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Autonomy support, relationship satisfaction and goal focus in the coach–coachee relationship: which best predicts coaching success?

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The role of the coach–coachee relationship in influencing coaching outcomes has emerged as an area of interest in research into the mechanics of effective coaching. Although extensively researched in the psychotherapeutic domain, exploration of the working alliance represents a new phase in executive and life coaching research. This paper presents an exploratory empirical study that explores four aspects of the coach–coachee relationship to investigate which is more related to specific measures of coaching success: (1) autonomy support; (2) the extent to which a coachee feels satisfied with the actual coach–coachee relationship; (3) the extent to which the coaching relationship was similar to an 'ideal' coach–coachee relationship; and (4) a goal-focused coach–coachee relationship. This is the first study to use multiple measures of the coach–coachee relationship in order to directly compare the relative efficacy of different aspects of the coach–coachee relationship. In a within-subject study, 49 coach–coachee dyads conducted four coaching sessions over a 10- to 12-week period. Results indicate that satisfaction with a coach–coachee relationship does not predict successful coaching outcomes, and whilst autonomy support and proximity to an 'ideal' relationship moderately predicted coaching success, a goal-focused coach–coachee relationship was a unique and significantly more powerful predictor of coaching success. The findings emphasise the importance of goals in the coaching process and highlight important differences between psychotherapeutic and coaching working alliances.

Keywords: Coach–coachee relationship; working alliance; goals; coaching success

Introduction

The role of the coach–coachee relationship in influencing coaching outcomes has recently emerged as an area of interest in research into the mechanics of effective coaching. Although the working alliance has been comprehensively researched in the psychotherapeutic domain, exploration of the coach–coachee relationship represents a new phase in executive and life coaching research – one with much potential to enhance our understanding of the mechanics of effective coaching. This paper aims to contribute to this emerging knowledge base.

Initially, this paper sets the context by presenting an overview of some of the main trends in coaching research to date and documenting the emergence of this new research focus. I then present an empirical study that compares the relative impact of four different facets of the coach–coachee relationship on coaching success: (1) a supportive humanistic

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coach–coachee relationship that provides autonomy support in terms of factors such as empathy, unconditional positive regard and trust; (2) the extent to which a coachee feels satisfied with the actual coach–coachee relationship; (3) the extent to which the coaching relationship was similar to an 'ideal' coach–coachee relationship; and (4) a goal-focused coach–coachee relationship. Finally, recommendations regarding future research in this area are proposed.

An overview of coaching research trends

Not surprisingly the academic coaching literature has changed substantially over the past two decades, with different themes emerging over time. A substantial amount of the academic literature about coaching that was published during the 1990s focused on delineating and defining coaching (e.g., Kilburg, 1996), or on describing how managers could improve employees' performance through coaching in the workplace (e.g., Graham, Wedman, & Garvin-Kester, 1994). The 1990s also produced papers on how to evaluate executive coaching engagements (e.g., Peterson, 1993, 1996), and a number of early quantitative studies on the effectiveness of coaching emerged (e.g., Miller, 1990; Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman, 1997) although qualitative case studies on executive coaching were most common (e.g., Diedrich, 1996).

An overview of the literature from 2000 to 2010 indicates that coaching was now being better understood as a methodology for creating positive change. For example, there were less debates about distinguishing coaching from consulting and a greater emphasis on evaluating the effectiveness of coaching (for a review detailing the changing trends in the coaching literature, see Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010). Coaching outcome research became broader as researchers explored the effectiveness of coaching in a wide variety of applications including life coaching (Grant, 2003), executive coaching (Cerni, Curtis, & Colmar, 2010), with Master of Business Administration students (Sue-Chan & Latham, 2004) or with medical practitioners (Gattellari et al., 2005) to name just a few. The early 2000s also saw the emergence of more quantitative randomised studies of coaching outcomes (e.g., Grant, Curtayne, & Burton, 2009; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005; Miller, Yahne, Moyers, Martinez, & Pirritano, 2004; Spence & Grant, 2007).

The general consensus at this time was that, although more research was needed, the literature supported the notion that coaching was indeed an effective change methodology (for reviews, see Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Grant et al., 2010; Greif, 2007; Passmore & Gibbes, 2007). There was also a growing understanding of the difficulties involved in evaluating the effectiveness of coaching, particularly from a quantitative perspective using randomised controlled studies. Various commentators began to argue that as we now had reasonable grounds to believe that coaching was effective, research should work to identify the so-called 'active ingredients' of coaching and as well delineating the factors involved in successful coach–coachee relationships (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006; Joo, 2005; Kampa & White, 2002).

This new emphasis on the active ingredients of coaching (McKenna & Davis, 2009) heralded a new wave of coaching research – one that takes as its key focus the nature of the relationship between the coachee and the coach. This line of research turns the focus away from an evaluation of coaching outcomes per se and seeks to identify the factors associated with the coaching relationship that contribute most significantly to coaching outcomes (e.g., de Haan, Duckworth, Birch, & Jones, 2013).

The present study aims to contribute to this emerging line of enquiry by presenting an exploratory study that directly compares the relative impact of autonomy support (factors such as empathy, unconditional positive regard and trust); with 'relationship satisfaction' (the extent to which a coachee feels satisfied with the coach–coachee relationship), with the extent to which the coaching relationship was similar to an 'ideal' coach–coachee relationship and with a 'goal-focused coach–coachee relationship' (the extent to which the coaching relationship focuses on the coachee's goals).

The influence of the common factors approach in therapy

For many years within the psychotherapeutic domain, a key debate concerned the relative efficacy of different treatment modalities. This debate was often positioned as a contest between psychodynamic therapy in the Freudian or related dynamic traditions (Freud, 1920; Jung, 1964) and the behaviourists (Skinner, 1963) or the cognitive behaviourists (Beck, 1995). More recently, the debate has been extended to encompass the 'third wave' of acceptance-based behavioural therapies (Hayes, 2004). However, despite frequent and often vitriolic debates amongst the proponents of different theoretical orientations about which was the 'best' therapeutic modality, comparisons between different types of empirically supported treatments have found little difference in modality effectiveness (Norcross & Newman, 1992). The term 'common factors' thus stems from the notion that, if all therapies are equally effective then there may well be a set of general active ingredients that are common to all treatment modalities – hence the term 'common factors' (Rosenzweig, 1936).

Not surprisingly, there has been considerable research in this area: a search of the database PsycINFO conducted in June 2013 using the words 'working alliance' found a total of 2029 citations and cross indexing 'working alliance' with the keyword 'therapy' resulted in 828 citations. The term 'working alliance' refers to the relationship between a helping professional and a client (or patient), which is comprised of a shared understanding of desired therapeutic outcomes, the tasks to be performed to reach those therapeutic outcomes, and a strong relational bond (Bordin, 1979). The importance of the working alliance is well documented in the therapeutic literature. For example, Wampold et al. (1997) pointed towards the role of relationship characteristics such as empathy, unconditional positive regard, trust, respect and support which are deemed to be the essential components of an effective working alliance in facilitating therapeutic change.

In a meta-analysis of 24 studies, Horvath and Symonds (1991) found a moderate but reliable association between good working alliance and positive therapy outcome, with the quality of the working alliance being most predictive of treatment outcomes based on clients' assessments. Extending such past work, Lambert and Barley's (2001) frequently cited meta-analysis found that the common factors that influence client outcomes in therapy can be divided into four areas with the relationship between a therapist and the client accounting for 30% of the variance in outcomes, with the 40% of the variance being attributed to external or contextual factors, 15% to hope or expectancy effects and only 15% to specific theory or techniques. More recent research has upheld the notion that the therapeutic working alliance is an important common factor predicting outcome in patients in a range of socio-psychological problems including borderline personality disorder (Barnicot et al., 2012), with homeless street youth (Connolly & Joly, 2012), and even in Internet-based e-therapy (Sucala et al., 2012).

In short, a significant body of research within the psychotherapeutic literature holds that one of the most important factors in determining therapeutic outcomes is the ability of the therapist to develop a working alliance with the client that embodies trust, warmth and respect for the client's autonomy (Lampropoulos, 2000).

Exploring common factors in the coach–coachee relationship

The common factors perspective that has been so influential in therapy has been brought to bear on developing understandings of the coach–coachee relationship. de Haan, Culpin, and Curd (2011, p. 25) found that coachees valued the coach–coachee relationship far more than any specific coaching intervention or technique, and concluded that there is 'clear support for a common factors approach' in coaching. However, although this was an innovative and useful study which highlighted the importance of the coach–coachee relationship in coaching engagements, it should be noted that de Haan et al. (2011) did not measure the actual outcomes of coaching; thus, the relationship between common factors and coaching success could not be identified.

A later study, de Haan, Duckworth, Birch, and Jones (2013), significantly extended the de Haan et al. (2011) methodology, producing possibly the most comprehensive research into the coach–coachee relationship to date. Examining data from 156 coach–coachee pairs, it was found that coaching outcomes were significantly related to the working alliance, client self-efficacy and the coaching techniques used by the coach. This last point is an important one, as the extent to which coaching techniques and working alliance are complementary in influencing coaching outcomes has not been sufficiently explored to date, with many commentators highlighting the overarching importance of the working alliance (Baron & Morin, 2009; Bluckert, 2005).

Unfortunately, the measures of coaching outcomes employed by de Haan et al. (2013) were somewhat vague. Coachees responded on a 7-point scale to four questions about perceived outcome: 'your overall coaching experience', 'coaching adding value', 'impact of coaching on your performance at work' and 'coaching enables you to achieve what you want to achieve', with coaching effectiveness being calculated as averaged scores across these four items. Consequently, these measures confound the performance-related outcomes of coaching with issues related to satisfaction with the coaching relationship. Thus, although the de Haan et al.'s (2013) study shines further light on the role of the coaching relationship, the fact that the outcome measures were quite broad limits the extent to which the extent to which the coach–coachee relationship can be directly related to specific coaching outcomes.

In an executive coaching study that utilised more specific measures of coaching outcome, Smith and Brummel (2013) explored the relationship between three of the four active ingredients of therapy (therapeutic relationship; expectancy, hope and placebo effects and theory and technique) and a specific measure of executive coaching success – change in leadership competencies – that were in themselves the focus of the coaching engagement. The results indicated that these three active ingredients were significantly related to coaching success. It is of note that Smith and Brummel (2013) also found that those coachees who set developmental plans (a technique frequently used in coaching engagements) were statistically more likely to experience competency improvement compared to those who did not create developmental plans. Given the robust findings in the goal theory literature that creating goals and action plans improves performance and facilitates goal attainment (Gollwitzer, 1999; Locke, 1996). Smith and Brummel (2013)

concluded that goal theory has much to offer in augmenting our understanding of what constitutes an effective coach–coachee relationship.

Other perspectives on the coach–coachee relationship

The nature of the coach–coachee relationship has been also explored using methodologies developed or specifically adapted for use in the coaching context. Such approaches are useful in this emerging area of coaching-specific research as they can give a different perspective from that offered by using more traditional psychotherapeutic frames of reference. For example, Jowett, Kanakoglou, and Passmore (2012) explored the coaching relationship using a coaching adaptation of the sport-orientated 3 + 1Cs (closeness, commitment, complementarity and co-orientation) relationship model (Jowett, 2007). Analysis of the coaching relationship formulated amongst five coach–coachee pairs revealed the importance of closeness as defined in terms of mutual trust and respect, commitment in terms of developing an effective and enduring coaching partnership.

Adapting the work of Gassmann and Grawe (2006) specifically for use in the coaching context, Greif (2010) attempted to delineate the nature of effective coaches' behaviours in the coach–coachee relationship through direct observation. Results indicated that coaching outcomes can be predicted by five key coaching behaviours: non-verbal reinforcement, verbal empathy, facilitation of self-reflection, resource activation and support in transferring intended change into practice through techniques such as rehearsal of specific actions within the coaching session or shadowing or accompanying the coachee whilst they perform intended actions or behaviour changes in the workplace.

Godfrey, Andersson-Gare, Nelson, Nilsson, and Ahlstrom (2013) explored the experiences of 382 coachees and 30 leaders who were coached in a health care improvement team coaching intervention by a total of nine coaches in a health setting. This study extended previous research on the coach–coachee relationship by focusing on team coaching, rather than the one-to-one coaching that has been the main focus of past research in this area. The findings clearly emphasise the importance of the working relationship. It was found that the coach–coachee relationship factors of building positive relationships, being respected, having positive interpersonal communications and receiving help and encouragement from the coach were key factors in making a difference to participants. Interestingly, the authors reported that the technical know-how that is often the primary focus in health care improvement strategies was the least perceived need of these teams, a finding that clearly illustrates the importance of a good coach–coachee relationship.

Ianiro, Schermuly, and Kauffeld (2013) investigated the role of affiliation and dominance in interpersonal behaviours in the coaching relationship, using data from observed coaching sessions between 33 coach–coachee dyads. Coachees also competed a four-item self-report measure of their perception of the coaching relationship assessing closeness, empathy, understanding and positive affect – key facets of a supportive coach–coachee relationship – and also completed goal attainment measures. In line with past work (e.g., de Haan et al., 2013; Jowett, Kanakoglou, & Passmore, 2012), Ianiro et al. (2013) found interpersonal compatibility of coach and coachee was beneficial in terms of both relationship quality and goal attainment. However, a notable finding was that the coach's dominance behaviour in the first session predicted goal attainment at the end of the five-session coaching process.

Bachkirova, Sibley, and Myers (2011) developed one of the most comprehensive coaching-specific instruments to date. This aims to describe both generic and diverse elements of a coaching session, including behavioural, attitudinal and relational aspects. Using a Q-sort methodology, Bachkirova et al. (2011) identified 80 key statements representing the most essential and typical elements of the coaching processes, including aspects of the coach–coachee relationship. However, although this represents an important innovation in the development of coaching-specific instruments through which to further our understanding of coaching processes, further research is needed to specifically relate these to successful coaching outcomes.

In summary, coaching researchers are beginning to develop coaching-specific methodologies for exploring the active ingredients of the coach–coachee relationship and its impact on coaching outcomes. This is a new shift in the development of our understanding about what makes coaching work. At the same time, it is generally agreed that traditional understandings of the working alliance as being comprised of respect for the client's autonomy, empathy, understanding and support is one of the most, if not the most, important factors in the psychotherapeutic relationship. Not surprisingly, it is often assumed in the coaching literature that this is also the case for coaching (McKenna & Davis, 2009).

The importance of goals in the coach–coachee relationship

However, coaching is not therapy. The core aims of coaching and therapy are different. Most coaching is inherently specifically outcome or goal focused rather than about ameliorating issues related to psychological problems (Berg & Szabo, 2005; International Coach Federation [ICF], 2013). Indeed, virtually all definitions of coaching explicitly include references to creating specific outcomes for clients, so that they can achieve their personal or business goals (Association for Coaching [AC], 2012), whether that can be expressed as helping coachees 'maximize their personal and professional potential' (ICF, 2012), helping 'clients to improve their performance or enhance their personal development' (European Mentoring and Coaching Council [EMCC], 2011), or building 'a leader's capability to achieve short and long-term organizational goals' (Stern, 2004, p. 154). This goal-focused orientation contrasts with the aims of the psychotherapeutic modalities that have most often been the focus of research into the working alliance.

Thus, past research in the therapeutic domain may not directly map on to the contemporary coach experience (Segers & Vloeberghs, 2009); more coach-specific research is clearly needed here. I argue that research into the role played by a goal-focused coaching relationship in determining coaching success should be a central part of the research agenda if we are to develop a solid understanding of what constitutes an effective coaching relationship. Indeed, a significant body of work in the goal literature unmistakably demonstrates the links between goals and performance improvement, and this is clearly of relevance for coaching (e.g., Gollwitzer, 1999; Locke, 1996).

The current study

To date, there have been few studies that have sought to explore the importance of goals in the coach–coachee relationship. I was interested to see which aspect of the coach–coachee relationship was more positively related to specific coaching outcomes: (1) autonomy support – a humanistic supportive relationship; (2) the extent to which a

coachee felt satisfied with the actual coach–coachee relationship; (3) the extent to which the coaching relationship was similar to an 'ideal' coach–coachee relationship; or (4) a goal-focused coach–coachee relationship. This is the first study to use multiple measures of the coach–coachee relationship in order to directly compare the relative efficacy of different aspects of the coach–coachee relationship.

To this end, I conducted a study using a within-subject design. The coaching intervention consisted of four coaching sessions conducted over a 10- to 12-week period. To evaluate if the coaching was indeed effective, I used a range of measures that have been found to be responsive to coaching in past research (Grant, 2003; Grant et al., 2009). These included measures of goal attainment, psychological well-being (PWB), depression, anxiety and stress and self-insight, in addition to the measures of the coach–coachee relationship that were the primary focus of the study.

Goal attainment scaling was used as the primary measure of coaching success, because, as previously noted, past research into the impact of the coach–coachee relationship on coaching outcomes has tended to use broad, non-specific measures of coaching outcome and such outcome measures may obscure important findings. It was hypothesised that participation in coaching would be associated with improvements in goal attainment. Furthermore, and in line with past research that has demonstrated that the attainment of personally valued goals has range of secondary beneficial psychological effects (e.g., Grant, 2003), I hypothesised that there would also be increases in PWB and self-insight, and reductions in depression, anxiety and stress. Because this was an exploratory study, no specific hypotheses were made regarding the relationships between different coach–coachee relationship measures and coaching outcomes.

Method

Participants

Participants were 49 adults (36 females and 13 males, mean age 36.65 years) who were studying coaching psychology as part of a postgraduate degree programme in coaching. Their occupations included professional executive coaches, human resource professionals, managers and lawyers. Twenty-two participants were experienced professional coaches or experienced professional counsellors, and 27 participants had workplace coaching experience as part of their existing or prior management roles.

Design and procedure

The study used a within-subject design. Every participant was both a coach and a coachee, that is, each participant coached another participant and also was coached by another participant. No participant was coached by their own coachee; participant 'A' coached participant 'B', who in turn coached participant 'C' who in turn coached participant 'A'. Within such constraints, there was random assignment to the role of coach or coachee.

Prior to the beginning of the coaching programme, all participants completed a three-day intensive seminar-based training programme on professional coaching practice, including intensive training in coaching and communication skills and sessions on confidentially and professional issues in coaching practice. All participants also attended two additional one-day intensive workshops on mental health and well-being issues in coaching, one at the mid-point in the coaching programme and one later in the

programme. In terms of theoretical frameworks, all participants had also completed (or were completing) an additional 12-week course in the theories and techniques of coaching psychology and this theory-base informed the coaching programme.

The coaching programme

The coaching programme consisted of four individual one-to-one face-to-face coaching sessions conducted over a 10- to 12-week period. Sessions were between 45 and 60 minutes in length.

The coaching programme utilised a solution-focused, cognitive behavioural coaching (SF-CBC) approach (further details of the coaching programme can be found in Grant, 2003). The SF-CBC approach posits that goal attainment and well-being enhancement are best achieved by understanding the reciprocal relationships between the individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviours and the environment, and then purposefully structuring these in ways that best facilitate positive change. The inclusion of solution-focused techniques into a cognitive behavioural framework helps orientate the cognitive behavioural framework away from problem analysis towards personal strengths and solution construction (for an extended discussion on integrating solution-focused approaches with cognitive behavioural theory, see Bannink, 2012).

The solution-focused cognitive behavioural therapy coaching process facilitates goal attainment by helping individuals to (1) identify desired outcomes, (2) delineate specific goals, (3) enhance their motivation by identifying their personal strengths and building self-efficacy, (4) identifying resources and formulating specific action plans, (5) monitoring and evaluating change and (6) modifying and adapting action plans (where necessary). The monitor-evaluate-modification steps of this process constitute a cycle of self-regulated behaviours which is a key process in creating intentional behaviour change (Carver & Scheier, 1998).

From this perspective, the role of the coach is to facilitate the coachees' progress through this self-regulatory cycle, by helping the coachee monitor and evaluate their progression towards their goals and develop specific action plans to be completed before the following coaching session. In order to ensure consistency in approach between coaches, all coaches were supplied with a manual containing reference material, coaching session templates, self-reflection guides and checklists. However, because over-reliance on prescriptive manuals can lead to a sanitised and mechanistic approach (Honos-Webb, 2005), coaches were also encouraged to be flexible in the way they used the manualised methodologies and to utilise their own personalised style of coaching, whilst continuing to work within the constraints of the SF-CBC model.

Measures

Participants completed measures in a group setting using paper questionnaires before and after the coaching programme.

Coaching success

Participants were asked to identify what would constitute a successful coaching outcome by describing a goal they would like to achieve. They then rated their goal attainment to date on a scale from 0% (no attainment) to 100% (complete attainment). Participants also rated the length of time they had been trying to achieve their goals. At the conclusion of

the coaching programme, participants re-rated their goal attainment. Such goal attainment scales have been used in prior coaching outcome studies to measure successful coaching outcomes (e.g., Grant, 2003). For a detailed discussion on goal attainment scaling, see Spence (2007).

PWB

PWB was measured using an 18-item version of the Scales of PWB (Ryff, 1989) using a 6-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). The PWB measures well-being on six subscales: positive relations with others, environmental mastery, personal growth, self-acceptance, autonomy and purpose in life. Internal consistency ranges from 0.82 to 0.90 (Schmutte & Ryff, 1997). Alpha for the present study was .82.

Depression, anxiety and stress

The Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) was used as a measure of psychopathology. The DASS-21 is comprised of three sub-scales measuring depression, anxiety and stress and uses a dimensional rather than categorical approach to the assessment of mental illness. Because it designed to be used with both clinical and non-clinical populations, it is a useful assessment tool for coaching populations. Internal consistency and test–retest reliability have been found to be good (r = 0.71–0.81; Brown, Chorpita, Korotitsch, & Barlow, 1997). Alpha for the present study was .87.

Self-insight

Participant's levels of self-insight were measured using the Insight Sub-scale of the Self-reflection and Insight Scale (Grant, Franklin, & Langford, 2002). The Insight Scale measures individuals' levels of insight into their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Items include 'I usually know why I feel the way that I do' and 'My behaviour often puzzles me' (reverse scored). The scale has a reported Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 and a test–retest reliability of 0.78 (Grant et al., 2002). Alpha for the present study was 0.76.

Measures of coach–coachee relationship

Four different measures of the coach–coachee relationship were used.

(1) *Autonomy support:* The term 'autonomy support' refers to the active support by another person of an individual's capacity to be self-initiating and autonomous. Autonomy support is characterised by factors such as empathy, unconditional positive regard, trust, respect and support (Deci & Ryan, 1987). Autonomy support was assessed using an adaptation of Deci and Ryan's (2005) Perceived Autonomy Support Scale (PASS). Items on this 15-item scale included 'My coach listened to how I would like to do things'; 'I feel that my coach cares about me as a person'; 'I felt that my coach helped me with choices and options'; 'I feel that my coach accepts me'; 'I felt understood by my coach'; and 'I feel a lot of trust in my coach'. Participants were asked to rate on a 7-piont scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Alpha for the present study was 0.91.

(2) *Satisfaction with the coach–coachee relationship*: Participants were asked to rate on a 5-piont scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) the extent to which

they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'I was very satisfied with the relationship that I had with my coach'.

(3) *Proximity to one's ideal coaching relationship*: Participants were asked to take two minutes or so to write about their ideal coaching relationship. They responded to the statement 'As a coachee, the kind of relationship I would like to have with a coach is as follows'. Once they had written a description of their ideal coach–coachee relationship, they then were asked to rate on a 1–5 scale (1 = *extremely dissimilar*, 5 = *extremely similar*) the extent to which their relationship with their coach was like their ideal coaching relationship – higher scores on this scale indicating greater proximity to participants' idealised coach–coachee relationship.

(4) *A goal-focused coaching relationship*. The goal-focused aspect of the coaching relationship was measured using a 9-item adaptation of the Goal-focused Coaching Skills Questionnaire (GCSQ; Grant & Cavanagh, 2007) that specifically assessed goal-focused interactions. Items on this scale included 'The coach was very good at helping me develop clear, simple and achievable action plans'; 'We discussed any failures on my part to complete agreed actions steps'; 'The goals we set during coaching were very important to me'; 'My coach asked me about progress towards my goals' and 'The goals we set were stretching but attainable'. Grant and Cavanagh (2007) report a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90. Alpha for the present study was 0.91.

Results

Means, standard deviations and Cohen's *d* for all variables are shown in Table 1. Data were analysed using paired-sample *t*-tests. A significance level of 0.05 was set for all tests.

Coaching success

Paired *t*-tests comparing pre- with post-programme means revealed that the coaching programme appeared to be successful in helping the coachees reach their desired outcomes for the coaching relationship: There was a significant increase in goal attainment following the coaching programme, t (1,48) (11.43); $p < .01$.

Table 1. Pre- and post-programme scores.

	Pre		Post				
	M	SD	*M*	SD	*t*(1,48)	*p*	*d*
Goal attainment	26.90	17.90	69.10	17.60	11.43	<0.01	2.4
Anxiety	5.06	5.52	3.22	3.64	2.89	<0.01	0.41
Self-insight	36.06	5.08	37.45	4.39	2.61	<0.05	0.29
Stress	12.45	6.64	10.69	7.85	2.13	<0.05	0.24
PWB	90.51	9.75	91.88	9.41	1.84	0.05[a]	0.14
Depression	2.41	4.26	2.78	5.04	−.67	*ns*	0.08

ns, non-significant; PWB, psychological well-being.
[a]One-tailed *t*-test; *d* = Cohen's *d* effect size.

Self-insight and well-being

Paired *t*-tests revealed that participation in the coaching programme was also associated with significant increases in self-insight, t (1,48) (2.61); $p < .05$, and significant decreases in anxiety, t (1,48) (2.89); $p < .01$ and stress, t (1,48) (2.13); $p < .05$. The changes for PWB were significant using a one-tailed *t*-test, t (1,48) (1.84); $p < .05$. No changes in levels of depression were observed.

As regards the relative impact of the coaching programme: as can been seen in Table 1, the largest outcome effect size was for goal attainment (the primary outcome measure), with the psychological outcome variables of anxiety, self-insight, stress, PWB and depression showing far smaller effect sizes. This finding makes sense in that the coaching focused on goal attainment rather than reducing psychopathology or increasing well-being.

The coach–coachee relationship

There was a significant correlation between coaching success as defined by the extent to which the client had achieved their desired outcome (i.e., goal attainment) and the GCSQ ($r = 0.43$; $p < 0.01$), and there was also a significant correlation between coaching success and autonomy support as measured by the PASS ($r = 0.29$; $p < 0.05$). In addition, there was a significant correlation between coaching success and 'ideal' coaching relationship ($r = 0.30$; $p < 0.05$). However, the relationship between coaching success and relationship satisfaction was not significant ($r = .25$; *ns*).

Partial correlations[1] were then conducted to determine if the GCSQ was still significantly correlated with coaching success when controlling for autonomy support and the 'ideal' coaching relationship. It was found that the correlation between coaching success and the goal-focused coaching style measured by the GCSQ remained significant ($r = 0.31$; $p < 0.05$) even when statistically controlling for an autonomy supportive coaching style as measured by the PASS, as well as the 'ideal' relationship.

Conversely, when statistically controlling for a goal-focused coaching style, none of the relationships between coaching success and the PASS ($r = 0.03$; $p = 0.79$), or between coaching success and 'ideal' relationship ($r = 0.07$; $p = 0.61$) remained significant.

There were no significant correlations between any of the different aspects of the coach–coachee relationship and changes in self-insight, PWB, anxiety, stress or depression. However, there was a significant correlation between coaching success and increases in PWB ($r = 0.40$; $p < 0.05$) indicating that goal attainment is associated with increased levels of PWB. As might be expected, there were positive correlations between the changes in depression, anxiety and stress. There were also negative correlations between changes in PWB and changes depression and stress – as PBW increased, participants' levels of depression, anxiety and stress decreased. Interestingly, there were negative correlations between changes in self-insight and changes in anxiety and in stress – that is, increases in self-insight were associated with decreases in anxiety and stress. This last finding reflects past research that has shown that self-insight is negatively correlated with psychopathology (Lyke, 2008). Correlations are presented in Table 2.

Discussion

The coaching programme appeared to be successful in helping the participants reach their desired outcomes: there was a significant increase in goal attainment following the

Table 2. Correlations between coaching success, different aspects of the coach–coachee relationship and changes in psychological outcome measures.

Variable	Coaching success	Goal focused	Autonomy	Satisfied	Ideal	Anxiety change	Self-insight change	Stress change	PWB change
Goal focused	0.43**	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Autonomy	0.29*	61**	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Satisfied	0.25	0.58**	0.77**	–	–	–	–	–	–
Ideal	0.30*	56**	0.75**	0.73**	–	–	–	–	–
Anxiety change	0.04	0.19	0.08	0.05	0.10	–	–	–	–
Self-insight change	−0.06	−0.12	−0.06	0.12	−0.13	−0.34*	–	–	–
Stress change	−0.21	−0.04	−0.14	0.03	0.05	0.36*	−0.30*	–	–
PWB change	0.40**	0.06	−0.05	−0.10	−0.06	−0.04	0.13	−0.34*	–
Depression change	−0.18	−0.18	−0.18	0.05	−0.11	0.11	−0.07	0.33*	−0.33*

Note: Goal focused = goal-focused coaching relationship; Autonomy = autonomy support; Satisfied = satisfied with coaching relationship; Ideal = Proximity to 'ideal' coaching relationship; Anxiety change = pre–post change in anxiety; Self-insight change = pre–post change in self-insight; PWB change = pre–post change in psychological well-being; Depression change = pre–post change in depression.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

coaching programme, and this increase in goal attainment is consistent with much past coaching research (Grant, 2003; Green, Oades, & Grant, 2006; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005; Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas, & Kucine, 2003). The finding that this coaching intervention was successful in enhancing goal attainment is an important one in the context of the current research question, because without a clear indication that the coaching did in fact have a positive impact, it would not be possible to subsequently explore the differential impacts of the various facets of the coach–coachee relationship and their connection to coaching success.

The impact on psychological factors

The notion that the coaching was successful is further supported by the findings that there was a significant increase in self-insight and PWB, and significant reductions in anxiety and stress. The finding that participants' self-insight increased following participation in the coaching programme is in line with past research (Grant, 2003, 2008). This finding makes sense in that the process of being coached requires that coachees engage in a reflective process, reflecting both in relation to their day-to-day activities related to the goal striving process (Vancouver & Putka, 2000) and during the actual coaching sessions themselves (Whitmore, 1992). Such reflection can help develop the higher levels of self-insight (Stein & Grant, in press). There was also an increase in PWB and a reduction in anxiety and stress. Again, this is in accord with past coaching research (Grant et al., 2009; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005) which has consistently shown to be associated with improvements on participants' mental health (Grant et al., 2010).

However, there was no reduction in participants' levels of depression. It should be noted that levels of anxiety, stress and depression were all well within the normal range (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). This was not a clinical population requiring therapy, and issues of psychopathology were not of concern. To be more specific, anxiety levels were at the 60th percentile for the general population, stress was at the 70th percentile for the general population, whereas depression was only at the 18th percentile for the general population – none of these levels was high enough to be classified as of clinical concern (Crawford & Henry, 2003). However, although as a group these participants did not have clinically significant problems with anxiety and stress, their levels of anxiety and stress were still high enough to be reduced over the course of the coaching programme. In contrast, there was virtually no depression in the group as a whole, and hence no reduction in depression was observed.

In short, given these findings we can conclude that the coaching programme was indeed effective in terms of both goal attainment and positive psychological impact, and that consequently we can use data from the programme to explore those facets of the coach–coachee relationship that are related to coaching success.

The coach–coachee relationship: goals are key

The main area of interest for the present study was the relationship between coaching success and four key aspects of the coach–coachee relationship: (1) autonomy support – a humanistic supportive coach–coachee relationship typified by factors such as empathy, unconditional positive regard and trust; (2) the extent to which a coachee felt satisfied with the actual coach–coachee relationship; (3) the extent to which the coaching

relationship was similar to an 'ideal' coach–coachee relationship; or (4) a goal-focused coach–coachee relationship.

The results indicate that there was a significant correlation between a goal-focused coach–coachee relationship and coaching success. That is to say that the more that the coach–coachee relationship was goal focused, the more successful the coaching engagement was likely to be. Surprisingly, the role of goals in coaching has been somewhat controversial, with some arguing that focusing on goals and outcomes can derail the coach–coachee relationship or can act as barrier to working with emergent issues within the complex dynamic system that is the coaching conversation (Cavanagh, 2013; Cavanagh & Lane, 2012; Clutterbuck, 2008, 2010). The findings in this study act as an empirical counterpoint to such conceptual propositions and suggest that goals are indeed central to both the coaching enterprise and the coach–coachee relationship.

The relative roles of goals and autonomy support

There was also a significant correlation between coaching success and the autonomy support facets of the coach–coachee relationship. This indicates that a supportive coach–coachee relationship typified by factors such as empathy, unconditional positive regard and trust has a significant impact on coaching success, and this finding is in accord with past research from the psychotherapy domain (Wampold et al., 1997) and coach-specific research (Jowett et al., 2012).

Not surprisingly there was a significant correlation between a goal-focused coach–coachee relationship and autonomy support ($r = .61$; $p < .01$). This suggests that both a goal-focused coaching style and a humanistic supportive coach–coachee relationship coaching style contribute to coaching success.

However, and this is a key point, the correlation between coaching success and a goal-focused coaching style remained statistically significant even when statistically controlling for the autonomy support facets of the coaching relationship. It should be further noted that the converse was not true: when controlling for a goal-focused coaching style, the relationship between the autonomy support facets of the coach–coachee relationship and coaching success was no longer statistically significant. These findings suggest that whilst both a goal-focused coaching relationship and the autonomy support facets of the coach–coachee relationship both contribute to coaching success, a goal-focused coaching relationship has significantly more impact on successful coaching outcomes.

Differences with psychotherapeutic research into the working alliance

These findings are in some ways the reverse of those found in the psychotherapeutic domain. As previously stated much research into common factors in psychotherapy has found that a supportive therapeutic relationship accounts on average for 30% of the variance in outcomes, whereas theory and techniques only accounts for 15% of the variance in outcomes. That is to say that, in psychotherapy, a supportive relationship is twice as impactful as the specific theory and techniques employed (Lambert & Barley, 2001).

The present study's findings indicate that the exact reverse may be true in coaching, with theory and technique being twice as impactful as a supportive working alliance. In

the present study, theory and techniques (i.e., goal theory and a goal-focused coaching relationship) accounted for 18.49% of the variance in outcomes whereas a supportive relationship only accounted for 8.4% of the variance in outcomes.[2] These empirical findings support the conceptual argument outlined by Segers and Vloeberghs (2009) that theory and techniques matter more in coaching than in therapy.

The results of the current study strongly suggest that the use of goals in coaching is indeed of practical importance in that the use of a goal-focused coaching style is more effective. This is not to say that a supportive relationship is not important. Rather, these findings emphasise that the coaching relationship differs from a counselling or psychotherapeutic relationship, and suggest that there may well be important and hitherto unexplored limitations in which findings from the psychotherapeutic literature can be generalised to the coaching enterprise.

The limitations of relationship satisfaction in predicting coaching success

As regards the relationship between coaching success and the coachee's satisfaction with the coach–coachee relationship, this study has highlighted some useful and possibly counter-intuitive findings.

There was a significant correlation between coaching success and 'ideal' coaching relationship ($r = 0.30$; $p < 0.05$). That is, the closer the coaching relationship was to the coachee's ideal coach–coachee relationship, the more successful the coaching engagement was. This was to be expected, given that there were significant correlations between the 'ideal' relationship and a goal-focused relationship ($r = 0.56$; $p < 0.01$) and both the goal-focused relationship predicted coaching success (see Table 2). However, and this is an important finding, the relationship between coaching success and coachees' rating of satisfaction with the coach–coachee relationship was not significant ($r = 0.25$; ns): satisfaction with the coaching relationship does not predict coaching success. This somewhat counter-intuitive point that has important implications for general coaching practice, and this is particularly salient for those that work in organisational contexts.

Many coaching practitioners use coachees' rating of satisfaction with the coach–coachee relationship as a key means of assessing the impact of their coaching services (Schlosser, Steinbrenner, Kumata, & Hunt, 2006). Whilst this metric may give some insight into how much the coachee appreciates or enjoys the coaching relationship, such metrics may be of little or no use in predicting the actual outcomes of coaching – an observation also of relevance for coaching researchers who wish to delineate the active ingredients of coaching.

Limitations

There are several limitations in the present study, and these should be taken into account when interpreting these findings. First, the participants were mature age university students who were enrolled in a coaching psychology postgraduate degree. Whilst many of the participants were experienced professional coaches, these findings therefore may not generalise to other contexts, such as workplace coaching or executive coaching contexts. In addition, because this study used a within-subject design, the lack of a no-intervention control group means that the effects could have occurred naturalistically rather than being caused by participation in the coaching programme. Furthermore, the design of the study could have created a demand effect in which participants felt obliged

to report making progress towards their goals. Finally, this was an exploratory study and the sample size of 49 is somewhat smaller than the 71 participants in de Haan et al. (2011) or the 156 coach–coachee pairs reported by de Haan et al. (2013) but is greater than the 30 coaching engagements reported by Smith and Brummel (2013) or the five coach–coachee dyads reported by Jowett et al. (2012). Regardless, the present study has presented original data related to the active ingredients of effective coaching, particularly in relation to the coach–coachee relationship and future research should seek to build on and extend these initial findings.

Future research directions

A number of future research directions emerge from this study. This new phase in coaching research has the potential to deliver novel and useful understandings of how to make coaching more effective, and to give us new insights into the mechanics of positive human change. Whether or not such promise materialises depends on the extent to which the coaching research community continues this line of enquiry. The present study has highlighted the importance of having a goal-focused relationship within a SF-CBC framework, but this many not be the case in other coaching methodologies or populations, for example, in developmental coaching for executives. Future research should seek to replicate and extend these findings in different coaching populations, using larger sample sizes and different coaching methodologies.

In addition, the coaching research in this area to date has focused on only two of the four so-called common factors – the nature of the coach–coachee relationship and (to a lesser extent) the influence of theory and technique on coaching outcomes. The other two common factors frequently cited in the psychotherapeutic literature are hope and context. These two have not as yet been explored in relation to their impact on coaching outcomes, and this could be a fruitful additional area for future coaching research. Such research has the potential further delineate the boundaries between psychotherapy and coaching, and give important information about the extent to which findings from the psychotherapeutic literature can be generalised to coaching.

Implications for coaching practice

This study has implications for practitioners who seek to engage in an evidence-based approach to coaching. These findings suggest that practitioners should be wary of relying on client reports of satisfaction as a reliable means of evaluating success of coaching programmes. One way to circumvent the issues highlighted in this report is to use specific measures of coaching success such as goal attainment scaling. Where indirect measures of coaching success such as satisfaction are used, practitioners should seek to correlate those with more specific measures in order to establish validity – do not take such measures at their face value. In addition, this study's findings remind us that goals and goal attainment sit at the core of the coaching enterprise. Our role as coaches is to help our clients reach their personal or business goals and maximise their personal and professional potential – the coach–coachee relationship is a tool to help facilitate that process. As professionals we need to choose the right tool for that task.

Conclusion

This study has shown some light on the mechanics of effective coaching and has raised some useful and somewhat counter-intuitive findings. The data from this exploratory study suggest that satisfaction with coach–coachee relationship appears to be an inadequate predictor of coaching success. Furthermore, the findings from this study suggest that there may be some important and hitherto unacknowledged limits on the extent to which research from the psychotherapeutic domain can accurately inform coaching research and practice. As coaching moves further towards becoming evidence-based it is important that we question frequently held assumptions about the relationship between coaching and psychotherapy, and that we make the effort to rigorously examine what really works in the coaching enterprise. In doing so, we will be even better placed to further develop coaching as an effective evidence-based methodology and help our clients make purposeful and positive change in their personal and professional lives.

Notes on contributor

Associate professor Anthony M. Grant is widely recognised as a key pioneer of coaching psychology and evidence-based approaches to coaching. He is the director of the Coaching Psychology Unit at Sydney University; a visiting professor at the International Centre for Coaching and Leadership Development, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK; a senior fellow at the Melbourne School of Business, Melbourne University, Australia and a visiting scholar at the Säid School of Business, Oxford University, Oxford, UK. In 2007, Anthony was awarded the British Psychological Society Award for outstanding professional and scientific contribution to Coaching Psychology and in 2009, he was awarded the 'Vision of Excellence Award' from Harvard University for his pioneering work in helping to develop a scientific foundation to coaching. Anthony has considerable coaching experience at senior levels with leading Australian and global corporations with well over 5000 hours of executive coaching experience. He also plays loud (but not very good) blues guitar.

Notes

1. A partial correlation measures the degree of association between two (or more) variables whilst removing the effect of another variable (or variables) and is this is a straightforward way of statistically determining the relative impact of various variables on another variable. In this case, conducting a partial correlational analysis allows us to directly examine the relationship between the Goal-focused Coaching Skills Questionnaire (GCSQ) and coaching success, whilst statistically removing the effects of autonomy support and the 'ideal' coaching relationship on coaching success, thus exploring the extent to which the GCSQ uniquely predicts coaching success.
2. Multiplying a correlation by itself gives the 'coefficient of determination' or 'R^2'. This is the percentage of variance in one variable explained by another variable. In this case, there was a significant correlation of $r = 0.43$ between coaching success and a goal-focused coaching relationship, and a significant correlation of $r = 0.29$ between coaching success and autonomy support. Thus, 18.49% ($0.43 \times 0.43 = 18.49\%$) of the variability in coaching success can be predicted from the relation with the goal-focused coaching relationship, whereas only 8.41% ($0.29 \times 0.29 = 8.41\%$) of the variability in coaching success can be predicted from the relation with autonomy support.

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