



Coaching: perspectives from the High Potential and the Coach

Developing high potentials is one of the top three reasons why coaches are employed by organisations.¹ If coaching is part of the talent development programme, the assumption is, high potentials will take advantage of the opportunity it offers to grow and learn. But is that true? What do coaches and coachees expect from high potential coaching and what do they get?

Given the ethical boundaries of confidentiality around coaching assignments, until now, we've had little insight into how high potentials approach coaching and how they experience it. This article reports on the findings of a research study which explored the experiences of mid- to senior level managers who had been coached as part of high potential development programmes. They offer some remarkable insights into the use participants make of coaching and the different perspectives on what it's for.

About this study

Undertaken as part of a professional doctorate, this qualitative research project used in-depth interviews with people who were designated as "talent" or "high potential" and the coaches who worked with them. Coachees worked in three household-name organisations: an insurance company, an online and high street retailer and an international automotive manufacturer. Coaches all had several years' experience of coaching and worked with a variety of different approaches.

A further article 'Talent Management: The High Potential's perspective' explores the experiences of high potentials managed as 'talent' and the implications for talent management processes.

Coaching: chit chat or challenge?

At the simplest level, high potentials are positive about coaching. They advocate for it to their colleagues, and continue working with their coaches over long periods of time, sometimes without any oversight from the organisation. Coaching can be seen as a low risk development option: *"it was a no lose scenario really wasn't it? So if I thought this just isn't working, I'd just go*

'right thank you very much for your time, it's not quite working out' and move on."

But the sense of impact from coaching is highly variable, and some participants seem to engage in it with little anticipation of personal change. A key factor in impact seems to be readiness, or lack of it, for discomfort. Some are defended against potential challenge: *"It's not challenging in a demanding type way. If I choose not to really want to open up and if I really don't want to confront certain things, then it doesn't need to be."* For these participants, coaching seems to be experienced as feel-good indulgence, rather like slipping into a warm bath: *"I'll normally turn up late then we'll discuss for about 15 minutes what she's been up to and where I've been, and then we'll have a chat and that's generally about it."* But why would busy executives make time for such an apparently unproductive activity? For these participants, it's possible that coaching is primarily a status symbol, publicly signalling that they're still worthy of investment. What their accounts certainly do tell us is that, perhaps contrary to our assumptions, receptivity and readiness for coaching is not always the same as receptivity and readiness for learning.

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In some cases, however, coachees expect coaching to be a place where vulnerabilities are exposed, precisely because that creates the possibility of change: *"In a lot of cases I felt outside of my comfort zone, which was a great thing to do."* Challenge can be experienced as working at a deep level: *"He doesn't let me get away with things. He sort of asks me to delve in more deeply, and it's really challenging."* And for coachees who are prepared to take risks, coaching can be life changing, at every level: *"I blossomed, I've grown as a person. I was standing taller, and people could see it, people were really noticing my posture, my engagement, my enthusiasm."*

It's common for both coaches and coachees to talk about insight as a key goal of coaching. Coaches can help the coachee to develop sensitivity to read subtle organisational runes: *"She helped me interpret the organisation's support for me. You know, the sort of signals."* It can develop empathy and understanding of

¹ Coutu D and Kauffman C (2009) *What Can Coaches Do for You?* Harvard Business Review

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others: *"How do you think the other person felt and thought about that situation?"* Self-awareness in particular can be a powerful catalyst for change *"It made me more self-aware, and by using that self-awareness I was able to realise things and adapt and change quicker than I would have been able to if I hadn't have known to be more self-aware."*

"This guy has actually done it himself, he's got some real life experience."

The coaching relationship itself is key to good coaching work. Coachees value connection and rapport with the coach because where there is trust, there can be openness: *"I felt that I could be completely transparent with him and completely open and honest."* The coach's credibility was vital, and based not on qualifications, but on experience: *"This guy has actually done it himself, he's got some real life experience and he's been successful in his own right doing his first career, so that's what made him credible."* Shared life experience also seemed to matter. Age, gender and intellectual capability all figured as important aspects of the coach's relatability for coachees.

Coaches on high potential coaching

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Coaches see the design of some high potential development programmes as having special challenges. Sometimes sustained organisational focus on the programme seems to be a problem: *"Most talent development programmes that I've been part of, they're much better managed at the beginning of the programme than they are by the end."* Time pressures on coaching assignments can feel constraining: *"Sometimes with a high potential programme, somehow it feels a bit rushed. This can't just be a conversation, you know, he needs to have an action plan. I'm going to be quizzed, he's going to be quizzed, 'where's the action plan?'"* These pressures are not just uncomfortable; they can mitigate against the coach's idea of good work: *"These things don't necessarily happen quickly or at the pace that the structure of the programme might insist upon."*

"What if we make them feel vulnerable. How are we going to deal with the fall out?"

Coaches value their freedom to work as they see fit, and are wary of a too-narrow agenda. They worry about their coachees' vulnerability in talent management

programmes which challenge them at a psychological level: *"that's where I start to fall out a bit with talent and potential programmes because there's not quite enough thought given to that human element of what if we expose these things about people to themselves. What if we make them feel vulnerable. How are we going to deal with the fall out?"*

Coaches see the potential of coaching as an opportunity to make sense of one's life, including making sense of being a high potential. They hope for breakthroughs in insight: *"You're kind of prising them apart, and I really love that kind of moment where they stop and think 'God...'"* They look for change at a psychological level as a mark of good coaching: *"I think good work for me is where the individual can come to make use of coaching to have an experience of some kind of expansion."* This seems often to be a much more valued outcome of coaching for both coach and coachee than the acquisition of models and theories of leadership: *"I couldn't write any of her models so there's nothing that I use explicitly."*

Coaches on politics, collusion and pragmatism

Coaches are pragmatic about the politics of talent management, for example, where they are asked to work with clients who have been nominated for political reasons: *"I feel bad for the individual, you know, I feel the organisation's failing them a bit here. I would prefer people to be more honest, but I'm also pragmatic and I can see why they do that."* As seasoned pros, they are savvy about the realities of organisational life, but they can feel compromised: *"I feel a little bit set up when they've been told they're a high potential [and] the feedback doesn't match that at all."* Where the politics become too uncomfortable, and challenging at a values level, coaches can see themselves as truth-tellers: *"It wasn't really fair. There needed to be some kind of honesty about it."*

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Pressure to collude with one side or the other is frequently part of coaches' experience, where the interests of the organisation and the individual appear to diverge. Sometimes it's organisational stakeholders who put the pressure on: *"He was quite an indiscreet HR sponsor. So he was constantly saying 'What do you think? What do you think?'"* On the whole though, coaches' primary loyalties usually lie with the coachee. This can even seem potentially subversive: *"When you're in a room*

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with another person and there's just the two of you and you're bound by confidentiality, then what happens happens. Wherever the person ends up going is where I end up going with them, and quite often that will not be really what the organisation might expect is happening in that room I suspect."

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There are some hints from this study that oversight of coaching is hit and miss, that evaluation is a rarity, and that some organisations keep their coaches at arm's length. This is an opportunity missed. Although coaches value their freedom and independence, they also appreciate having a wider impact on the commissioning organisation than just the individual assignment: *"One of the things I'm interested in is unlocking the potential of a whole system, and that includes everybody potentially in the system."*

So high potential coaching is a low risk option for coachees, but significant learning and change are not always on the agenda. Where the coachee can tolerate vulnerability though, change can be profound. Greater insight seems to be an important outcome for those involved, and coaches and coachees value a strong relationship as an enabler for good work. Coaches find the design of some high potential programmes challenging, and are sensitive to psychological risks to their coaching clients. They often feel under pressure to collude, though they are pragmatic and realistic about organisational tensions. Their idea of good work often involves having an impact at a deep level and beyond the single coaching assignment.

Implications for talent practitioners

What are the implications of these findings for the design of your coaching programme and your expectations of the contribution of your coaches? While this research study offers no best practice prescription it does raise some questions which will repay consideration for talent practitioners.

- How can you maximise alignment between different groups of stakeholders? What do you expect coachees to learn through coaching?
- What would be fit-for-purpose evaluation for your coaching programme? How can you involve coaches in giving feedback and contributing to design? How

can you get to know your coaching panel and sustain your oversight of the coaching assignment? How can you balance evaluation with respecting confidentiality and giving coaches freedom to do good work?

- How can people be prepared to be coached and educated about what it's for? What might be the barriers to forming a solid relationship of trust? What feedback should you look for from coachees? What is a positive outcome of coaching for you and your organisation?

For more information please contact:

Alison Rose

alison@mdvconsulting.co

MDV

Leadership and talent consultants

www.mdvconsulting.co