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Research report
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Coaching: the evidence base

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Executive summary

Coaching is a widespread and respected aspect of HR and management practice. Its power to change mindsets and to propel action is widely appreciated in organisations. Yet coaching's intrinsic value can be compromised by a continued weakness in evidence for its direct effect on individual and business performance. Taking an evidence-based approach, it's clear that coaching has some way to go in terms of:

- the ability of HR and L&TD practitioners to develop a more critical approach to its use within organisations
- the development of a convincing and robust foundation of academic evidence to support its use
- the integration of business metrics as part of coaching assignments in order to test their value
- consistent reflection on practice engagement with stakeholders and a willingness to be held to account for the impact of coaching and mentoring.

These have to be balanced by the fact that coaching is still a relatively young discipline and one with complex and contested professional terrain, and where many issues of practice are yet to be resolved. Nevertheless, a way forward is offered on the basis that:

- Robust, well-validated research in psychology and therapy supports the value of coaching and mentoring skills such as listening, building rapport, asking powerful questions, feedback and the value of the relationship.
- A focus on line manager coaching offers a way of using these proven skills in a systematic fashion.

Supplementing line manager coaching capability with regular internal coaching will help to cement the value of coaching in organisations. In the following report we look in some depth at the four dimensions of an evidence-based approach to coaching and mentoring. Some are fairly detailed and are supported by appendices at the end of this report, so practitioners who are interested can additionally consult the latest evidence on, for example, the nature of established coaching research and the lessons to be learned from psychotherapy, as well as some detailed evidence on the positive impact of line manager coaching.

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1 The need for a critical approach to coaching and its evidence base

A recent article by Rousseau and Barends (2011) explains the need for an evidence-based approach to HR. The essence of the article is that effective practice is based upon applying the tools of critical thought, scientific evidence and data analysis. When that happens, a self-reinforcing '*virtuous circle is created*'. The need to do this is accentuated with an intervention such as coaching and mentoring, and with related development programmes such as management and leadership. For the evidence base in coaching to be effective, it needs to integrate the principles of the evidence-based HR (EBHR) approach.

EBHR is a decision-making process combining several elements, all of which should be of interest to coaching practitioners and users who want to make sure that coaching works for the organisation and the individual. The elements are:

- *critical thinking*, in order to appraise the intervention in its context and ensure that the right choices are both considered and acted upon
- *using the best available scientific evidence*, which generally, though not exclusively, is that which is published in peer-reviewed journals – although the youth of coaching means that many of its peer-reviewed journals are less established
- *using the best available business metrics* around key issues such as talent and retention, as well as individual performance and capability, to ensure that the intervention is aligned to business objectives
- *engaging in critical reflection* about the approach and integrating the views and concerns of stakeholders into any further development phase, that is, being open to criticism and suggestion about how the approach works or doesn't and making genuine and visible attempts to address these.

This section is concerned with the first aspect of an evidence-based approach: developing critical thinking around an intervention. The EBHR approach is similar to the evidence-based medicine approach. Evidence-based medicine uses clinical judgement, peer-reviewed research, clinical data and practitioner reflection to inform decisions. Obviously it's different in terms of context and consequence when using an EBHR approach than when appraising life or death clinical issues. But without being facetious, a lack of evidence base can threaten the life of a programme. So what about coaching's critical judgement? It would be fair to say that the critical stance on coaching is fairly relaxed. Most practitioners accept coaching as a positive intervention and much of the evidence base on coaching specifically supports that view. Most critical thought about coaching tends to be based on an assumption of the need for coaching or mentoring. Critical thought is focused on whether it's the appropriate intervention, what sorts of technique should be used and how it should be introduced. There is less thought on whether in fact it is the right intervention.

There is a tremendous amount of goodwill towards coaching, but few organisations can take the success of an intervention on good faith when resources are tight and when all expenditure must have a proven impact. While Rousseau and Barends' evidence-based approach provides a thinking map around the issues, it's also important to adopt an analytical approach – something which is expounded by Boudreau and Jesuthasan (2011). Broadly, they suggest that HR intervention should be based on four analytics-based measures. These are covered in section 3 because they relate directly to the use of business metrics.

Coaching is often used as the standard response for various HR and L&TD interventions. Talent management and succession planning, leadership and executive development all usually have an element of coaching and mentoring. It's also used for performance engagement for routine development of employees and for induction. Indeed, coaching is the all-purpose generic solution to many development needs – rather like organisational aspirin. But aspirin has, as part of the evidence-based medicine ethos, a massive fund of studies to support its efficacy for various conditions. Coaching's evidence base is more patchy – and it is to this that we now turn.

2 Academic coaching research: evidence or advocacy?

Research on coaching is very young. It's no more than about ten years since universities and research institutes began to develop coaching as a field of research. As often happens when a conceptual field is developing, academic coaching research tends to be variable. The majority of research on coaching tends to focus around the issues of process and techniques, which generally aim to reinforce the value of coaching as an intervention (Passmore and Fillery-Travis 2011). Coaching is promoted as a good thing – and often it is. But this perception can be damaging. The problem is that research which tends to be more from a perspective of advocacy and engagement can encourage bias. It often fails to pick up disconfirming evidence. There is, though, some evidence from the psychology field that might be helpful, which we now explore.

The published research on coaching

Various authors have tried to shed light on the research conducted into coaching. Grant and Cavanagh and their various collaborators – though supportive of coaching as an intervention – have made creditable attempts to test its evidence base. In their first paper, Grant and Cavanagh (2007) conducted a review of the psychological coaching outcome literature. They focused on the psychology literature, which tends to be the basis of most coaching research, although there is a wealth of what might be called pseudo research in management journals and periodicals. They reviewed a total of 69 outcome studies between 1980 and July 2007: 23 case studies, 34 within-subject studies and 12 between-subject studies (see Appendix 1). Only eight randomised controlled studies had been conducted. Grant and Cavanagh commented further that: *'This indicates that coaching psychology is still in the early stages of development, and can be understood as an emerging or protoscientific psychological discipline'* (Grant and Cavanagh 2007).

In a further article, Grant et al (2010) surveyed the field again looking for a further flowering of research and found a significant growth in the output of academic research compared with their 2007 study. They found a total of 518 published scholarly articles and dissertations. They found that in the 62 years between 1937 and 1999, only 93 papers had been published, but in the ten years from 2000 to May 2009, a four-and-a-half-fold increase was evident. This reflects the explosive growth of coaching as a discipline in the decade. However, of the 499 published papers since 1980, Grant et al (2010) found that 265 have been opinion papers, theoretical discussion or descriptive articles. There have also been 77 PhD dissertations and only 186 studies which could be described as empirical, that is, using observed facts and data and evaluating evidence. Of those, most were surveys. But crucially, very little research was conducted examining the efficacy of coaching as an intervention for creating organisational and individual change. Appendix 1 provides a detailed account of this evidence.

When we refer to evidence for coaching and mentoring, we often focus on organisational coaching and primarily coaching of executives and senior managers. The most regularly quoted studies, such as the Manchester study of executive coaching, indicate that the evidence for this is often weak and partial (see Anderson 2001). Yet, a strong pool of research insight on the value of coaching as an intervention is available from a related field using broadly the same techniques and based on the same type of relationship but in an altogether different context. This is the evidence from psychotherapy research, which we illustrate below.

The promise of psychotherapy research for coaching

One area of research in interpersonal helping interventions is rich in randomised controlled studies and rigorous research. Psychotherapy sometimes gets a chequered reputation, perhaps based on the weight of Freud and psychoanalysis or various tragi-comic media portrayals, such as that between the troubled New Jersey mobster Tony Soprano and his therapist, building a perception that therapy is a less-than-effective

talking cure. Yet psychotherapies are regularly used in place of or in combination with drugs to help people with a variety of mental and cognitive conditions. Moreover, the US healthcare system and others require these to be evidenced and for their efficacy to be fully tested (see De Haan 2008). Over its long and regular use, psychotherapy has amassed enough studies to conduct what might be termed the platinum standard of academic research, namely meta-analyses. By analysing many studies, meta-analyses allow researchers to identify what is known as an 'effect size' – a powerful statistical indicator of the impact of a particular treatment. De Haan (2008) and Ahn and Wampold (2001) explain in some detail how such studies work. And De Haan explains their relationship to coaching and mentoring (see Appendix 3 of this report). One example illustrates how meta-analyses have established cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) as one of the most successful interventions in helping people overcome addictions and phobias. The acute and clinical nature of psychotherapy practice is obviously different from coaching, but the growing evidence suggests that three key factors are present in any interpersonal helping intervention.

- a strong relationship between client and therapist, known as the 'working alliance'
- the personality of the therapist as someone who is perceived to help the client
- consistency in using a particular approach or method.

These are exactly the behaviours which De Haan (2008) suggests that an effective coach exhibits. While his insights are like much coaching theory developed in the context of specialised executive coaching sessions, they are equally relevant to the type of coaching that takes place in most settings – that delivered by line managers. Line managers are generally not trained coaches, but when using coaching and mentoring behaviours at their most productive they can be seen to exhibit:

- a positive and supportive but challenging and accountable relationship between the coach/manager and the coached
- an intent to help and enable by releasing the individual's potential for change and learning
- consistent use of skilled questioning, active listening, helpful clarification and constructive feedback towards goals and objectives.

As we will see in Appendix 3, these key behaviours, skills and attitudes are the bedrock of effective coaching and, indeed, sustainable management practice.

In summary

Most coaching research does not yet have a robust evidence base. This is for several reasons. Much of the research is advocacy rather than enquiry. Most of it is based on theoretical disputes and schools of coaching, and much of it focuses on models and techniques. Most of the studies are case studies, which are generally descriptive, and most of these case studies don't involve rigorous experimental designs of the type needed to prove efficacy, certainly within the psychology literature. Few studies use the gold standard method of randomised controlled trials so that we can genuinely assign an effect to coaching as an intervention, mainly because it is more difficult for researchers to get access to organisations on a long-term basis. Yet evidence from psychotherapy into the effectiveness of various approaches shows that the key skills identified are translatable to a coaching context. Obviously academic evidence is only one aspect of establishing an evidence base. Business and organisational data and data around performance and output can also be used. It is to this aspect we now turn.

3 Using business metrics in coaching

Continuing with our evidence-based approach to coaching, it's clear that the third aspect – that of being able to 'build reliable and valid facts, metrics and assessments' of the intervention or programme we intend to pursue – is crucial. The CIPD's *Real-world Coaching Evaluation* report, published in 2010, outlined the considerable stock of data available to gauge the impact of coaching. Table 1 sets out the key data.

Table 1: Data available for use in coaching effectiveness studies
psychometrics
360-degree feedback and other performance appraisal records
individual diagnostics, such as learning styles
team diagnostics and performance data
employee surveys and polls
HR systems data on absence, retention, talent management, learning attainments, and so on
business process, quality and productivity data
target, audit and compliance data
financial data (for example revenue, profit and earnings data)

For reasons of scope in *Real-world Coaching Evaluation*, we omitted the bottom three aspects of corporate data. However, no order of importance is assumed. These data are also key. First, the 'hard' business process and production data, such as six sigma, quality and lean production metrics, should be used where the organisational context drives their use. Second, we omitted the sort of target and attainment data commonly used in the healthcare and education sector. Financial data – such as that which records turnover, revenue, earnings and profits and which can be converted to ratios for comparison – is also a key foundation of corporate data. Again, in context these and other business metrics, such as sales and customer retention, are critical. All of these are the low-hanging fruit of everyday data which everyone in the organisation is focused upon and through which coaching and mentoring programmes can align.

Psychometrics

There are many psychometric tests, gauging everything from psychological fitness to cognitive ability, skills and performance. In many organisations such tests are used as a pre-recruitment screening exercise. The data is often sensitive, sometimes confidential, and the time period of the testing needs to be taken into account. The fact that people learn and change means that the often fixed and deterministic approach of psychometric tests should not be taken at face value. Psychologists can administer instruments such as MBTI, Saville Wave and OPQ during recruitment and development programmes. Normally these require expert or at least trained feedback. Many look at personality in terms of dimensions and seek to identify core behaviours and skills (see Saville and Hopton (2009) for an accessible guide to the Saville Wave technique through tests on sports and business personalities).

Appraisal and performance data, for example of 360-degree appraisal

360-degree appraisal is often used to inform coaching assignments precisely because it offers feedback on performance and behaviour from all levels of the organisation. The instrument should be well designed and properly worded and the emphasis should be developmental, not punitive or performance focused. If, for

example, an individual has issues such as a failure to deliver on time or an inability to accept feedback, the data can be fed into a coaching assignment. Since, as with many psychometrics and other appraisal data, the individual will already know about their 360 profile, this can be a productive stepping stone for the coaching process. Performance appraisal is usually based on written reports of discussion and is usually held as a structured report, which can be a very useful reference document.

Individual diagnostics such as learning styles

Many learning and talent specialists are familiar with instruments such as the Honey and Mumford learning inventory and the Kolb learning styles approach. These tend to use questionnaires to develop a 'construct' of the individual's learning preference, such as their tendency towards activist/reflector or theorist/pragmatist. These states might describe activists as better at getting on with things and less good at assessing their impact or paying attention to detail. On the other hand, someone displaying theorist bias might over-engineer a project but be less good at progressing it. Some have criticised this and the original Kolb approach as being poorly validated, but used as indicative tools they can help people to develop awareness, take responsibility and pay attention to their learning (De Haan 2008). As such, they can provide a component of the coaching and mentoring effectiveness data.

Team diagnostics and performance data

Team performance data can be garnered from everything from six sigma data in an engineering operation to team development models such as the Belbin team roles inventory, when used appropriately. They can range from basic questionnaires to sophisticated psychometrics. Although team coaching is likely to be the province of highly qualified coaches and leaders, the information from team interactions, where relevant, can be very useful in assisting coaching conversations. Given the growing importance of collaboration, communication and knowledge-sharing, there are a growing number of tools measuring how people interact within organisational settings, some of which, such as sociometrics, are being increasingly used (see Fliaster and Spiess 2008).

Employee surveys

Most organisations use surveys of some kind to gauge the opinions and views of their employees. Engagement surveys range from self-designed instruments to the well-known Gallup Q12, which uses 12 'critical' questions to gauge satisfaction and engagement. Employee engagement is increasingly seen as a key driver of sustainable organisational performance (see CIPD 2010).

Engagement scores can often provide detailed information on how leaders are engaged with their team. They can be used as a basis of discussion for coaching in leadership development. An employee survey can also be used to identify disengaged and burnt-out employees, especially those in key areas, to 're-motivate' them and to identify personality conflicts where they 'down rate' their manager so much that they stand out from other team members. Looking at the manager's data may identify a personality clash. Given its often subjective nature, such data should be used not as a decision tool but as a discovery tool.

General HR data on absence, retention, exit interviews, talent planning

HR departments have a wealth of other information that can be used to evaluate the impact of interventions such as coaching. Systems contained within HR information databases – storing information on such issues as absence management and retention, job levels, promotions and vacancies – can all be used to some degree as data for gauging the impact of coaching and other learning and talent interventions.

Relating these diverse sources of data to coaching and mentoring programmes

All of this requires a systematic approach using well-designed tools. Boudreau and Jesuthasan (2011) provide a compelling framework for HR analytics that can be applied to coaching. It comprises:

Logic-driven analytics

Analytics that are logic driven are those which use key company data and information flows and link these with the various aspects of an organisation. For example, if an organisation has a major sales and customer service aspect to its operations, how are practitioners using this business driver to ensure that coaching helps develop key sales skills and behaviours? They should be able to use performance and appraisal data linked with sales target data to connect the various capability needs for which coaching might be appropriate.

Segmentation

Segmenting employees and teams is a key driver of an evidence-based approach. Segmented data can be used to gain insight. For example, if the sales performance in one team selling slower-moving goods is differentiated from those selling fast-moving goods, better decisions can be made about how to develop teams. Perhaps coaching in the business objectives and environment of key customers and suppliers could provide new capability to one team and working on sales conversations could help another.

Risk leverage

Managing people presents risks of various levels depending on the business and the context. Gathering and updating the evidence on such risks can be very useful. These risks are leveraged; some are worth taking, others are worth minimising. In the CIPD's *Developing Coaching Capability in Organisations* report (Knights and Poppleton 2008) we showed how M&G Asset Management used psychometrics such as the Hogan inventory related to skills mentoring to monitor and calibrate the risk behaviour of their fund managers. As it turned out, though designed as a talent programme, this had the very positive by-product of inculcating a culture of appropriate risk and reward, something which many other financial institutions are learning from.

Integration and synergy

Developing an understanding of how the organisation works across its varied departments, centres and partnerships means recognising the value of integration and synergy. This is a vital component of the evidence-based approach and enhances effectiveness. In an NHS trust, for example, if we know that clinical staff are offered a coaching-based leadership programme, this can help us align other areas that work in partnership with them, such as nursing and lab staff. This helps coaching and mentoring interventions to become effective and widespread and adds increased value if done properly.

Optimisation

Ensuring that investment and resource is targeted in order to drive the best outcomes is the role of optimisation. Using the insights already gleaned from our investigation of analytics and our judgements about segmentation helps to inform and target interventions such as coaching. For example, though it's often assumed that coaching works better with high-potentials and leadership teams, evidence from call centres shows that it can be a very effective mechanism for developing and retaining employees with limited career opportunities and fairly routine job roles.

In summary

Organisational data can be used to align coaching with business objectives. Much of that data is collected on recruitment and development milestones, for example psychometrics and appraisal data, and can, with some effort and insistence, be used to prepare coaching assignments. Team diagnostics and other data relating to team performance can also be used to support both individual and team coaching. Other key organisational data, such as employee surveys and production and quality data as well as targets and KPIs, should also be focused upon because they are likely to be regularly used and reflected upon. The systematic and regular use of business metrics is a key aspect of coaching and mentoring's evidence base. The Boudreau and Jesuthasan analytics framework offers a systematic approach that can be used with various streams of business and HR data to develop the evidence base for coaching. Data is of course critical, but it's also important for practitioners to engage with stakeholders and reflect upon the successes and failures of coaching programmes. This helps to ensure real alignment and, thus, effectiveness, and is the subject of our next section.

4 Reflecting on practice and engaging with stakeholders

A central aspect of adopting an evidence-based approach is to be reflective and thoughtful about the approach and to be open to the views and concerns of stakeholders. This is hugely important because stakeholders are, in the main, the users of L&TD interventions such as coaching. Often the coaching world can be internally focused and insular, focusing on a narrow group of stakeholders – primarily a select band of executive coaches or those who define themselves as such and, secondly, those who receive coaching.

It's equally important to focus on the needs of the organisation, its customers, clients, patients or taxpayers. In the CIPD's *Real-world Coaching Evaluation* report (2010), we addressed these issues in respect of evaluation; however, a stakeholder focus is equally important when we are developing an L&TD intervention. The key issues are how we build stakeholder engagement over coaching and mentoring interventions.

As our *Developing Coaching Capability in Organisations* report (Knights and Poppleton 2008) explained, coaching occurs in distinct phases and approaches within an organisation. Coaching can take place on a supported and sponsored basis, with senior executives driving coaching and mentoring and promoting it as 'the way we do things round here'. Alternatively, coaching and mentoring can be emergent, where it grows and spreads from a number of key coaching initiatives, perhaps in a single team or department, or even some key individuals.

Another form of coaching capability can develop informally, as our *Developing Coaching Capability in Organisations* report (Knights and Poppleton 2008) indicates. These are used by people who believe in coaching but who don't necessarily have organisational support. Such an approach seeks to build the brand of coaching as a powerful programme for learning and change. This is where connecting with stakeholders is critical. It's also important when assessing the evidence base that we look at three issues which are important when considering how coaching integrates with stakeholders.

Sponsorship

Coaching and mentoring can be very popular with leaders and executives and is generally held in high esteem by HR leaders. That can create the necessary sponsorship and ownership for coaching, protecting resource and ensuring time commitment and motivation to pursue a coaching-based strategy. However, sponsorship can become an issue when leaders insist or even decree that the organisation become a coaching culture, for example. Like any organisational and cultural intervention, this can fall on stony ground. Mindful practitioners should watch out for that sort of mindset and counteract it. Coaching is not for every organisation and, indeed, in some cultures can be counterproductive, so sponsorship needs to be tempered with a level-headed assessment of what coaching can deliver and how it fits with the organisation. Evidence-focused HR and L&TD practitioners treat coaching like any other intervention. They ask searching questions, for instance: is it appropriate and for whom? And does it fit with the organisation? How will it help to change the culture and what skills and behaviours should we seek to develop?

Coverage and development

Coverage and development are key questions. Who is being offered coaching and mentoring? Are there examples of people being 'forced' to accept one-to-one coaching who do not wish to avail themselves of that approach, perhaps because they are uncomfortable or hostile to the approach? Are line managers who are reluctant or unskilled in coaching practice being helped to develop and improve these skills?

Are managers who are expected to line-manage with coaching behaviours receiving minimal support after an initial 'sheep-dip' coaching skills course or are they expected to pick up the skills from a book? The issue of time and space is also critical: do managers have it, how can they coach employees and task and monitor at the same time if their job requires this? Where coaching is centralised, there may be impatience with laggards and 'refuseniks', but reluctant coaching, either given or received, is not productive. It's the role of coaching practitioners and L&TD specialists to challenge such thinking. Is confidentiality getting in the way of effective alignment of coaching and mentoring with the rest of the business?

Ethics and organisational impact

At the top end of organisations, is coaching a productive business relationship which helps deliver for the organisation, or is it a closed confidential bubble which could hide unethical behaviours? Coaching consultants Jon Blakey and Ian Day have addressed this issue, taking a critical view about coaching (Blakey and Day 2012). They assert that coaching has become indulgent of poor and unethical performance by being too supportive, not challenging enough and has become insular and ineffective as a result. They suggest a need to rebalance coaching towards a more robust, challenging and business-focused stance. They take issue with much of the focus of one-to-one coaching and its tendency to neglect the interests of stakeholders, especially when incompetent, risky and unethical behaviours are exposed but not meaningfully challenged. Like much research and commentary on coaching and mentoring, Blakey and Day's observations are based on executive and leadership coaching; they draw particular lessons from their experience of coaching senior leaders in banking and finance. Many coaches and coaching practitioners will disagree with this perspective, but it shows that the role of the stakeholder and critical reflection on the part of practitioners is a key aspect of evidence-based coaching.

In summary

A key pillar of the evidence-based approach is to reflect critically upon practice to understand how coaching is working and not working for various stakeholders and to seek to learn and improve what is, after all, a learning approach. By focusing on the key issues of sponsorship, culture, coverage, development, ethics and organisational impact, L&TD and other practitioners can develop a useful perspective for both reflective practice and stakeholder engagement. The need to fearlessly and frankly confront accepted practice wisdom, such as the need for coaching to always be supportive and unquestioning of the individual, is another. That said, much of this insight is based upon executive and leadership coaching; it's also important to look at where coaching really occurs and the consequences of that. This is the subject of Appendix 3, where we offer a way forward for coaching based on core line manager skills.

Conclusion and recommendations

The popularity and widespread proliferation of coaching throughout organisations means those managing and delivering coaching need to engage more with the evidence base that demonstrates how coaching works. An evidence-based approach to coaching is based upon:

- critically appraising coaching interventions
- understanding the scientific basis of evidence and integrating its practice-relevant insights
- linking coaching assignments with key organisational data and metrics
- reflecting on these and integrating stakeholders' concerns and suggestions.

Taking a more critical approach to coaching and appraising it as an intervention is the first step. That often means shifting a mindset that sees coaching as the best solution in all cases towards a more evaluative approach. Understanding the available academic evidence, its strengths and weaknesses, as well as connecting coaching with real business metrics and using an analytical framework all help to ensure that its use is targeted upon organisational impact. Taking a reflective approach to the implementation of coaching and mentoring and engaging with stakeholder concerns and suggestions is another pillar of evidence for effective coaching. Finally, focusing on how line manager coaching capability can move the needle on performance and engagement can embed the real value of coaching. This requires basic skills and an understanding of the importance of a supportive approach. Arising from this report, a number of recommendations can be made.

- Approach coaching critically in your organisation. How has coaching arisen? Has the question been asked about its value and effectiveness? Is coaching the best intervention available or is it a knee-jerk response? Is coaching being used as organisational aspirin, generic and routine? Our *Developing Coaching Capability* tool (CIPD 2008) helps to answer these sorts of questions.

- Become familiar with the academic evidence for coaching and related areas. Appendices 1 and 2 of this report are designed to help you do that, but make sure you scan the latest evidence. A periodic search using Google Scholar will give you access to key abstracts. On the CIPD website online journals can be searched for evidence in particular settings, for example healthcare or customer service, to find a great deal more.

- Understand how coaching contributes towards line manager effectiveness based on key basic and advanced skills. It is important to focus less on techniques and theories of coaching and more on the ability to have productive coaching conversations about performance, goal-setting and learning. The CIPD's *Coaching at the Sharp End* report (Anderson et al 2009) and tool (CIPD 2009a) help with this.

- Support the coaching and mentoring skills and behaviours of line managers and emphasise the consequence and impact of different approaches. Short courses and prescribed reading can be supplemented by better embedded learning of coaching skills, for example, action learning sets around coaching skills, CPD and allowing some managers to train as internal coaches through accredited programmes and developing them as internal coaches.

- Contribute to the evidence-informed approach. Whether you deliver coaching as a coach, help deliver it as an L&TD specialist or use it as part of your management approach, we'd like to hear about how you focus on the key evidence-informed principles and how you build the evidence for coaching and mentoring.

Appendix 1: Evidence on coaching and approaches to research

Table 2: Coaching research in psychology literature

Outcome study	156	Mostly descriptive
Of which case study	101	
Within-subject	39	Mostly empirical
Between-subject	16	
Randomised controlled study	11	Empirical and evidential

Case studies

The majority of these studies have been of the case study variety. Case studies offer a deep and often insightful view of an organisation's practice and are widely used in HR and psychology research. They vary in quality, with the best being properly theorised and using advanced methodology for both design and analysis. Generally, however, they are focused upon practice issues and are descriptive. Most case studies developed within academic studies are anonymised, while a great many are reviewed in periodicals and other channels such as professional conferences, which can and do add insight and are generally named. This adds to their salience as exemplars of coaching practice, but arguably adds to the sometimes mistaken perception of a coaching evidence base. Generally these are a different type of research and can be useful in the overall evidence mix. But the important issue is that they don't set out to test or probe; their objective is mainly to provide commentary.

Within-subject studies

Case studies and any other type of study that is conducted 'within-subject' are generally those that are conducted on all people (subjects) involved in assessing the intervention. This is a moot point with most coaching case studies. By definition most coaching case studies are conducted in an organisation that has a coaching programme, so they are 'within-subject' by definition.

Between-subject studies

Between-subject studies are those where a subject is exposed to the treatment or intervention more than once and in some cases are matched to other subjects. It's sometimes called a repeated measures approach and allows the use of better statistical tests, which are necessary to validate an intervention. Only 16 'between-subject' cases were conducted and these can be defined further into:

Randomised controlled studies (RCSs)

Whatever research or approach we use, we can only be truly certain (within an accepted margin of error) that the actual effect we witnessed was not down to pure chance by assigning subjects randomly to be subject to or omitted from an intervention. Then, when we test the impact, we can compare two groups in what is

equivalent to a laboratory test: the people who had the intervention versus those who did not receive the intervention, and sometimes an additional 'placebo' group (given something resembling the intervention). RCSs are mostly used in medical and psychological research and aren't always easy to conduct in a business environment. But as Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) suggest, they are happening more, though it will take another ten years of detailed studies to judge the efficacy. There will also be obstacles to conducting these in the business environment.

For example, there could be a perceived 'disbenefit' of being assigned to the non-intervention group if coaching is perceived as such a positive and enabling approach. There are practical difficulties in separating people into intervention groups, but generally if we want robust evidence on the value of an intervention, we should use this method. Only 11 of the coaching studies in the Grant et al (2010) study were conducted under this rigorous gold standard. Of these studies, four were conducted in the medical or healthcare arenas (which are generally more open to and indeed demanding of this approach given its role in evidence-based clinical practice). Most found positive benefits from coaching. A further four were conducted in life or personal coaching, which led to better goal attainment, reduced anxiety and stress, and enhanced psychological health. They also had positive impacts on resilience and coping ability.

There have only been a few randomised controlled studies of workplace coaching. Deviney (cited in Grant and Cavanagh 2007) examined the efficacy of supervisors working as line management coaches. They found no change in their skills following a multiple rater feedback instrument (employees were asked to rate the skill of managers). The other randomised study examined coaching's effectiveness in reducing sickness absence due to stress and other well-being issues (Duijts et al 2008). The study, conducted in the Netherlands, found significant improvements in health, life satisfaction and reduced burnout, but no improvement in self-reported sickness absence. This shows at least that the scientific evidence for coaching is ambiguous. In any case, the small number of properly designed and validated studies means we cannot draw any firm conclusions.

Appendix 2: Evidence from psychotherapy and how it impacts the coaching evidence agenda
(summarised from Smither 2011)

Coaching has a rich evidence base, with peer-reviewed research, robust efficacy data and critical research studies. That seems counterintuitive given the foregoing argument about a weak and descriptive evidence base. Yet it's true. The reason is that coaching is supported by a wealth of evidence from the foundational disciplines of psychology and therapy, particularly the skills of psychotherapy and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) (Smither (2011). The skills of any therapeutic setting and the relationship within it are very similar to coaching at an executive level and, though most coaching and mentoring is performed as part of a set of skills in line managers, the differences are of emphasis and context rather than concept. Smither sets out eight key questions for a coaching evidence agenda. We will discuss how these questions have been answered in psychotherapy research and contrast these with the state of knowledge in coaching.

1 How effective is coaching?

2 Are some approaches more effective than others?

3 Is executive coaching more effective than alternative HR interventions?

4 Is the number of executive coaching sessions related to the efficacy of coaching?

5 Does the background and training of executive coaches affect the efficacy of coaching?

6 Are the benefits of coaching temporary or are they sustained over time?

7 Does the efficacy of coaching depend on it being face to face?

8 To what extent is coaching efficacy influenced by the social and organisational support provided to the executive/employee?

These questions have all been addressed in psychotherapy research. We take each question in turn below.

How effective is therapy?

Smith and Glass, in a 1977 study, showed that of 375 studies, a so-called 'meta study' found that a typical therapy client was better off than 75% of untreated individuals. Hoffman and Smits (2008) and Van Ingen and Novicki (2009) have confirmed this effect 30 years on. Various studies have also looked at the use of therapy for different conditions and confirm this. So therapy is effective and the meta-analyses which standardise and pool results from many different studies confirm this.

Coaching implications

As we have explained, coaching does not come close to the rigorous studies present in therapy research. Many of these studies are the randomised controlled, pre-test, post-test studies required by the US healthcare system to regulate and fund treatments. Coaching could usefully develop group comparison and rely much less on self-reported data. While it's a challenge to develop coaching control groups, it can be done, for example, in talent and leadership programmes with different intakes; the first intake (or cohort) could be compared with later ones.

Are some approaches more effective than others?

Both the Smith and Glass study of 1977 and later, more recent studies found few if any differences in the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions. This was based on comparing behavioural approaches, such as de-sensitisation and modification, and non-behavioural approaches, such as psychodynamic and transactional analysis. Mostly all forms are effective. A study by Ahn and Wampold (2001) found that common factors present in all therapies – such as the healing/helping context, the working alliance, a belief in the need for treatment and in the treatment itself – are the important ingredients, not the specific ingredients of the treatment.

Coaching implications

Studies such as that of Peterson (2009) suggest that although coaching has many different schools and techniques, the dimensions of relationship insight, motivation, capabilities, real-world practice and organisational context are all stronger indicators than any particular technique. Yet Segers and Vloeberghs' (2009) suggest that techniques may be more important in coaching than in therapy.

Is executive coaching more effective than alternative HR interventions?

The effectiveness of psychotherapy can be directly compared with the impact of drugs, non-treatment and placebos. A small number of studies show that psychotherapy is more effective than non-treatment, delayed treatment, placebos and/or drugs.

Coaching implications

The differing context of executive coaching means that many of these comparisons are not valid. Coaching is normally compared along with other learning and organisational change interventions. Better evaluation practice would help to separate out the impact of coaching from other interventions.

Is the number of sessions related to efficacy?

Psychotherapy research focuses on the 'dose effect'. How much of an intervention was optimal to improvement in the condition? Howard et al (1996) found that a tenth to just under a fifth of patients had an effect at or before the first session. This intention to treat is an important factor. By eight sessions, the majority of patients showed improvement and, by 26 sessions, around three-quarters had improved. They found differing responses depending on the condition treated.

Coaching implications

Generally, therapy is a longer duration or more frequent intervention than coaching. Organisations generally have an incentive (even if individuals don't) to minimise the length and duration of coaching assignments. However, no real research has been done, but the research from therapy shows a way forward. A point to stress is that coaches and mentors are generally working with the psychologically well and have less of a challenge.

Does the background training or experience affect efficacy?

Stein and Lambert (1995) found in another meta-analytic study that the level of therapist training and experience was positively related to clients reporting satisfaction with the outcome. In many outpatient settings, therapists with more training were found to suffer fewer therapy dropouts than less trained therapists.

Coaching implications

Coaches have such a diverse variety of backgrounds and experience that it would be worthwhile to look at these dimensions. Disputes between some professionals who see coaching as firmly in their domain, such as psychologists and those with business experience, suggest that this would be difficult.

Are the benefits of therapy temporary or are they sustained over time?

Studies such as that by Cuijpers et al (2008) found, unsurprisingly, that short-term and long-term effects differed. Other studies showed sustained follow-up on the intervention. The evidence is mixed, though it is available.

Coaching implications

To genuinely measure the duration effect of coaching we would need a major supply of case studies. This research is not available in coaching and explains the reason for poor evaluation outcomes. Our 2009 *Learning and Talent Development* survey indicated that only about 20% of respondents conduct any kind of evaluation on coaching.

Does the efficacy depend upon face-to-face interactions?

Psychotherapy research identifies both a positive and neutral impact between face-to-face and remote interventions. For example, telephone therapy reduced depressive symptoms and attrition or drop-out rates were lower than in face-to-face settings. A meta-analysis on the use of what is known as bibliotherapy suggested that using written or computerised exercises to reflect on the condition gave a very respectable effect size compared with face-to-face sessions.

Coaching implications

We would expect the network of relationships in a workplace to have some kind of impact on coaching. Evidence already exists on the impact of learning and training. Bright and Crockett (2012) illustrate its positive effect in an experimental study of workplace learning. They identified a significant difference in employees' ability to identify solutions and heightened ability to deal with changing priorities and tight deadlines compared with a control group. The experimental group also showed an increased adeptness for articulating ideas more clearly and concisely when compared with the control group.

To what extent is the efficacy of therapy influenced by the social and organisational support provided to the patient/executive?

Social support is critical to the success of therapeutic interventions. It's best described in terms of the number and quality of relationships. Meta studies show a weak positive relationship between successful psychotherapy outcomes and social support.

Coaching implications

Coaching would expect to have more benefit from positive social and network relationships. To begin with its array of relationships is likely to be more diverse than that found in a therapy setting. However, it could equally be negative if an individual thinks they have benefited from coaching and is ready for a promotion but fails to attain it, for example.

Appendix 3: From working alliance to workplace alliance: focusing on line manager coaching

In therapeutic settings the relationship between counsellor and client/patient is known as the 'working alliance'. Most coaching research is focused on executive coaching, though not always exclusively aimed at the C-suite of executives and organisational power-brokers, and it is often used with senior managers and leaders. Arguably this sort of intense coaching intervention, though powerful in driving theory, is less important in terms of practice. The reason is that most coaching is delivered by line managers using some basic key skills. One of the key issues from a stakeholder reflection perspective is whether our evidence base takes true account of that fact, and whether in fact it is effective as an intervention.

In the CIPD's *Coaching at the Sharp End* report (Anderson et al 2009), we found that a line manager equipped with basic coaching skills could operate at both a basic performance level useful for managing day-to-day issues, setting goals and managing output, and/or they could operate as an empowering coach useful for advanced development, leadership and talent transition programmes. By using the basic skills of coaching, managers were able to have a big impact on their reports. By focusing on these key skills and ensuring that there are appropriate support networks, targeted learning and development, and, where appropriate, supervision and quality control, coaching can continue to make a significant and lasting organisational impact. Because arguably line managers are the load-bearers of most organisational coaching, it's appropriate to focus on this aspect of coaching and to build that relationship.

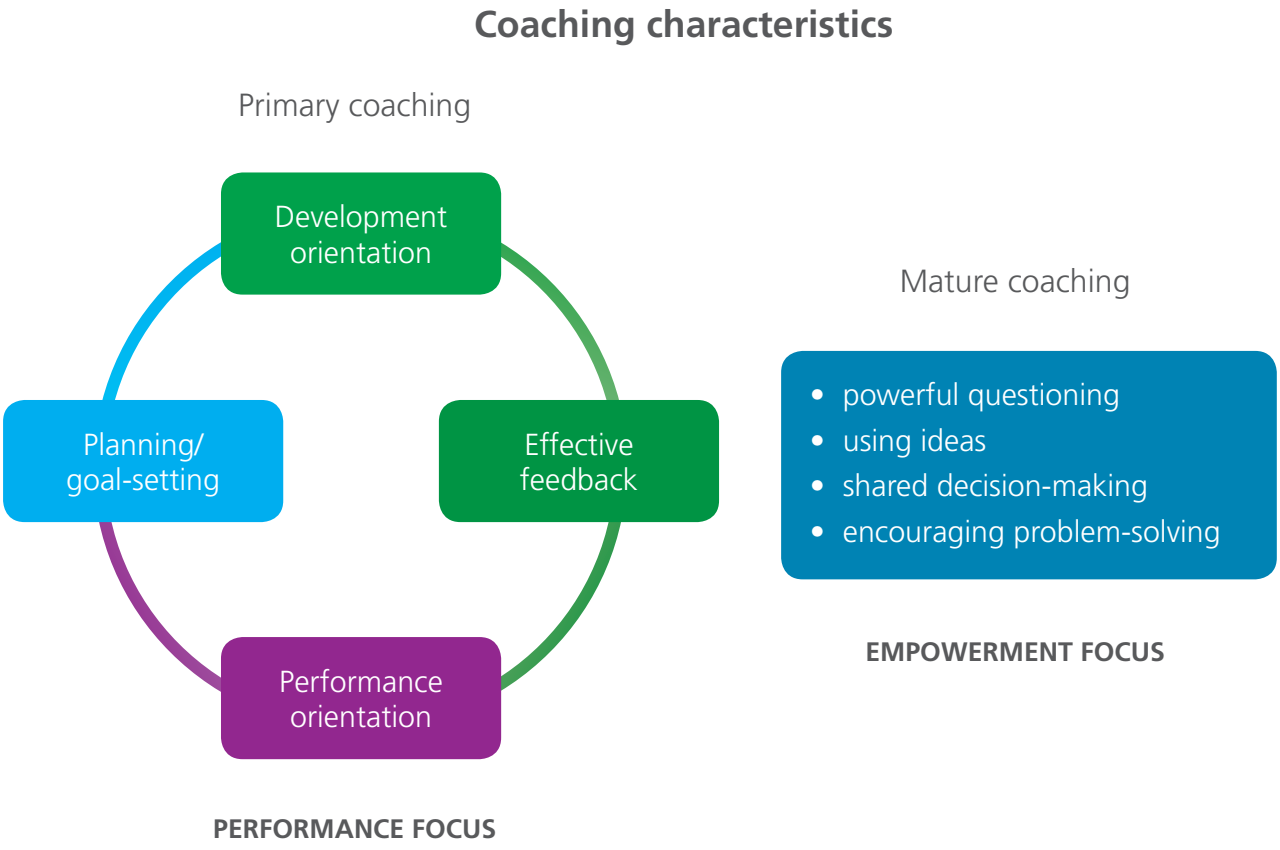
Our 2012 *Learning and Talent Development* survey report shows that since 2009 coaching by line managers has been seen as one of the most effective forms of development by L&TD practitioners. As Figure 1 shows, line coaching has also been seen as more effective than coaching by external practitioners.

Figure 1: Trend towards line manager coaching

Source: Compiled from the CIPD *Learning and Talent Development* survey report 2012.

Most evidence about the impact of coaching focuses on the impact of external coaches, who, in reality, provide only a small number of specialised coaching interventions. Some major academic studies have focused on management coaching. Therefore, the most likely channel for coaching capability is via line management. Figure 2 shows the basic model of line manager coaching developed from the CIPD's research.

Figure 2: The dimensions of coaching capability in managers



These skills of listening, questioning, being supportive but challenging, as well as helping an individual to clarify their thoughts are fairly common to all helping interventions. As De Haan (2008) explains, they are essentially about the importance of the relationship:

> *The recent findings in psychotherapy are both sobering and instructive. If we accept them in relation to coaching as well, it is clear that we should place much less emphasis on ourselves as coaches during coaching, but should learn to put our relationships with our coaches and what is going on for coachees more at the centre. Following my reading of the meta analyses of psychotherapy I now find that many guides for coaches, including my own…place too much emphasis on the coach and specific coaching techniques.*

One of the more interesting coaching research studies of recent years has focused on line management coaching behaviour at one US firm (Shipper and Weer 2011). The study – over 15 years using a longitudinal approach – has major implications for both coaching and management practice. Longitudinal studies even of one firm are rich research approaches as they track different cohorts of employees and effectively allow us to gauge a before and after effect. Known as a *post-test* and *pre-test* approach in psychological research, it's a robust approach. This is a very robust design for research into workplace issues. The study, though not yet published, confirms the findings of some key work in management and psychology around the 'intent' of management behaviour using advanced data modelling based on 360 data. It suggests that whatever the job-tasking requirement, and whatever the difficulty in managing that task, the *intent* of the manager as a supportive individual and their ability to be level-headed, temperate and wise reduces stress levels and increases effectiveness of employees.

The research builds upon earlier work that identified a known ratio of positive to negative coaching. Losada and Heaphy (2004) found that the ratio of positive to negative coaching is indicative of team effectiveness. Losada (1999) reported that highly effective teams have a positive/negative (P/N) ratio of 5.6:1; moderately effective teams have a P/N ratio of 1.9:1; and lowly effective teams have a P/N of 0.36:1. Thus, it would appear that it would take three positive incidents of coaching to overcome a single negative incident of coaching relative to improving work group effectiveness. Thus, the length of the impact of positive versus negative coaching is of interest as well as the relative weights of the two types of coaching.

Shipper suggests that coaching by line managers conducted in a positive and supportive approach forms what psychologists call positive emotional attractors (PEAs). Feedback given in an offhand way, or tasking or work allocation which doesn't take account of an employee's needs or stress levels, is seen as being a negative emotional attractor (NEA). This is backed up by neuroscientific studies conducted by Boyatzis et al (2010) using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). The research is especially resonant for teams – and for line manager coaching. It effectively confirms much of the common-sense view about what good line managers do. And it confirms the value of questioning, listening, empathy and supportive challenge, which are at the heart of coaching and mentoring. By focusing on these simple and replicable dimensions of coaching and by moving away from the obsession with theories, techniques and schools, a core coaching capability in line managers can be developed that supports positive engagement, contributing to sustainable organisation performance. This doesn't mean that the line manager is the only form of coaching, but arguably that conversation between line managers and members of their teams is the fulcrum of most organisational coaching and mentoring. What could be called 'workplace alliance' should be focused upon more because there are major benefits to getting it right.

Practitioners should also seek to capture the key information within the coaching process. Each coaching conversation, for example, will use models such as GROW or solutions focus tools to develop the structure of the conversation. In the GROW conversation, for example, the 'way forward' stage can be used for a ten-minute evaluation period addressing whether the coach and coachee think progress has been made. This should then be quickly reflected on with other parties to the coaching relationship. Such approaches offer a simple and quick review of the process. Scaling – where the numbered scale is used to determine how much progress has been made and target future improvements – is another useful approach to gathering data within the coaching conversation. This can be linked to other key data in the evidence cycle.

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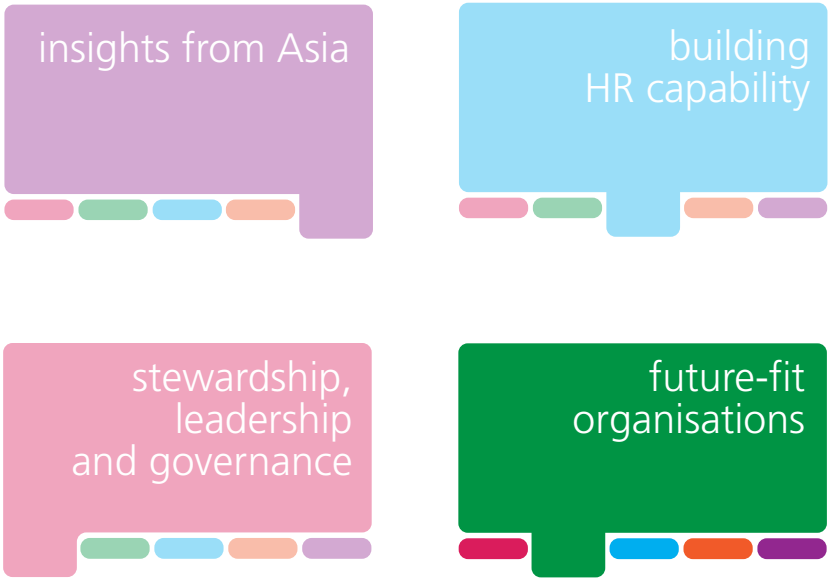
sustainable organisation performance

Future-fit organisations is one of the four themes in our Sustainable Organisation Performance research programme. The other three themes are stewardship, leadership and governance, building HR capability and insights from Asia. Within each of these themes we will research a range of topics and draw on a variety of perspectives to enable us to provide insight-led thought leadership that can be used to drive organisation performance for the long term.



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