

A Critical Evaluation of Methodological Approaches, Research Designs, and Data Collection Methods in Leadership Coaching at Grant Thornton Czech Republic

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1. Introduction

Grant Thornton Czech Republic is a well-established firm providing audit, tax, and business advisory services. As a result of a growing need for leaders to adapt quickly, improve their effectiveness and lead with emotional intelligence, the firm introduced a Leadership Coaching Program with the scope of eight senior managers and partners. The program was designed and delivered by an experienced professional with over 25 years of experience in audit, internal controls, and compliance. The coach is Certified Chartered Accountant and Certified Internal Auditor and has recently incorporated Integral Coaching and Emotional Intelligence Coaching into her work, also supported by formal qualifications.

This report critically evaluates the research methods used to explore leadership coaching at Grant Thornton Czech Republic. It focuses on the philosophical foundations, methodological approaches, research designs, and data collection methods to provide evidence-based leadership development in a professional services environment.

2. Research Philosophy

As organizations become more complex, effective leadership is extremely important for. Performance management, teams' motivation, and overall having the capacity to adapt to change. Coaching is often a tool used to help leaders build greater self-awareness, improve the emotional intelligence, and behaviour agility. However, its results are not always easy to measure, especially in fast-paced, results-driven settings like professional services. By analysing the methods used to research leadership coaching, this report intends to offer practical insights into how such interventions can be better understood and assessed.

The study is founded on certain beliefs about what is real (ontology), how knowledge is gained (epistemology), and the overall approach to studying a topic (paradigm).

These beliefs affect how the research is planned, which methods are used, and how the results are understood.

This study is based on a relativist view of reality, recognizing that individuals can interpret the same event or experience in different ways (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

This is especially important in coaching context, as each coachee may react differently to similar coaching interventions based on their personality, professional experience, background, or role within the organization. In this study, both objective elements (such as changes in KPIs, peer feedback, performance appraisals) and subjective experiences (such as increased confidence, emotional self-awareness, or a stronger team belonging) are seen as valid indicators of change and measure of coaching impact.

It is particularly relevant for professional services firm such as Grant Thornton Czech Republic, as leaders operate in different fields, they manage various and complex client needs, and have their own leadership style and values. Without acknowledging these individual realities, it may miss important changes in how people grow as leaders or misunderstand information/feedback that seems contradictory but it makes sense in the person specific role or context. In this respect, it promotes a more ethical and respectful way of doing coaching research, recognizing that people experience change differently.

This study is based on a constructivist view of knowledge - epistemology, which means that people learn and understand things through their own experiences, reflections, and conversations with others, rather than discovered as an absolute truth (Crotty, 1998). This philosophical concept is fitting well with coaching, as coachees often discover new ideas and personal growth – often recognized as “aha moments”- through discussions and reflective inquiry, including self- reflections. (Stober and Grant, 2006).

However, positivist epistemology is used, to measure the change in knowledge (e.g. motivation, engagement, behaviour change), structured surveys and quantitative assessments to be used. This approach reflects the need to take into consideration

and acknowledge both subjective experience and measurable progress (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

This study is guided by a pragmatic research paradigm, which focuses on finding practical solutions to real-life problems. A pragmatic approach allows the researcher to use both quantitative methods (like surveys or performance data) and qualitative methods (like interviews or observations), depending on what best fits the situation (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). This flexibility is especially useful in leadership coaching, where change is complex and influenced by many personal and workplace factors.

For example, some coaching outcomes—like improved delegation or emotional control—may be easier to understand through personal feedback, while others—like team performance or engagement—can be tracked through measurable data. A pragmatic approach makes it possible to combine both types of information. Coaching encourages leaders to go beyond surface-level problem-solving and explore the underlying beliefs and mental models that shape their actions. This aligns with Argyris' concept of double-loop learning, which emphasizes the importance of questioning assumptions to achieve meaningful change (Argyris, 1991).

This approach helps the study produce results that are useful for day-to-day practice and also supported by theory. It works well in the context of coaching at Grant Thornton Czech Republic, where both personal development and organizational outcomes are important (Morgan, 2007).

3. Methodological Approaches

The study of leadership coaching effectiveness at Grant Thornton Czech Republic could use both qualitative and quantitative approaches to better understand the impact of coaching. Qualitative methods have the advantage to investigate the experiences of each participant, exploring emotional changes and mindset shifts, which are difficult to be understood by looking into numbers-based data only. Flick (2018) emphasizes that qualitative methods are particularly effective when exploring individual meaning-making and subjective experiences, which makes them highly suitable for evaluating

coaching interventions. In the same time, quantitative tools provide structured, measurable data that can support organizational decisions regarding leadership development and culture.

3.1. Qualitative Approach in Coaching Research

Qualitative approaches such as interviews and open-ended feedback are effective in coaching research since they can be adapted during the process, allowing researcher the flexibility to explore unexpected topics that might appear, which is not uncommon in complex consulting and leadership environments. Also, they offer to the coachees the space to reflect on personal growth, leadership style, and emotional development. These reflections are in line with the constructivist epistemology, which recognizes that knowledge takes place through experience and reflection.

The interviews can be structured, using a fixed set of questions for each participant. While this method ensures consistency and easier comparison, it can as well limit the conversations and might not capture important insights. For the area of leadership coaching, these types of interviews might not be the most suitable one. For example, if a structured interview asks, *“Did you improve your communication skills after the coaching program?”*, the coachee may answer “Yes”, but the response lacks detail. Thus, the researcher finds limitation to explore how the improvement happened, in what situations, or what challenges the coachee experienced.

Part of the research on coaching effectiveness, using semi-structured interview is more appropriate, as it combines a mix of fixed questions and themes with the flexibility to adapt them to the person being interviewed interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). It allows the researcher to guide the conversation and ask follow-up questions to better understand what matters most to each participant and how coaching creates impact. As an example of semi-structured interview question is: *“Can you describe how your approach to communication has changed since the coaching sessions?”* This opens for the coachee the space to reflect on their journey and may lead to valuable insights—for example, a story about learning to listen more actively during high-pressure meetings, or how feedback from a team member might have changed

their view of leadership. All this reflection process makes growth more meaningful and impactful, both for the individual and the organization.

Unstructured interviews are more like open conversations, without a structured defined set of questions. The participant is guiding the discussion. Those types of interviews can provide deep insight, but it may be harder to analyse and compare across participants. Unstructured interviews can be helpful for exploring early-stage coaching experiences or generating ideas, but they are usually too open-ended for structured program evaluation.

Part of the coaching program, the coachees are engaged in a process of reflective journaling, noting their thoughts, insights, and any challenges they encounter between sessions. This practice invites the coachees to engage in mindful reflection and identify patterns in their actions, emotional shifts, limited beliefs or changes in mindset.

From a research point of view, reflective journals offers data about the inner experiences and it aligns with the constructivist epistemology guiding the study. Also, it supports deeper self-awareness, encourages critical thinking, and allows coachees to articulate their developmental progress over time. According to Bolton (2014), reflective writing enables individuals to make sense of their experiences, challenge assumptions, and identify personal learning themes that might otherwise remain unconscious.

These reflections will not be judged or evaluated by the researcher but they will be analysed to identify common themes and developmental patterns across participants. Analysing these entries will help build a fuller picture of how coaching supports growth over time.

While many coaching studies emphasize performance outcomes or change of behaviour, there is growing recognition that the coachee's subjective experience should be at the core because it plays a critical role in the effectiveness and sustainability of leadership development. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research approach, focuses on exploring the lived experience of individuals—how they

perceive, feel, and make meaning of what they go through (van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994).

Focus groups are considered as a potential method for gathering feedback and exploring shared coaching experiences. In theory, focus groups can be useful in identifying common themes, encouraging communication and exchange between participants, and creating a common space for reflection. However, in the specific context of leadership coaching at Grant Thornton, they have several constraints. Given the seniority of the participants and the nature of their roles, creating a safe and open space for honest discussion in front of peers may be difficult. Topics such as emotional vulnerability, personal challenges, or perceived weaknesses may not be openly shared in a group setting. There is also a risk that due to organizational hierarchy or internal politics the tone of the discussions could be influenced and participants may withhold their true thoughts. For these reasons, although focus groups can offer valuable insights in some research settings, they may not be the most appropriate tool for capturing the depth and authenticity of personal coaching experiences in a professional services firm.

3.2. Quantitative Approach in Coaching Research

Quantitative method is useful in coaching research for measuring behaviour and performance-related outcomes. Quantitative research is particularly effective in identifying patterns and measuring change across larger groups through tools such as structured surveys (Muijs, 2011). In this study, although a pre-coaching survey has not been conducted, a post-coaching survey can be implemented to assess areas such as leadership confidence, team engagement, and peer feedback. As example of questions for Leadership Confidence could be: *“On a scale of 1 to 5, how prepared did you feel to handle leadership challenges before the coaching program?”* *“On the same scale, how prepared do you feel now?”*. An example of a question to research regarding Behaviour Change could be: *“How often do you apply the tools or techniques learned during coaching in your daily leadership practice?”*

(Options: Always / Often / Sometimes / Rarely / Never)” An example of peer feedback (Self-reflective): *Have you received feedback from colleagues or team members about changes in your leadership approach? If yes, what kind?*

These quantitative findings can stay at the base of senior leadership team, and Human Resources Department to evaluate the impact of the coaching program and to identify areas for further development. For example, if leadership confidence is growing after coaching, it shows that participants feel more capable in their roles.

This information helps leaders and HR understand what worked well in the coaching program and where improvements are needed. It can also guide future leadership development efforts—for instance, by focusing more on certain skills or offering coaching to other parts of the business.

4. Research Designs: Case Study and Action Research

This study will be based on a case study design, meaning the implemented leadership coaching program at Grant Thornton Czech Republic. The hands-on, case study approach, is a practical opportunity to assess the coaching experience across multi-departments within the organizational contexts, realities and current challenges.

In the same time, the study is action research, as the coaching program is not only being observed by the researcher as an outsider, but the researcher is the one who is implementing it as a live intervention with the main purpose of improving leadership effectiveness. Thus, the researcher will engage in a complex and ongoing cycles of reflection, feedback, and adaptation. This is in line with the principles of action research, which connects theory with practice and supports continuous learning and improvement (Reason and Bradbury, 2008).

This combination of case study and action research offers both structure and flexibility, which is important in a real coaching environment. For example, the case study approach allows the customization to Grant Thornton's reality, focusing on how coaching is experienced by different teams and leaders. One of the reasons case

study research is suitable for this study is that it addresses situations where the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are blurred or complex (Yin, 2018). By using a case study approach, the research is able to welcome the complexity of the real-world context, rather than trying to control or isolate variables. This approach helps provide a more authentic and meaningful understanding of how coaching works within a specific professional setting.

At the same time, action research allows the coaching program to be adjusted as feedback is received. For example, if participants highlight that certain leadership topics—like managing pressure or improving delegation—are more relevant than expected, the coaching sessions can be adapted in real time to meet those needs. This makes the research more practical and responsive, helping to create results that are not theoretical, but with direct effect on the daily leadership work of the participants.

5. Ethical Considerations and Insider Research

Ethical considerations are to be considered throughout the study. Participants should be informed about the purpose of the research, their right to confidentiality, and their freedom to withdraw at any time. Consent needs to be obtained in writing, and all data needs to be anonymized during analysis and reporting.

A key ethical challenge is the **insider research**, as the researcher is also involved in designing and delivering the coaching program. While this insider role is bringing valuable insight and trust with participants, it can also raise concerns around objectivity and potential bias. To manage this, the researcher needs to maintain reflective journals, to seek peer supervision, and should make efforts to separate coaching from data analysis activities. Also, this study aligns with the ethical guidelines outlined by the International Coaching Federation (ICF), which emphasize confidentiality, informed consent, and the creation of a safe, respectful environment for the coachee (ICF, 2020).

Respecting the coachees' psychological safety is also critical. Given the sensitive and personal nature of coaching, special care needs to be taken not to pressure

participants to share more than they are comfortable with, and findings should be presented in a way that protects individual identities.

6. Conclusion

This report, titled *“A Critical Evaluation of Methodological Approaches, Research Designs, and Data Collection Methods in Leadership Coaching at Grant Thornton Czech Republic”*, has explored how coaching can be effectively studied within the unique context of a professional services firm. The proposed research design combines case study and action research, covering both structure and flexibility—integrating the lived experiences of coachees with real-time learning and improvement.

The use of qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling makes possible the exploration of individual development journeys. A phenomenological approach further strengthens this approach by focusing on the meaning individuals assign to their growth. In parallel, quantitative tools, including a post-coaching survey, provide measurable indicators that support HR and leadership teams in making informed, evidence-based decisions. Other studies using mixed methods have shown that combining interviews with surveys helps give a fuller picture of coaching. It not only shows what behaviour changed but also how leaders understand and make sense of those changes (Halliwell, Mitchell and Boyle, 2022).

The structure of this study aligns with the research onion model proposed by Saunders et al. (2019), which takes a step-by-step approach and highlights the importance of linking philosophical assumptions, research strategies, and data collection methods. The selected case study and action research approaches reflect both the interpretivism and pragmatic positions, allowing for flexibility and relevance in a real-world organizational setting.

The overall approach is rigorous and practical offering a framework for evaluating coaching programs in a way that honors personal experience while advancing organizational objectives.

7. Recommendations

The following simple recommendations are suggested:

- a) The use of semi-structured interviews to explore individual leadership development in future coaching programs.
 - b) Ideally the implementation of pre- and post-coaching surveys to better measure progress over time.
 - c) To encourage the reflective journaling as part of the coaching process to support deeper learning and self-awareness.
 - d) To include three-way meetings with managers to align expectations and gather observable feedback.
 - e) Ensure all research activities are supported by clear ethical guidelines, including written consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.
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