

# Coaching, goal-setting and personality type: What matters?

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*The study subjected two 'sacred cows' in coaching, goal-setting, and the use of personality instruments, to empirical testing. In an experimental between-subjects design (N=117) with two conditions, goal-setting and non-goal-setting, coaching occurred under standardised procedures, and both coach and coachee completed the MBTI and NEO-PIR questionnaires and post-coaching evaluations. Outcomes were re-tested at two and eight weeks. Surprisingly, given the extensive research basis for goal-setting, multiple regression analyses showed no significant difference between goal-setting and non-goal-setting conditions. Personality difference was, however, found to be significant.*

**Keywords:** Coaching, Executive coaching, Individual difference, Goal-setting.

**C**OACHING IS NOW A VERY significant factor on the cost side of the accounts of UK organisations. This is for at least three reasons:

- **Cash** – *The Economist* (23 November, 2003) has estimated the global market to be US\$1billion, and doubling every 18 months.
- **Time** – Senior executives in both the public and private sector are spending significant time in coaching and coaching development.
- **Major business decisions** – UK and European coaches generally do not advise (Kauffman & Scoular, 2004) but coaches are nevertheless frequently part of decision-making processes that lie right at the heart of European investment, commercial and public policy decision making.

So the stakes are high. This begs a number of questions. What is the theoretical basis of all this work? And what evidence links that to coaching applications? Which components of coaching 'work'? Our clients need to be confident our interventions are the most effective possible. And when the inevitable pressure comes on costs it will be necessary to understand our processes at this fundamental level in order to be able to reconfigure them ever more efficiently.

## Goal-setting and personality type

The present research sought to test empirically two 'sacred cows' of coaching: Goal-setting and personality type. In both cases there is a strong theoretical base in psychology which might be presumed to underly their use in coaching, yet in both cases this assumption was hitherto untested.

Goal-setting is one of the most substantially researched areas in the entire field of organisational psychology. Studies conducted since the 1960s (Latham & Yukl, 1975; Latham & Saari, 1979; Locke & Latham, 1990; Latham & Locke, 1991) and in a wide range of organisational and ethnic contexts have shown that in almost all circumstances the more clear the initial goal at the outset, the higher the performance outcome. This would seem to legitimise the heavy emphasis on goal-setting in standard coaching models such as GROW (Whitmore, 1996). The research hypothesis here presumed that in the goal-setting conditions, outcome scores would be higher.

Again, the use of personality type in coaching sits atop vast amounts of research, but its many applications in coaching (raising awareness of self; building ability to understand others and hence communicate better, etc.) had not been explicitly tested. Here, we considered specifically how best to match coach and coachee, asking whether

performance scores were higher with matched or unmatched pairs. That is, did similarity of personality lead to better communication, or did difference lead to useful challenge? There was no prior research to indicate the likely answer.

## Method

One-hundred-and-twenty coaching sessions were conducted, each of strictly 30-minutes duration and all 'cold' in that coach and coaches had never met before and had no time for warm-up or 'chemistry' exploration. Coach/coachee allocation was randomised, all other aspects standardised and controlled so far as possible, and to maintain consistency all 14 coaches were experienced graduates of the Meyler Campbell Business Coach Programme. The coaching was conducted in eight different organisational contexts ranging from large multi-national organisations to small entrepreneurial firms across the southern UK.

In half the sessions, randomly allocated, the coaches were asked to use all their normal techniques in coaching including Goal-setting (the 'G' of the GROW model). In the other half coaches were identically instructed except they were requested not to use Goal-setting. Afterwards both coach and coachee completed a short evaluation questionnaire (from which the outcome score was statistically derived), and coach and coachee both also completed the MBTI and NEO personality questionnaires. (Both NEO and MBTI were used for technical reasons.) Additionally, the coachees were asked to complete further outcome questionnaires two and eight weeks later.

## Results

### 1. The unanticipated

The biggest result was, as one of the coaches commented in their qualitative feedback, 'it's amazing what you can do with a stranger in 30 minutes'. Across five questions (one to five scales) the maximum score was 25: the mean aggregate was heavily skewed to the positive end, at 20.4. Thus, despite

brevity, lack of warm-up and their one-off nature, the coachees rated the sessions surprisingly highly.

This was confirmed in the qualitative answers where coachees listed specific outcomes that they had achieved from the session. Examples (taken from the immediate and two-week follow-up sets) included:

'A realisation of a link between two different fundamentals in my life'; 'instigating a weekly team meeting would be more useful than I realised before'; 'understanding that to fix or address problems in my career I need to address issues of stability in my home life'; 'aborted a job application'; 'further structuring of next contract with potential consulting partner and conversation planned with a colleague'; 'discussed issue with boss and able to resolve a misunderstanding'.

### 2. Results: Goal-setting

As noted above, one of the strongest findings in organisational psychology is the clearer the goal, the higher the performance. So we anticipated a simple bar graph, with outcomes high in the Goal-setting condition, and lower in the non-Goal-setting condition. In reality, to our puzzlement, the results showed no difference between the Goal-setting and the non-Goal-setting conditions.

### 3. Results: Personality

We ran a number of tests comparing different types of coach/coachee match or non-match and there was no significant difference except for MBTI 'temperament' (Keirsey & Bates, 1984), i.e. whether the core preference is for SP, SJ, NF or NT. When coach and coachee differed on temperament, outcome scores were higher and this was statistically significant.

## Discussion

### a. Goal-setting

Two factors may have led to these surprising results. First, some coaches commented in

their post-coaching evaluation questionnaires that they felt unethical not using this key element, so sought through listening to impute the goal the coachee was working towards, and coach against that. Secondly, they felt they may simply have been trying even harder: listening more acutely, and in general straining every muscle to help the coachee nevertheless benefit from the session. For whatever reason, this finding clearly needs to be tested further.

### b. Personality

While the finding is potentially very useful for people seeking to match coach and coachee, again further research is clearly needed to retest the results. The tentative hypothesis is that in pairings differing on temperament, the coach may instinctively come from a different perspective, and perhaps challenge coachee assumptions more, with this more complex interaction leading to higher performance outcomes.

### Conclusions

The unanticipated results of this research seemed, first, to support the general experience that coaching is extraordinarily powerful, even in brief one-off sessions – though this was with very experienced coaches.

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The findings on Goal-setting are directly contradictory to a large body of research and thus must have a large question mark over them until the research has been retested. In the meantime it our view that Goal-setting remains important whether explicit or imputed and should still be regarded as best practice in business coaching. In our experience training senior executives to coach, the rigorous structure of GROW is particularly important in the early stages of training; particularly with experienced people sorely tempted to ‘tell’, the ‘G’ be the coaching equivalent of ‘training wheels’ keeping them on the right (i.e. the client’s) track.

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