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The Efficacy of Executive Coaching: An Empirical Investigation Using Random Assignment

Abstract

This study compared the effectiveness of goal-focused (i.e., task driven) and process-oriented (i.e., process driven) coaching approaches in an organizational setting. Sixty-four senior managers at a multi-billion dollar company were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: goal-focused coaching (Group 1), process-oriented coaching (Group 2), goal-focused control group (Group 3), and process-oriented control group (Group 4). Each participant and supervisor agreed upon a leadership competency from the organization's performance management system as the coaching objective. The coaching intervention consisted of four one-hour coaching sessions distributed over four to six weeks. The coaching was provided by 16 experienced executive coaches. The respective approaches were standardized using a manualized approach with training to ensure consistent delivery of the two coaching approaches. The results showed an increase in leadership competency and behaviors for the coaching groups, but not for the control group, as rated by the coachee. Contrary to prediction, there was no significant difference between the goal-focused and process-oriented coaching approaches on leadership competency or behaviors. The implications of these results for executive coaching theory, research, and practice are discussed.

Background

With an increased demand for executive coaching among organizations, more empirical evidence is needed to substantiate coaching as a viable intervention. To provide evidence, the research needed to investigate two questions: "Does coaching work?" and "How does coaching work?" (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006; Theeboom et al., 2014). Although the number of studies examining the effectiveness of coaching is rapidly increasing, there are very few empirical studies that incorporate rigorous research methodologies and criteria that include the following: between-persons, randomized-controlled, pretest-posttest (i.e., summative evaluation), and the use of external professional coaches. Using these more rigorous methods and designs strengthens prior research that coaching works.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. Participants in the coaching groups will have significantly higher self-ratings and supervisory ratings of leadership competency and behaviors than participants in the control groups.

Hypothesis 2. Goal-focused and process-oriented coaching approaches will show significant differences from each other as rated by the coachee and their supervisor on the leadership competency and behaviors.

Hypothesis 3. Coachees (Groups 1 and 2) will increase their leadership competency and behaviors scores from post coaching (posttest 2) to follow-up (posttest 3).

Design & Method

Research design – This study used a switching replications design where after the initial coaching sessions the control groups became the coaching groups and the coaching groups became the follow-up groups.

Participants
- Coachees and supervisors were recruited by internal Human Resource partners. Requirements for participation included (a) at least one direct report (b) middle manager or higher and (c) four-year college degree or equivalent on-the-job-training.
- Coaches were recruited from the Center for Creative Leadership.

Sample
- 64 coachees, 39 supervisors, and 16 coaches were included in the analyses:
  - 31% of the coachees and 62% of supervisors had a Master's or Doctorate degree
  - 60% of coachees and 76% of supervisors reported having over 6 years management experience
  - 50% of the coachees were male and 50% female

Measures
- The coachees and supervisors completed two surveys measures at pre-coaching (Time 1), posttest 1 (Time 2), and posttest 2 (Time 3)
  - Organization's performance management competencies
  - Leadership Practice Inventory (Kouzes & Posner, 2003)

Analysis

Multilevel Modeling (MLM) was utilized to evaluate the hypotheses.
- The model was structured in two levels: time (pre-coaching and post-coaching outcome measures), nested within coachees (different coaching conditions), as shown in the equation below.

$$Y_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}Group_{ij} + \gamma_{10}Timeij + \gamma_{11}(Group\ Time)_{ij} + u_{0j} + r_{ij}$$

Results

- The findings showed an increase in leadership competency and behaviors for the coaching groups rated by the coachees, but not from the supervisors.
- The data did not support the notion that a particular coaching approach matters in predicting and increasing leadership competency and behaviors.
- There was no significant difference between the goal-focused and process-oriented coaching approach on leadership competency or behaviors after the coaching intervention was completed.

Discussion

The main purpose of this research was to conduct an empirical study for the purpose of determining the effectiveness of coaching and comparative effectiveness of two coaching approaches that incorporated a rigorous research methodology that included (a) between-persons, (b) randomized-controlled, (c) pretest-posttest questions, and (d) using external professional coaches. This study has implications for both future coaching research and practice. For future coaching research, using rigorous methodology is possible despite being difficult and costly to conduct. For practice, this study showed that using different coaching approaches do not fully help us understand the process of effective coaching since coaching worked regardless of the approach used. Furthermore, the findings of this research were only significant as rated by the coachee and not the supervisor. Therefore, future research should consider the role the supervisors plays in the effectiveness of coaching.

Groups 1 & 2 received coaching from Time 1 - Time 2
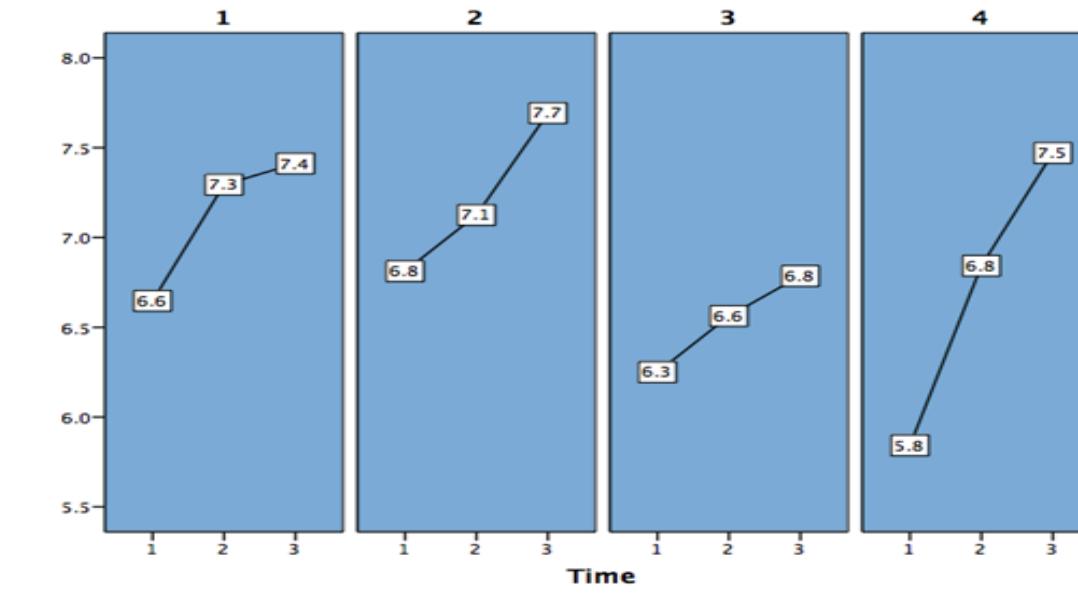**Groups 3 & 4 received coaching from Time 2 - Time 3**

Coachees' Ratings of Leadership Competency
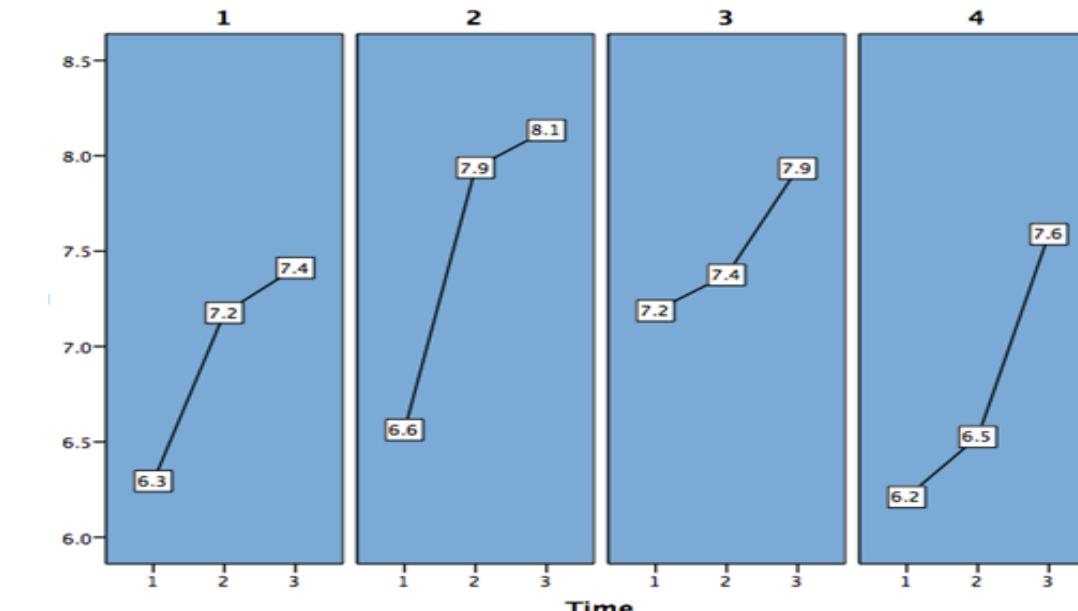
Coachees' Ratings of Leadership Behaviors
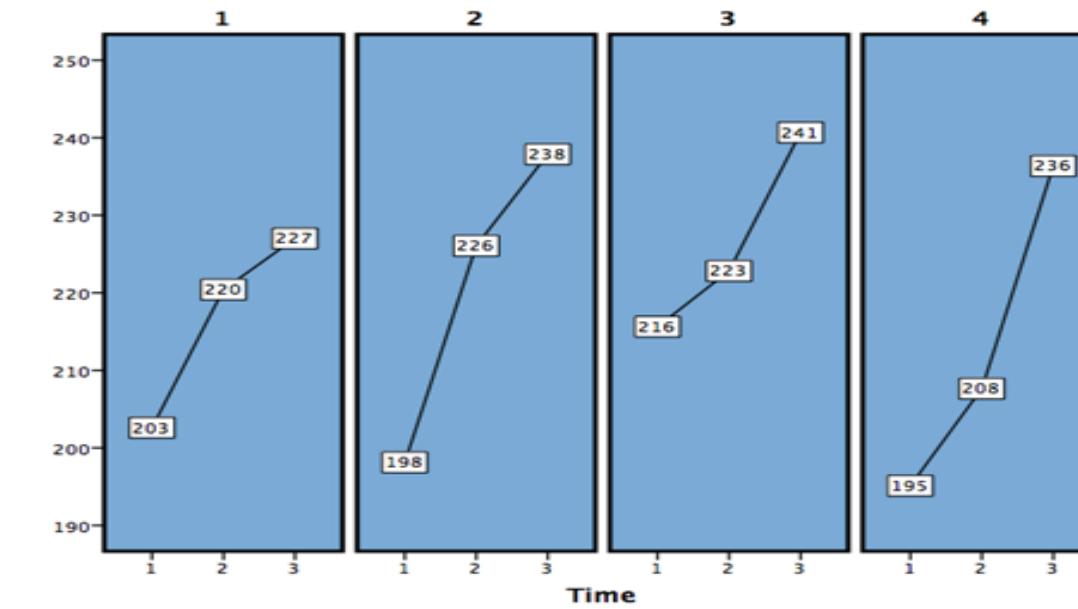
Supervisors' Ratings of Coachees' Leadership Competency

Supervisors' Ratings of Coachees' Leadership Behaviors