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Coaching SME managers: business development or personal therapy? A mixed methods study

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While a growing number of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are making use of coaching, little is known about the impact such coaching has within this sector. This study sought to identify the factors that influence managers' decision to engage with coaching, their perceptions of the coaching 'journey' and the kinds of benefits accruing from coaching: organisational, personal or both. As part of a mixed methods approach, a survey tool was developed based upon a range of relevant management competencies from the UK's Management Occupational Standards and responses analysed using importance-performance analysis, an approach first used in the marketing sector to evaluate customer satisfaction. Results indicate that coaching had a significant impact on personal attributes such as 'Managing Self-Cognition' and 'Managing Self-Emotional', whereas the impact on business-oriented attributes was weaker. Managers' choice of coaches with psychotherapeutic rather than non-psychotherapeutic backgrounds was also statistically significant. We conclude that even in the competitive business environment of SMEs, coaching was used as a largely personal, therapeutic intervention rather than to build business-oriented competencies.

Keywords: business development; executive coaching; importance-performance analysis; neuro-linguistic programming; psychotherapy; SMEs

1. Introduction

Executive coaching is becoming one of the fastest growing interventions in the professional development of managers. Unfortunately, while a growing number of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are making use of coaching (CIPD 2008), little is known about the impact such coaching can have within SMEs (Peel 2004), largely because very few studies have been conducted on the impact of coaching within firms of any size. A further difficulty is that despite its popularity, there is little consensus on the nature of executive coaching, including its definition and functions (Sperry 2008). In this article, executive coaching is taken to be 'an experiential, individualised, leadership development process that builds a leader's capability to achieve short and long-term organisational goals. It is conducted through one-on-one interactions, driven by data from multiple perspectives, and based on mutual trust and respect.' (Stern 2004, p. 154).

The study sought to identify the factors that influence managers' decision to engage with coaching, their perceptions of the coaching 'journey' and the kinds of benefits that the coaching could achieve. These were measured by exploring the impact of coaching on a wide range of management competencies, but the objective of the study was not to

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primarily discover whether coaching has an impact on performance itself. Rather, a measure of performance was used as a marker to identify what the coaching process lends its focus to: organisational themes, therapeutic/personal development themes or both.

Ives (2008) argues that most coaching approaches can be broadly grouped into two categories: personal development and performance coaching. The latter, which Ives (2008) calls goal-driven coaching, is distinguished by three key features: it is non-directive, goal-focused and performance driven. Its focus is on raising performance and supporting effective action, rather than promoting feelings or thoughts (Grant 2003), although the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. However, according to Ives (2008), in recent years, coaching has tended to adopt a more therapeutic, personal development approach, partly because so many coaches are steeped in therapeutic models (Hart, Blattner and Leipsic 2001; Williams and Davis 2002).

One of the unique contributions of the study was measuring the impact of coaching experience on the personal development of managers, using the importance-performance approach. The findings of the study are intended to help those who commission, personally engage with, and offer coaching, to identify where coaching has a positive impact on performance and where this impact is weaker. Adopting this critical view highlights areas where organisations need to be cautious when commissioning coaching, and where coaches need to work on their competencies and develop their experience.

2. Management development in SMEs – the perennial problem

SMEs make an essential contribution to the UK economy, but are particularly reluctant to engage in management development (Storey and Westhead 1996; Wong, Marshall, Alderman and Thwaites 1997; Smith and Whittaker 1998; CEML 2002; Gray and Mabey 2005). Storey (2004), for example, notes that, although 82% of managers in large (>500 employees) firms undertake formal development, the figure falls to only 37% for the managers of firms with less than 10 employees. Formal management development, then, is more likely to be reactive (to an externally arising need) rather than proactive and developmental (Smith, Whittaker, Clark and Boocock 1999), and tactical in response to problems that threaten the firm's stability or durability (Patton and Marlow 2002). Gray and Mabey (2005) also find that, in their study of 191 SMEs, 71% admitted to having no formal management development policy. Indeed, when it does occur, management development is mainly directed at fixing short-term work-related problems (including non-routine events – Cope 2003), rather than the development of people (Hill and Stewart 2000). Many SME managers/directors are 'home grown'; that is they have a wealth of company-specific knowledge, but limited experience of broader management competencies – particularly people skills (Bolden 2004).

Whether SMEs engage in management development or not is often strongly influenced by the culture of the firm and the attitudes of senior management (Smith and Whittaker 1998). For many owner-managers, the business is an extension of their self-image and ego (Scott, Roberts, Holroyd and Sawbridge 1989). Unfortunately, many do not have the necessary management or leadership skills to cope with emerging issues, particularly those related to managing and motivating people (Fuller-Love 2006). Such problems become exacerbated as firms expand, with employers having to acquire new skills themselves, train their existing employees or hire professional managers from the outside. Many managers, however, suffer from an autocratic style, have limited objectives and are suspicious of 'specialist' managers (Keasy and Watson 1993). What they need is a 'critical sparing partner', not so much a mentor as a 'sounding board', who can challenge their

thinking and encourage them to explore alternative perspectives (Smith and Whittaker 1998, p. 181) – a role similar to that of a coach.

Where SMEs do engage with management development, however, much of provision is supply rather than market driven (Morrison 2003). Indeed, much of the existing provision remains unknown or misunderstood by SMEs, and most SMEs find it difficult to identify and select the kinds of management development opportunities they need from the plethora of options available to them (Wong et al. 1997). The lack of engagement with formal development, however, may not be entirely illogical. As Storey and Westhead (1996) argue, small firms are less likely to survive to take advantage of management development, and so are more focused on short-term gains. They are also more likely to lose managers due to poaching activities of non-training firms, and suffer from higher costs per employee because they are unable to spread these costs over a large number of employees. Just as crucially, the link between management development in SMEs and improved performance is far from proven (Storey 1994; Storey and Westhead 1996; Smith and Whittaker 1998). SME managers are also reluctant to expose their own deficiencies to external third parties in a personal development or consultancy situation (Stanworth and Gray 1991). Does this reluctance also apply to coaching? One of the aims of the study reported here is to throw light on this issue, in part, to identify whether coaching is an efficacious tool for this target group.

The key to supporting SME managers is to 'join them in their world and to tap seamlessly into the activities that they would be undertaking as a normal part of running their business' (Perren and Grant 2001, p. 16). It needs to mimic the informal learning opportunities that many successful business leaders experience, including just-in-time learning (Marchmont Project 1999). Of relevance here are the modes of learning that include informal mentoring, networking, peer learning and coaching (Paauwe and Williams 2001). Fuller-Love (2006), however, questions whether these kinds of experiential learning approaches would be welcomed by the managers of small businesses, because they may be unable to recognise any immediate benefits from using them. One of the purposes of this study was to explore the veracity of this view.

3. How effective is executive coaching?

Since much workplace learning occurs through more informal means of development or 'developmental interactions' (D'Abate, et al. 2003), it is crucial that coaching, mentoring and other such forms of delivery are given more empirical attention. Despite the economic significance of SMEs, there is a virtual absence of existing research into the effects of coaching (and mentoring) within these types of organisation (Grant and Zackon 2004; Peel 2004). For example, an abstract search conducted in May 2009 in the Business Source Premier bibliographic database of 1100 peer-reviewed business publications using the search strings 'coaching' and 'SMEs' yielded only seven articles, with only one of these actually exploring the impact of coaching in SMEs (in Quebec). Given the proliferation of executive coaching as a source of professional development (Eggers and Clark 2000; Goldsmith, Lyons and Freas 2000; Smither and Reilly 2001), including coaching within SMEs, the call for research attention is now a matter of urgency. This has been further supported by a recent UK survey which found that almost 71% of the 729 organisations interviewed regularly used coaching as a learning and development tool, with 39% offering coaching to directors and senior managers (CIPD 2008). Moreover, between 25% and 40% of US fortune 500 companies now use executive coaching (Palmer 2003).

Exceptions to this lack of research includes the study by McGovern et al. (2001) who attempted to map the tangible benefits of executive coaching with respect to an organisation's 'bottom line'. Of the 100 executives interviewed from a total of 56 organisations, 86% were very or extremely satisfied with their coaching experience. Moreover, participants estimated a return on investment of 5.7 times the initial cost. The efficacy of executive coaching was also examined by Olivero, Bane and Kopelman (1997), whereby 31 public sector agency managers underwent an 8-week executive coaching programme following from an initial 3-day management training programme. They estimated that as a result of the executive coaching, productivity was significantly greater (88%) than through the delivery of the management development programme alone (22%). Similarly, Hollenbeck and McCall (1999) describe a follow-up study to an executive coaching programme, with coachees regarding their executive coaching experience as very valuable (3.95 out of 5.00) and that they changed as a result (4.07 out of 5.00). Feggetter's (2007) study of 10 managers found that they rated the impact of coaching on their leadership skills as positive. These results, however, should be treated with caution because they are largely focused on participants' comments on personal *satisfaction* levels with coaching (Hollenbeck and McCall 1999; McGovern et al. 2001) or used small samples (Olivero et al. 1997; Feggetter 2007). There are few, if any, studies that move beyond small samples and satisfaction levels and which measure performance. Our own study is an exception. Furthermore, it is worth noting that not all empirical studies on coaching have been positive. In a study of 87 executives, for example, Wasylyshyn (2003) found that a third of the sample reported a 'guarded' or a negative response to coaching.

Paige (2002) adopts Guskey's five-stage model of professional development evaluation to examine the impact of coaching on five executives. Guskey's (1998) model is based upon Kirkpatrick's model of evaluation comprising participants' reactions, participants' learning, organisational support and change, participants' use of new knowledge and skills, and learning outcomes. For coaching to have an impact, Paige (2002) finds that the organisational culture needs to be receptive to coaching as a professional development initiative. The coach also needs to be familiar with the culture of the client to understand the challenges he or she is facing. Moreover, the most crucial of the coaching skills identified includes the capacity to develop and maintain a trusting relationship, to move clients from their respective 'comfort zones' by challenging their thinking processes.

In sum, the research questions of this study were

- What factors encourage managers to engage with executive coaching?
- What is the impact of the executive coaching experience on managers' performance?
- Is the focus of coaching on managers' organisational performance their therapeutic/personal development, or both?

4. Methodology

4.1 Sampling

The sample includes directors and managers of small and medium enterprises who participated in the LeadershipSkills programme funded by Surrey Learning and Skills Council. The outputs of the 3-year programme which was completed in 2007 included the delivery of leadership seminars to 1500 local managers, action learning sets to a further 100 managers and one-to-one executive coaching to 204 managers.

The sampling procedure for the first, qualitative, part of the study comprised a two-stage process involving static sampling of 30 randomly selected participants, followed up by a theoretical sample of a further 16 respondents ($N = 46$), drawn from the original static sample and based upon emerging themes requiring further investigation. Static sampling was adopted because it was not possible to identify participants on the basis of any prior knowledge of, or issues within, their organisations. Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection through which the researcher jointly collects, codes and analyses data and decides what data to collect next and from where (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Although Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann and Hanson (2003) recommend between 20 and 30 interviews for a qualitative study, over-sampling and any resulting redundancy of information were considered preferable to under-sampling and missing essential data.

The beneficiaries of the programme came from a wide variety of sectors, organisations and businesses, including legal institutions, accountancy firms, manufacturing companies, marketing organisations and, in one case, a school. Levels of seniority also ranged from owner-managers or directors to managers just below board level. The gender breakdown was 65% male and 35% female. Ages ranged from 29 to 63 years with a mean age of 47 years, whereas work experience in their sectors ranged from 5 to 38 years with a mean of 17 years. Some had just moved into a new role, whereas others had been in the same role for 37 years. The mean time in the current work role was nearly 10 years. Thus, the coachees tended to be senior managers, owner-managers and directors with considerable work experience, including experience in their current roles.

Given the diversity of sectors and organisational types, the data gathered from each organisation comprised an individual case study. This is deemed appropriate because, as Yin (1984) contends, the case study methodology is the most appropriate approach in studies where the boundaries of what is being investigated and the context are not clearly delineated. Multiple cases are also a powerful means for creating theory because they allow researchers to replicate propositions so that patterns can be identified within their study and chance associations eliminated (Eisenhardt 1991). Multiple cases also reduce the chances of creating idiosyncratic results (Bryman 2004). The second part of the study included the use of a postal questionnaire which was sent to all 204 beneficiaries of the programme. After two reminders, a total of 85 questionnaires were returned with a response rate of 42.5%.

4.2 Research design

The study purposefully adopted a mixed research methods approach; that is a design that endorses and makes active use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data gathering and analysis (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2005; Gray 2009). Mixed methods have been defined as

the collection or analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given a priority, and involve the integration of data at one or more stages in the process of research (Creswell et al. 2003, p. 212).

As Hanson, Plano Clark, Petska, Creswell and Creswell (2005) point out, using mixed methods allows researchers to simultaneously generalise from a sample to a population and to gain a richer, contextual understanding of the phenomenon being researched. One of the strengths of quantitative research is that it allows us to identify relationships between variables and to make generalisations. An important strength of qualitative research is that it is capable of analysing concrete cases in their 'temporal and local

particularity' (Flick 1998, p. 13) and starts from peoples' expressions and actions embedded within a local context. However, irrespective of the stance adopted, what was deemed important was not a dogmatic allegiance to one particular paradigm or theoretical lens, but the selection of research methods that were appropriate to the questions being asked (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003).

The design adopted was constructed within the spirit of a critical realist epistemology. Critical realism asserts that 'the way we perceive facts, particularly in the social realm, depends partly upon our beliefs and expectations' (Bunge 1993, p. 231). Hence, critical realism acknowledges that observation, description, interpretation, theorisation and explanation cannot be theory-neutral. Access to the world is always mediated by our pre-existing stock of conceptual resources (Fleetwood 2005). Being in the post-positivist tradition, it also considers that, although there is a true reality (entities exist independently of our knowledge of them), they can only be apprehended and measured imperfectly (Fleetwood 2005; Ponterotto 2005) and inconclusively (Madill, Jordan and Shirley 2000; Kwan and Tsang 2001; Kemp 2005). For example, data gathering methods used in this study included tape-recorded interviews. But the resulting transcribed text represents, at best, only indirect evidence of the actual inner thoughts and ideas of respondents (Polkinghorne 2005). Nevertheless, recognising fallibility does not mean that post-positivist research sinks into relativism. Attempts were made to adhere to standards of what Patton (2002, p. 544) calls 'traditional science research criteria'. These criteria include: internal validity (credibility), external validity (transferability), reliability (dependability) and objectivity (confirmability) (Guba and Lincoln 1994). However, the concept of transferability was not adhered to in a positivist sense. In the spirit of critical realism, the aim was to achieve a plausible, defensible 'deep' explanation, leaving the issue of generalisation as an empirical one for further study (Harrison and Easton 2004).

The credibility of the research was assisted by prolonged engagement in the field. This was a 3-year study, during which time, not only were coachees interviewed as they exited the programme, but the emerging findings were cross-checked with coaches through two focus group sessions. Morrow (2005) recommends that focus groups are useful for presenting emerging data and for receiving correction, direction and feedback. Peer debriefing sessions were also held, during which preliminary outcomes of the study were presented to fellow researchers at the University of Surrey. The emerging findings were also presented for comment and feedback at various regional workshops and seminars. Research should also be an authentic, just and honest account of what happened (Neuman 2006). Authenticity was addressed by ensuring that coachees were sent a copy of the interview schedule in advance and by ensuring that a wide variety of organisations were represented in the sample, so many 'voices' were heard.

Criticality was addressed by taking care to search for alternative explanations by including negative cases or counter-instances in the sampling process and through being reflexive about the threat of bias (Whittemore, Chase and Mandle 2001). In addition, the interview posed both positive and negative questions, including any disappointments with coaching outcomes or process. Divergent findings are valuable because they require us to re-examine assumptions and conceptual frameworks (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). To address the transferability issue (so that the results of this research can be transferred to other contexts), care was taken to describe the context we were working with, the characteristics of the sample and the assumptions that drove the research (i.e. the literature review of training in SMEs). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that the dependability of a study can be enhanced through the use of an inquiry audit in which both the processes and products of the research are reviewed for consistency. Hence, at the completion of the

analysis, a researcher external to the project was commissioned to examine the audit trail between the data, emerging constructs and theoretical outputs. In qualitative research, for a study to claim plausibility, the meanings that emerge must be tested for their confirmability (Miles and Huberman 1994). To assist this process, a database was maintained so that concepts and themes could be tracked to their source for verification.

4.3 Research instruments

Table 1 presents a summary of the research questions, the data gathering approach and tools adopted for the data gathering process.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were used to explore why respondents had chosen to engage with coaching, the issues addressed and the personal and organisational impact of the coaching intervention. Given the lack of empirical data on the personal and organisational impact of coaching (noted above), qualitative responses were triangulated with a quantitative survey using a structured 60-item questionnaire. The questions, however, were used largely as a framework, with supplementary probing questions being used to facilitate in-depth reflection and narration. Jabri and Pounder (2001) argue that this approach allows the ‘voices’ of actors to be surfaced, providing an account of how they construct their personal interpretations of reality. It was recognised, however, that through data analysis, further questions might arise, requiring additional interviews (through the theoretical sampling).

Before the interviews, as part of what Lillis (1999, p. 80) calls a ‘systematic field study protocol’, the purpose of the interview was explained in a letter, setting out the aims of the research and how the interview was to be conducted. An interview protocol was also drawn up for the interviewer, setting out a preamble for the interview which included a guarantee of confidentiality and a request that the interview be recorded. This was granted in all cases. The protocol was also vital for reducing the risk of the interviewer’s expectations infiltrating the process. The role of the researcher was that of ‘sympathetic editor’ assisting the respondent (author), to produce a fuller and deeper account (Polkinghorne 2005). On completion of each interview, the tape was transcribed ready for

Table 1. Overview of the research design and research instruments.

	<i>Research questions</i>	<i>Approach</i>	<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Research instruments and sample size</i>
1	What factors encourage managers to engage with executive coaching?	Qualitative	Coachees	Semi-structured interview (<i>n</i> = 46)
2	What is the impact of the executive coaching experience on managers’ performance?	Quantitative	Coachees	Two focus groups (nine respondents) Survey (<i>n</i> = 85)
		Qualitative	Coachees	Semi-structured interview (<i>n</i> = 46) Two focus groups (nine respondents)
3	Is the focus of coaching on managers’ organisational performance, their therapeutic/personal development or both?	Quantitative	Coachees	Survey (<i>n</i> = 85)
		Qualitative	Coachees	Semi-structured interview (<i>n</i> = 46) Two focus groups (nine respondents)

analysis.

Interview data were triangulated through the two focus groups held with coaches. The two focus groups were attended by a total of nine members of the coaching faculty on a volunteer basis. Permission to tape-record the sessions was requested and granted. Some of the core themes emerging from preliminary analysis of the first 40 transcripts were presented through a short interview schedule, to stimulate the discussion and to elicit feedback and cross-validation. The session, however, was not prescriptive, with care being taken to listen for, and encourage, new 'coach perspective' themes as they emerged from the discussion.

To measure the impact of the coaching intervention, a quantitative survey was constructed based closely on the Management Standards Centre's (MSC) Management Occupational Standards (MOS, 3rd edition) for management and leadership. These standards, which replaced the 2nd edition published in 1997, were developed between 2002 and 2004. In constructing these standards, the MSC undertook a functional mapping exercise to identify the functions that managers perform in the workplace and the areas of competence identified for each function. For this research, each of the six functional areas was taken (for example, 'Providing Direction' (12 items), 'Achieving Results' (12 items), 'Working with People' (7 items)) and each of the units for that area used to formulate a total of 47 questions. Table 2 provides a brief description of each of these functional areas.

In terms of competency frameworks, the MOS are behavioural rather than technical; that is, they focus on generic, management behaviours in the workplace (linked to facilitating change, working with people, managing self, etc.), rather than on specific occupational expertise. This was seen as appropriate to the research being undertaken, as coaches are not always experts in the technical niceties of particular industries or sectors. Although the limitations of competency frameworks are also acknowledged (they see leadership and management as a set of individual traits, and largely ignore the influence of organisational culture and the leader's interactions with others – Bolden, Gosling, Marturano and Dennison 2003), MOS were regarded as appropriate for two reasons. First, they were originally developed through an extensive exercise which benchmarked against occupational standards in the private, public and voluntary sectors of the UK, and then against international benchmarks. Second, they were sufficiently wide ranging and

Table 2. Description of the MSC functional areas.

<i>Functional area</i>	<i>Description</i>
Managing self and personal skills	Making sure managers have the personal resources (particularly knowledge, understanding, skills and time) to undertake their work role
Providing direction	Ensuring all organisations have an overall strategic business plan and the identification of individual areas of responsibility through an operational plan
Facilitating change	Encouraging and supporting the identification and practical implementation of ideas
Working with people	Developing working relationships with colleagues within and external to the organisation
Using resources	Having ownership and being responsible for a budget for a defined area or activity of work
Achieving results	Managing a project, including developing a project plan and monitoring and controlling changes to the plan. Ensuring the project achieves its key objectives

Source: Adapted from the MSC (2004).

comprehensive to cover the roles that most of the study's respondents experienced, and thus offered a high degree of face validity. However, MOS are also an example of what Raelin and Cooledge (1995) term 'generic' competencies which they criticise as being artificial and ignoring the specific context in which management occurs. Hence, although offered the range of MOS, respondents were also required to identify which were relevant to their own job by indicating the strength of relevance on a five-point Likert scale and the impact of the coaching experience on these attributes. The importance of the attribute for the manager's job ranged from (1) 'very important' to (5) 'very unimportant'; the impact of the coaching on the attribute ranged from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree.

It was thus possible to eliminate those competencies deemed as inapplicable from the subsequent analysis. The design and use of competency frameworks within SMEs, however, is comparatively rare. Yet, competencies help to put into place a mechanism for measuring, monitoring and comparing the behaviour of managers (Salaman 2004). Le Deist and Winterton (2005), however, argue that these kinds of narrow, conceptual frameworks need to be broadened into a more holistic system which includes cognitive competences (the ability to think and act in an insightful and problem-solving way) and behavioural competences (such as impact and influence, self-confidence, team leadership (McClelland 1998)). It was felt that two important categories – the contribution of emotional and cognitive factors to performance – had been omitted. Intellect and emotion are often seen as being at opposite ends of philosophical conceptions of human beings (Gabriel and Griffiths 2002). Yet, an increasing amount of work performed in organisations involves the reading of other people's emotions and the employment of appropriate emotions and accompanying behaviours. Emotions and emotional intelligence have been highlighted as qualities essential to the modern leader (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee 2002) and for performance in team contexts (Offerman, Bailey, Vasilopoulos, Seal and Sass 2004). These emotions include empathy, humility, trust and self-awareness (Bolden and Gosling 2006). Adding questions on both cognitive processes and emotion produced a 60-item questionnaire.

4.4 Approach to data analysis

For the qualitative data analysis, a framework analysis approach was adopted (Bryman and Burgess 1994; Richie and Spencer 1994). Framework analysis is a form of content analysis that involves summarising and classifying data within a thematic framework (Jones 2000), and can be used within realist or constructivist approaches to research (Braun and Clarke 2005). The five key stages in framework analysis comprise familiarisation (with the data), identifying a thematic framework (codes), indexing, charting and mapping, and interpretation. Typically targeted at the analysis of transcripts produced verbatim from taped interviews, framework analysis involves identifying recurring themes based upon a combination of *a priori* issues, emergent themes and recurring attitudes or experiences (Llewellyn, McGurk and Weinman 2005).

First, a preliminary read through of all the transcripts was conducted to achieve a holistic overview. Then, a batch of 10 transcripts were randomly selected and studied for emerging themes. Further batches of 10 transcripts were then taken and further themes added to the framework or modified. These themes were then used as headings under which a systematic charting of the transcript content was conducted. In undertaking this process, themes were refined and new ones added to the framework. One of the strengths of framework analysis is that it allows between- and within-case analysis, so that comparisons between and within cases can be made. Above all, the analytical processes

and interpretations made about the data can be judged by others (Richie and Spencer 1994). It should be noted that the analysis was conducted not in a linear fashion, but through a recursive process, moving back and forth across the five phases, in order to construct, cross-check and amend emerging themes (Braun and Clarke 2005).

In analysing the quantitative survey, importance-performance analysis (IPA) was adopted. IPA was first used to understand customer satisfaction as a function of expectations related to salient attributes 'importance' and judgements about their performance ('performance') (Martilla and James 1977). The purpose of using IPA in this study was to help identify areas where there is a mismatch between the importance of a coaching goal (to the individual) and how the coaching has improved (or failed to improve) performance of that goal. Conversely, it also sought to identify where there is a strong association between both importance and performance, showing where the coaching had achieved success. The means of the importance (on the y-axis) and performance (x-axis) ratings were then calculated for each element and plotted along the grid. Given that IPA has previously been used in fields of study such as service quality (Wade and Eagles 2003), e-business strategies in small businesses (Magal and Levenburg 2005) and the use of new technology in hotels (Beldona and Cobanoglu 2007), the application of IPA in coaching research is another contribution of this study to the literature.

5. Results

5.1 *Factors influencing the decision to engage with coaching*

Few respondents seemed to have had many preconceptions about what to expect from the coaching experience. Indeed, a minority reported feelings of scepticism or even cynicism. For most, however, it was an opportunity to try out a developmental approach they had never experienced before. They recognised that the coaching provided an opportunity to gain access to an outside expert who they could bounce ideas off or even a challenge: 'Someone to beat me up a bit' (Respondent 14). Coaching was seen as an introspective device for a 'sanity' check (Respondent 2) or a 'personal health check' (Respondent 10). However, a small number of respondents were quite aware of the benefits of coaching and wanted to assess the value of this intervention in order to be able to implement coaching as a company-wide training strategy (Respondent 7). Coaching was also seen as more personal and potentially more linked to real business problems or issues.

Coaching was seen by the overwhelming majority of respondents as a more effective and convenient option than traditional, classroom-based management development programmes. Coaching can be fitted around the working day and is more personal than course attendance. It is also more confidential, allowing managers to discuss organisational and personal issues that are much more difficult to divulge at courses, often in front of people who are largely strangers. On the other hand, it was also recognised that formal programmes are probably more effective for learning specific skills, although the danger is that such courses are generalised rather than company specific. As one manager commented, 'one of the dangers of attending a course is that once you are back in the workplace, the old habits return' (Respondent 8). Coaching can be more effective because it is iterative, allowing the trial of new behaviours or approaches, followed by review and feedback during future coaching sessions.

An unexpected issue that emerged from the research is the importance of mentoring. Although coaching was viewed in highly positive terms, mentoring was also seen as having an important role to play in leadership and management development. This is because mentors are usually in-house and familiar with political situations and

personalities and give a manager greater insights into a situation. They ‘know the tricks’ in a particular industry, sector or organisation (Respondent 3), whereas coaches are often outsiders. Coachees highlighted that the main benefit of coaching is that it helps one probe the situation and arrive at an appropriate solution, thus indicating a positive feeling amongst the coachees that they possess the potential to resolve their own problems: ‘It’s good because it is coming from you’ (Respondent 1).

5.2 The perceived impact of coaching experience on personal development

Personal development is taken here to also include organisational themes, partly because, especially in SMEs, the competencies, attitudes and behaviour of owners and directors interplay so closely with organisational culture and outcomes. To this end, the data analysis is performed and presented in three stages. The first part of the analysis involved grouping of the importance and performance of the coaching attributes according to the seven dimensions on the importance-performance matrix. The second part of the analysis concerned importance and performance of the coaching attributes. Hence, the coaching attributes are grouped and ranked according to their mean scores. Finally, the qualitative part of the analysis was used to validate and complement these findings in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the impact of coaching experience on personal development. Figure 1 shows an overview of the perceived importance of coaching dimensions and the impact of coaching experience on personal development using the importance-performance matrix.

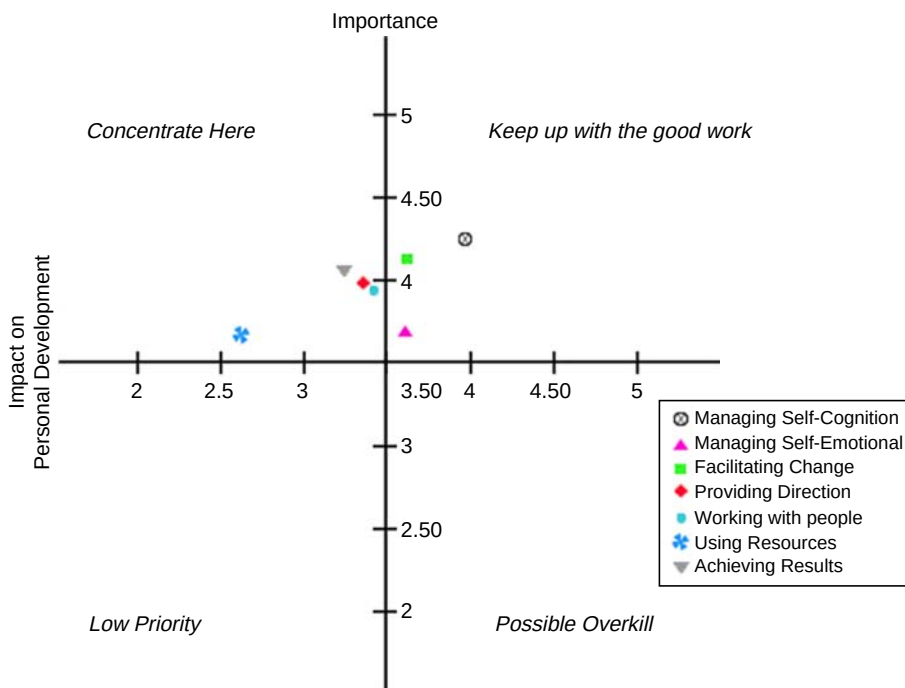


Figure 1. Overview of the perceived impact of coaching on personal development: importance-performance matrix.

The importance-performance matrix mentioned above displays four quadrants alongside two factors: 'perceived importance of coaching dimensions to coachees' job' and 'perceived impact of coaching experience on personal development' as measured by the seven dimensions. The perceived importance of the seven coaching dimensions and their impact on personal development fall under the two quadrants: 'Concentrate here' and 'Keep up with the good work'. The first quadrant 'Concentrate here' indicates that the four dimensions – 'Providing Direction', 'Working with People', 'Using Resources' and 'Achieving Results' – were considered to be important to coachee's jobs. However, the data suggest that the coaching programme had little impact on improving these aspects of their work. These findings imply that the coaching experience should be strengthened by including these elements in the coaching programmes or ensuring that coaching faculties or teams are capable of coaching them. The quadrant 'Keep up with the good work' indicates that the three aspects of coaching programmes – 'Managing Self-Cognition', 'Managing Self-Emotional' and 'Facilitating Change'— are important to the coachee's job. Furthermore, the participants support the view that coaching experience had helped them in managing change and carrying out cognitive and emotional tasks in their work environment. It is worth noting the two remaining quadrants. The first, 'Low priority', illustrates both low importance to respondents and low impact of the coaching experience. The second, 'Possible overkill' indicates low importance but high impact. It is noteworthy that neither of these quadrants contains any dimensions, suggesting the positive result that the coaching was not wasted on performance criteria deemed unimportant by managers.

Tables 3–5 provide an in-depth and systematic view of ratings in a descending order for items measuring the seven dimensions displayed in the importance-performance matrix. Table 3 presents the attributes which fall in the 'Keep up with the good work' category in the importance-performance matrix. Each attribute listed in Table 3 has been ranked as important to the coachees' personal and organisational performance along with the ratings for their perception towards how the coaching they received helped influence their performance. The position of the attributes in the matrix is identified according to their mean scores. The top three attributes comprise

- improve organisational performance,
- think through issues logically and
- develop and implement operational plans.

The bottom three attributes comprise

- reduce my stress levels,
- be more relaxed and
- achieve more emotional balance.

Table 4 presents items measuring constructs that are important to the coachees' personal and organisational performance but perceived coaching as having had a low impact on their personal and work performance. The top three attributes comprise

- manage a project,
- develop a customer-focused organisation and
- develop a strategic business plan for my organisation.

The bottom three attributes comprise

- ensure my own actions reduce risks in health and safety,

Table 3. Categorical distribution of attributes: keep up with the good work.

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Keep up with the good work</i>	<i>Importance</i>	<i>Perceived impact on personal development</i>
RE	Improve organisational performance	4.46	3.63
COG	Think through issues logically	4.43	3.85
DIR	Develop and implement operational plans	4.43	3.84
COG	Manage my own resources	4.42	3.83
PPL	Develop productive working relationships with colleagues	4.36	4.00
PPL	Develop productive working relationships with colleagues and stakeholders	4.25	3.90
DIR	Provide leadership for my organisation	4.23	3.78
DIR	Provide leadership for my team	4.20	3.81
COG	Reflect on performance	4.19	4.22
DIR	Put the strategic business plan into action	4.19	3.49
CH	Encourage innovation in my area of responsibility	4.19	3.68
DIR	Provide leadership for my area of responsibility	4.17	3.81
COG	Solve problems	4.16	3.88
CH	Plan change	4.16	3.76
CH	Implement change	4.16	3.79
COG	Reflect on my work situation	4.15	4.54
CH	Encourage innovation in my organisation	4.13	3.56
COG	Manage my professional development	4.00	3.79
CH	Encourage innovation in my team	3.98	3.53
COG	Be more satisfied with my work	3.96	3.66
EMO	Be happier in my work	3.95	3.72
EMO	Be more determined	3.94	3.67
EMO	Reduce my stress levels	3.84	3.70
EMO	Be more relaxed	3.71	3.63
EMO	Achieve more emotional balance	3.61	3.74

Notes: RE, achieving results; COG, managing self-cognition; DIR, providing direction; PPL, working with people; CH, facilitating change; EMO, managing self-emotional.

- ensure an effective organisational approach to health and safety, and
- promote equality of opportunity and diversity in my area of responsibility.

Finally, Table 5 presents ratings of attributes which were perceived to have had less impact through coaching but were also of less importance to the coachee's personal development. However, because the mean scores were above 2.5, this suggests that these attributes, although given low priority, were not seen as unimportant.

These themes of generating self-understanding, gaining a sense of direction, initiating change and working with others were also highlighted by qualitative data analysis. Most respondents indicated that they gained a mixture of both business and personal benefits from coaching. Some were surprised at this because they had embarked on the coaching programme with only business goals in mind, but found that personal agendas emerged: 'I don't think it was particularly easy to separate them' (Respondent 22). However, for a minority of respondents, their goals were clearly and overwhelmingly business oriented: 'the bulk of it, 80% was organisational' (Respondent 4).

As expected, the kinds of issues dealt with through the coaching process were broad and varied and included, as could have been predicted, themes such as leadership styles,

Table 4. Categorical distribution of attributes: Concentrate here.

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Concentrate here</i>	<i>Importance</i>	<i>Perceived impact on personal development</i>
RE	Manage a project	4.20	3.36
RE	Develop a customer-focused organisation	4.20	3.16
DIR	Develop a strategic business plan for my organisation	4.16	3.41
RE	Manage business processes	4.15	3.35
RE	Manage the achievement of customer satisfaction	4.11	3.13
RE	Manage a programme of complementary projects	4.10	3.19
RE	Build my organisation's understanding of its market and customers	4.09	3.15
PPL	Recruit, select and keep colleagues	4.02	3.30
DIR	Develop the culture of my organisation	3.98	3.44
DIR	Manage risk	3.96	3.05
RO	Manage a budget	3.96	2.72
PPL	Allocate and monitor the progress and quality of work in my area of responsibility	3.94	3.28
RO	Manage finance for my area of responsibility	3.94	2.70
RE	Resolve customer problems	3.91	3.11
RE	Work with others to improve customer service	3.91	3.18
DIR	Map the environment in which my organisation operates	3.88	3.40
RE	Develop and review a framework for marketing	3.88	3.13
RE	Monitor and solve customer service problems	3.86	3.04
DIR	Ensure compliance with legal, regulatory, ethical and social requirements	3.85	2.78
PPL	Provide learning opportunities for colleagues	3.85	3.28
RE	Support customer service improvements	3.85	3.06
PPL	Plan workforce	3.83	3.16
PPL	Allocate and check work in my team	3.72	3.11
RO	Ensure health and safety requirements are met in my area of responsibility	3.71	2.54
RO	Promote the use of technology in my organisation	3.59	2.71
RO	Ensure my own actions reduce risks to health and safety	3.58	2.51
RO	Ensure an effective organisational approach to health and safety	3.58	2.57
DIR	Promote equality of opportunity and diversity in my area of responsibility	3.49	2.86

Note: RO, using resources. For other dimensions, see 'Notes' of Table 3.

Table 5. Categorical distribution of attributes: low priority.

<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Low priority</i>	<i>Importance</i>	<i>Perceived impact on personal development</i>
DIR	Promote equality of opportunity and diversity in my organisation	3.45	2.86
RO	Obtain additional finance for the organisation	3.41	2.56
EMO	Reduce my sense of detachment	3.12	3.26

Note: See 'Notes' of Tables 3 and 4.

marketing, recruitment, time management and achieving a work-life balance. What emerged strongly from the research was that some managers achieved a greater sense of strategic direction (especially strategic change) and planning as a result of coaching, as well as the ability to prioritise and focus on key areas of the business: 'it focused my thoughts' (Respondent 11). Not only this, they were also in a better position to make decisions and take action:

I went ahead and did something that I wanted to do purely as a result of talking to [name of coach] and making myself realise that I'm not going to go further in this direction unless I actually do X, Y and Z and go somewhere towards doing it, so again the action aspect of it was very helpful for me' (Respondent 5).

It was often the case, then, that the manager was aware of what action to take, but often appeared unsure of themselves and procrastinating: 'I wasn't able to take the company forward because I'd sort of 'plateaued'. I needed somebody to bring in, take me forward a bit and I think that's how it seems to work' (Respondent 13). Boosted self-confidence and motivation were strongly recurring themes and clearly helped in the decision-making process: '... we talked about confidence and positioning and getting your head right and some of the softer things I suppose' (Respondent 14). For some, coaching also worked as a career retention tool: 'I've had a tendency to move around but I can't do that anymore. She helped me reorganise my work life and do things that are motivational' (Respondent 7). A few respondents thought coaching was a life-changing experience: 'It marked a certain change in attitude' (Respondent 26); 'It changed my life because it made me look at other people's perspectives as well as my own' (Respondent 6).

6. Discussion and conclusions

The study adds weight to Bolden's (2004) claim that managers often have a wealth of 'home grown', sector-specific knowledge, but often lack wider, management competencies. Interestingly, and perhaps worryingly, the area of 'Working with People' emerged in the 'Concentrate here' quadrant. In other words, managers recognised this as an important area for their personal development, but the coaching was not perceived to have a significant impact. The data did not reveal reasons for this. It is tempting to speculate that only 10 hours of coaching might not be sufficient to shift personal attitudes, values and behaviours towards team members and other co-workers. However, the attributes Managing Self-Cognition and Managing Self-Emotional emerged as both important to managers and areas where coaching had a high impact. But the 'harder', more business-focused attributes of Working with People, Managing Resources, Providing Direction and Achieving Results, although seen as important to managers, were areas where the coaching had less impact (see Focus Here in Figure 1).

Coaching, then, was valued as an intervention that assisted SME managers gain a 'broader picture' of what skilled managers do – which included features of self-management. In some senses, it was also reactive (Smith et al. 1999; Hill and Stewart 2000), with many managers engaging with coaching due to quite deep-seated organisational or personal problems. Results revealed that the confidential and, at times, intense nature of the coach–coachee relationship allowed managers to divulge some of their innermost concerns, doubts and deficiencies, in a way that would be far less forthcoming in a traditional classroom-based training programme (Stanworth and Gray 1991). The study endorses the views expressed by Smith and Whittaker (1998) that managers need a 'sounding board' that can provide them with both challenges and new perspectives.

However, the results of our own study suggest that coaching is used more as a therapeutic intervention (Managing Self-Cognition and Managing Self-Emotional) rather than being primarily business-focused. The exception to this was the success of Facilitating Change, which included planning and implementing change strategies and encouraging innovation. Our findings, then, largely contrast with those of Hart et al. (2001), whose coaching therapists claimed that their coaching conversations were tied to business and work objectives. Overall, it appears that, in terms of Ives' (2008) dichotomy between coaching for performance or coaching for personal development, it was the latter that emerged dominant. This, perhaps, is not so surprising. Of the programme's 22 executive coaches, just over half (13) held qualifications in neuro-linguistic programming ($N = 12$) or psychotherapy, and were chosen by 150 (73%) of the programme's 204 coachees. This selection of therapy-qualified coaches in preference to non-therapy qualified ones is statistically significant ($\chi^2(1, N = 204) = 45.176, p < 0.05$). Coaches steeped in therapeutic models are likely to coach on therapeutic themes. Yet, given that coachees had a free choice in their selection, this therapeutic focus must have been desired by the coachees themselves. Indeed, as we have seen, some respondents alluded directly to coaching providing them with a 'sanity check' and a 'personal health check'. This focus should, perhaps, be seen in positive terms. Achieving success in attaining personal development goals may prepare the way for a more organisational focus in the longer term; the success of 'Facilitating Change' may be the beginning of this.

Many managers engaged with coaching in order to evaluate its effectiveness (with a view to expanding its use in their organisation) but also to improve their own coaching skills, illustrating that senior managers are, indeed, pivotal in supporting the demand for learning in an organisation (Marchmont Project 1999; Hill and Stewart 2000). But it was also a response to organisational and personal crises, to feelings of isolation, helplessness and low self-esteem. No support was found for Fuller-Love's (2006) assertion that SME managers would not welcome the kinds of experiential learning experiences associated with coaching because they would not be able to recognise any immediate benefits. The research revealed that respondents were able to easily articulate the type and scale of organisational and personal benefits they had gained from the coaching. Not only was there almost a complete lack of any negative comments, in most cases, the coaching was regarded positively, and, in a small minority of cases, as a 'life changing' experience. This contrasts, then, with Wasylyshyn's (2003) study which found that a third of respondents in her sample gave guarded or negative responses to coaching. However, our study's positive results should be heavily qualified by the finding that few coachees indicated an intention to continue with coaching in the future. This response, though, was given particularly in relation to cost. The programme was delivered at virtually zero cost to the coachee. When offered continued coaching support at market rates (for example, a minimum price of £100 per hour), the majority of respondents felt that this was beyond the means of a small company's budget. A number did hint, though, that they might engage in some occasional 'top up' coaching sessions in the future. Overall, then, coachee's positive rating of coaching did not necessarily translate itself into a commitment to coaching in the future.

The research suggests that the current version of the Management and Leadership Standards (MSC 2004) contains an important gap, namely around emotional capabilities. The study revealed that, although five out of the six Managing Self-Emotional attributes came at the base of the categorical distribution list (Table 3), these were in the 'Keep up with the good work' segment of the importance-performance matrix. In other words, not only were these attributes deemed to be important to the work of managers, but also coaching was perceived to have an impact on personal development within this area.

These attributes included being happier in work, being more determined, having lower stress levels and being more relaxed and emotionally balanced.

Several weaknesses of the study should be noted. First, the survey sample size of 85 was a relatively modest base from which to extrapolate generalisations. Furthermore, although respondents to both the survey and interviews were drawn from the same population, due to the anonymity of the survey, it was not possible to determine whether survey respondents and interviewees were the same group of people. In addition, the responses were self-reports, regarded as one of the weakest forms of data-collection strategy (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998). The research was also cross-sectional, taking a snapshot of respondents' views shortly after they had finished their experience of coaching. However, it is the intension that some follow-up research will be conducted by contacting all participants in 12 months' time to see how many have, indeed, continued with coaching and the depth and impact of this engagement. This will inform the extent to which pilot projects such as the one discussed can prime the way towards a sustained engagement with coaching within the SME sector.

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