

EXECUTIVE COACHING AND SELF-EFFICACY: A STUDY OF GOAL-SETTING AND LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

By Carol-Anne Minski, PhD

Introduction

Executive coaching has been proposed as an intervention that helps executives improve their performance, and achieve the goals of the organization. For all of the work that has been done to clarify the subject of coaching in the past 20 years, what actually happens in coaching engagements remains a mystery. It is generally accepted that goal-setting is a necessary condition for successful coaching (Grant, 2004). Although goal-setting models exist, descriptions of the various ways that coaches utilize goal-setting sessions to enhance self-efficacy with clients are not readily available. The purpose of my dissertation research was to explore executive coaches' strategies for enhancing self-efficacy during goal-setting conversations with their clients. The foundation for this research is that executive coaching can positively affect self-efficacy so that leaders can accomplish their goals to enhance organizational change. Researching the role self-efficacy plays in goal-setting outcomes with leaders is essential. Applying social cognitive theory and self-efficacy constructs to the leadership process has practical implications.

This was a qualitative descriptive study that utilized a semi-structured interview method with twenty executive coaches, via telephone. The main focus of the interview was to ask participants to describe the specific coaching that takes place during goal-setting with executive clients. Thematic analysis was the method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The sample comprised 11 females and 9 males. All of the coaches held coaching certifications, mostly PCC , (one MCC) and seven had achieved doctoral level education. The number of years of executive coaching experience ranged from 2 years to 35 years.

Descriptive Findings

- When asked about goal setting models, the coaches note their clients are aware of the *how-to* part of goal setting, and admit that some variation of the SMART model is utilized in their practice (SMART goals are: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time- bound). Coaches emphasized that the most important part of the goal-setting process is clarification of the goal, rather than using a model.
- When asked about measuring outcomes, all of the coaches say they check progress toward the goal in every session (as opposed to waiting at the end of the contract). Some coaches use a

customized survey, or a form at the end of the contract. A few coaches that use a 360 assessment will re-administer the 360 as a post-measurement. Some coaches have the client use a self-scaling, where the client rates their self on a 1 to 10 scale

- The barriers to goal-setting as described by the coaches in this research include: behavior change, emotional intelligence, personality style, lack of goal clarity, and lack of belief in self.
- The executive coaches in this study use a skillful blend of core strategies to overcome barriers to goal achievement (asking powerful questions, deep listening, assigning homework, brainstorming and challenging assumptions). These strategies used by the coaches in this research exhibit the core coaching competencies as defined by the International Coach Federation (ICF, 2009).
- Coaches were asked: "What are the key steps that you think are important when you are specifically in a goal-setting session with your client?" Key steps include:
 - Clarify the meaning and wording of the goal
 - Confirm accountability and ownership
 - Set action steps and milestones
 - Look at future state
 - Written record of commitment
 - Check on the environment /organizational goals

Key Finding and answer to the research question: What are the strategies that executive coaches use to build self-efficacy in relation to positive goal accomplishment in their clients?

The five core strategies that executive coaches say they utilize to enhance self-efficacy in order to develop positive goal accomplishment are: helping the client gain perspective, acknowledging skills and competencies, reviewing past success, social experiments, and change models.

Strategies for Enhancing Self-Efficacy

- Gaining perspective (Adaptive Leadership)
- Acknowledging Skills and Competencies (Appreciative Inquiry)
- Reviewing past success (Social Cognitive Theory)
- Social experiments (Adult Learning)
- Change Models (Immunity to Change, Intentional Change)

Adaptive Leadership

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) use the metaphor of a dance floor where the leader gets up on the balcony to see what is really happening by separating from the situation. *Getting on the balcony* allows the leader the freedom to look objectively at his or her role. Coaches in this study noted that their clients gain perspective through uncovering assumptions, changing frame of reference, and reflective thinking. The strategy of gaining perspective helps the client develop capacity for critical reflection on what is happening while remaining objective.

Appreciative Inquiry

In this research, all of the executive coaches mentioned using the art of questioning to point out client's success, acknowledge skills and competencies, and to provide sources of positive feedback. Coaches emphasized the importance of celebrating strengths and success. Appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) intersects with all of the above mentioned theories through its underlying questions that provide an acknowledgement of skills, review of past successes, positive feedback, reframing and reflective thinking.

Social Cognitive Theory

According to Bandura, Perceived self-efficacy arises from a variety of sources as follows:

Personal accomplishments (mastery experience), observation of others similar to oneself succeeding (vicarious experience and modeling), verbal or social persuasion (including coaching), and physiological state (Bandura, 1993).

The specific strategy of reviewing past success (mastery) was discussed by the executive coaches in this research and is displayed in the final themes listing. Modeling others was not mentioned in this research, although it did come up in the pilot study. Modeling may be implicit in the use of social experiments. Verbal persuasion underlines positive feedback and intersects with appreciative inquiry. Some executive coaches in this study mentioned using somatic techniques or helping the client with stress or relaxation as an overall coaching framework, although not as a connection to goal setting. However, it is important to note that Bandura (1993) lists physiological states as a way to enhance self-efficacy.

Adult Learning Theory

The executive coaches in this study noted that they utilize adult learning theory, and adults learn when they want to, or in some cases, when they need to think about changing behavior. A coaching strategy that falls into the category of experiential learning would be the social experiments used by the coaches in this current research.

Two major change models described most often by the coaches:

Intentional Change Theory (Boyatzis, 2006) describes five steps for producing change, and most of the coaches included at least four of the steps in their descriptions of ways to help their clients. The coaches that described using the ICT model spoke about helping the client identify their *ideal self*.

In the Immunity to Change Model (Kegan & Lahey, 1994) lay the groundwork for understanding change-resistance by helping the client uncover “competing commitments” and adult meaning making. Executive coaches in this dissertation research talked about helping their clients gain perspective, or gaining self-awareness through revealing competing commitments.

Conclusions

- The results of this research *highlighted 5 theory-based strategies* that coaches use to enhance self-efficacy and positive goal achievement.
- This study directly contributes to the coaching research literature by confirming that coaches use theory-based strategies that build self-efficacy.
- This study confirmed the importance of the ICF core coaching skills, and suggests the requirement of adding theory-based coaching strategies to coaching certification training.

Significance of this dissertation research

This study directly contributes to the coaching research literature by confirming that coaches use social cognitive theory, and introducing four new theory-based strategies that build self-efficacy. The coaches in this research *described five complementary strategies that played a role in developing positive goal accomplishment for their clients*: adaptive leadership, adult learning, social cognitive theory, appreciative inquiry, and change models.

This study *confirmed the importance of ICF core coaching skills* and centers the positioning of those skills within the goal-setting framework. Lack of confidence and lack of clear goals are barriers to

goal commitment, along with emotional, behavioral and cognitive barriers. The executive coaches in this study use a skillful blend of core strategies to overcome barriers to goal achievement (asking powerful questions, deep listening, assigning homework, brainstorming, and challenging assumptions).

This research provides evidence that coaching strengthens self-efficacy and adds to the research on this topic. This current research strengthens the case for an evidence-based approach to coaching and provides a significant link to the self-efficacy literature (Baron & Morin, 2010; Malone, 2001; Moen & Allgood, 2009).

Selected References

- Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning. *Educational Psychologist*, 28(2), 117-148.
- Baron, L., & Morin, L. (2010). The impact of executive coaching on self-efficacy related to management soft-skills. *Leadership & Organizational Development Journal*, 31(18-38).
- Boyatzis, R. E. (2006). An overview of intentional change from a complexity perspective. *Journal of Management Development*, 25(7), 697-623.
- Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D., & Stavros, J. (2008). *Appreciative Inquiry handbook for leaders of change*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Grant, A. M. (2004). Executive, workplace and life coaching: Findings from a large-scale survey of International Coach Federation members. *International Journal*, 2(2), 1-15.
- Heifetz, R. A., & Linsky, M. (2002). A survival guide for leaders. *Harvard Business Review*, June 2002.
- ICF. (2009). ICF professional coaching core competencies. Retrieved from <http://www.coachfederation.org/icfcredentials/core-competencies/>
- Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (1994). *In over our heads: the mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Malone, J. (2001). Shining a new light on organizational change: Improving self-efficacy through coaching. *Organization Development Journal*, 19(2), 27-36.
- Moen, F., & Allgood, E. (2009). Coaching and the effect on self-efficacy. *Organizational Development Journal*, 27(4), 69-82.