were identified in terms of behavioural changes in individual coaching clients.

- All client interviewees (100 percent) reported a shift in thinking borne out of greater confidence. An example observed by a line manager was:

'She has got more confidence in the way she presents herself, especially at strategic meetings with senior staff. The coaching has given her the skills to do that. This has enabled me to give her more areas to lead on...'

- Greater emotional intelligence and self-awareness. This included clients understanding themselves better and improving their clarity about others' perceptions of them, and being able to manage their own emotions better. One example reported by a coach was:

'She is now very conscious of adapting her behaviour depending who she is dealing with – more flexible in how she deals with her managers – more accepting of what she can and cannot change.'

- Prioritisation and work-life balance. Examples included an employee who now questions which aspects of proposed work adds value. Her sponsor reported she was more organised and much improved in terms of logical thinking.
- Relationships. This includes improved client-line manager relationships, as well client-team relationship, as in this example from a client:

'I am starting to look at how the team could be running more efficiently and I am starting to make a lot more suggestions and things seem to be falling into place really.'

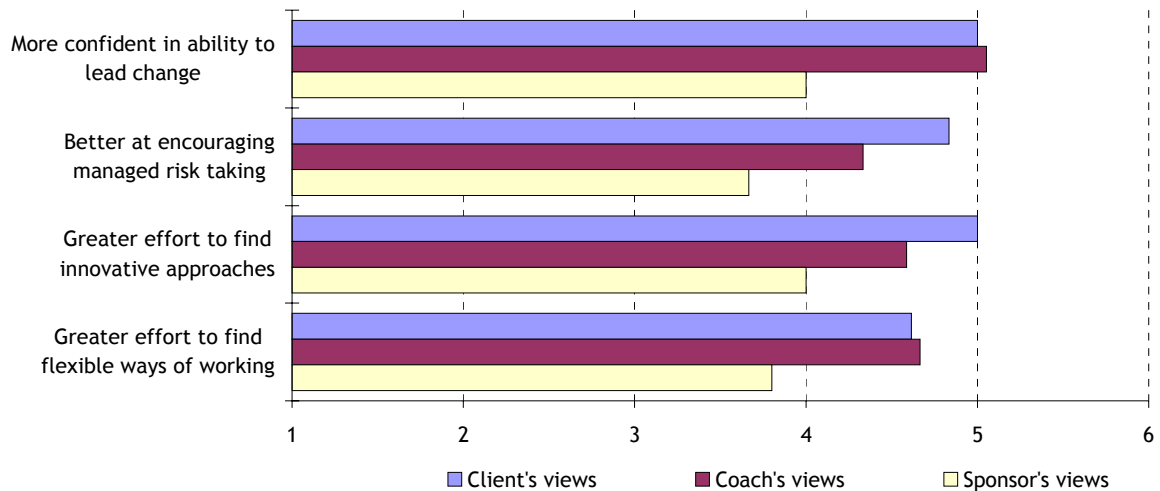
- Improvements in clients' interpersonal skills, especially increased personal effectiveness and effectiveness in dealing with difficult people and situations.
- Improved management skills (among clients with a managerial role), especially that clients were better at managing their own team and better corporate managers as a result of the coaching they had received, and utilised a wider range of leadership styles for different situations.

Contribution to organisational improvement

In our surveys respondents were asked to describe the extent of their agreement with a series of statements about the impact the coaching had had on specific aspects of the coaching clients working lives. Four of these statements related to clients' ability to improve the performance of their department or organisation. Figure 1 shows the average (mean) scores from the respondents. Anything with a numerical value over 3.5 represents overall agreement with the statement. Figure 1

demonstrates positive development on all four statements and was especially the case when it came to clients having more confidence in their own ability to lead change and in making greater efforts to find innovative approaches.

Figure 1: Impact on performance improvement skills



Horizontal scale: 1 'Very strongly disagree'; 2 'Strongly disagree'; 3 'Disagree'; 4 'Agree'; 5 'Strongly agree'; 6 'Very strongly agree'

Base: (in question order) 14, 12,14,13 clients; 19,12,17,18 coaches; 6, 3, 4, 5 sponsors

Source: IES, 2008

There was little evidence at the time of the interviews of impact on organisation performance, although there was a strong sense from both clients and their sponsors that these individual changes would inevitably translate into improved business performance, given time. Most interviewees felt that the evaluation was timed up to a year too early in the coaching process for them to comment sensibly on organisational outcomes.

We encountered confusion in both line managers/sponsors and clients minds about how closely tied to organisational performance the coaching should be and what the coaching should focus on; business benefits explicitly; or personal development and assume that this feeds through to business benefits. The majority seem to feel that the coaching has been marketed in the past as a personal development activity with no requirement for work-related outcomes.

The way the Coaching Pool operates

There was substantial praise for some ways in which the Coaching Pool Partnership of 13 Councils across the West Midlands has operated to date. All client respondents to our survey thought the coaching was worth the time and effort: 88 percent thought it was 'very worthwhile'. All clients in our survey (100 percent) would recommend coaching to others.

For the vast majority of clients, this was their first experience of coaching and half of clients had self-nominated to the Coaching Pool having seen the advertising. All clients had a personal development aim in choosing coaching, with career planning also featuring strongly. Improvements to services, their team or their organisation was mentioned by much smaller numbers of respondents.

Not all line managers in our survey have been involved with three-way contracting or objective setting, and some coaches are nervous about handling the three-way contracting meeting. In practice, goals tend to be emergent with two sets of objectives: those for 'public' consumption and additional 'personal' ones.

Processes generally regarded as excellent include the client/coach working relationships, administration, frequency and number of coaching sessions. Some clients particularly liked the fact that coaches already understood the systems of local government while others reported the ease of accessing a coach. For the coach respondents particularly impressive is the coach training and supervision.

Coaches were much less impressed with marketing to potential clients, although some reported they understood it had been deliberately low key during the start-up phase for '*fear of being swamped*.' Coaches perceived not enough clients coming to the pool as demoralising so the recent marketing activities should be welcome.

Suggestions for improvement

There was a clear perception that the coaching being provided is a high quality product. As the Coaching Pool moves forward as a fully operational service the priorities areas we suggest are:

- Aim for a substantial increase in the number of clients.
- A review of marketing, increased support for the programme from senior leaders and a pro-active approach to identifying potential clients.
- More links with organisations' needs, perhaps through: prioritising managers in circumstances where they and their organisation are likely to gain most benefit; performance-orientated publicity; and encouraging at least one of the 'public' objectives to be explicitly linked to a business or corporate priority.
- More help for clients in choosing who they would like as their coach.
- Use of key monthly metrics by Management Board to maximise ongoing value for money to its partner organisations eg coach utilisation (percentage) and client sign up rate (against target).