

# What are the experiences of external executive coaches working with coachees' assigned goals?

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## Abstract

The notion of goals as central to the coaching process is reflected in practice literature, popular coaching models and research, with an emphasis placed on the effectiveness of coachee-led goal-setting. In executive coaching however, the organisation may assign goals to determine outcomes for both business and individual. How this dynamic impacts on the external executive coach's experience was explored in a study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, a qualitative method involving in-depth interviews. This article explains the methodological and analytic approaches, and describes the key findings, including the significance of coaches' beliefs about goals, and the complex nature of multi-stakeholder contracting.

**Key Words:** goal setting, assigned goals, executive coaching, multi-stakeholder contracting, accountability.

## Introduction

Much existing research into goals and coaching, as well as popular practice literature, describes the theoretical benefits of coachee autonomy and self-set, intrinsic goals. However, in executive coaching, a third party can be involved in defining the purpose of the coaching and setting goals for the coachee to benefit the organisation. This process is known as three-cornered contracting or multi-stakeholder contracting (Hay, 1995; Rogers, 2008) and may involve a manager, a human resources (HR) professional or another party. This creates a dynamic and an expectation with which the coach has to work. Whether this is an opportunity, a challenge or a conflict for the coach does not appear to have been explored.

As a coach myself I was aware of guidance on the importance of coachees' goals, but had not come across comparable instruction on third party input into goal-setting for coaching. I was interested in finding out how executive coaches experience this, partly in order to inform my own practice. My aim was therefore to understand the experiences of external executive coaches working with coachees' assigned goals by consulting with executive coaches to find out about the issues they face when working on goals assigned within multi-stakeholder coaching contracts and to explore with them how they manage that process.

To put the study in context, this article describes the findings of a literature review and explains the methodology which was subsequently designed for the study. It then presents the findings and analysis, concluding with suggestions for future research.

## Literature

The literature on goal-setting is extensive (Locke et al, 1988; Locke and Latham, 1990), and the number of studies concerning coaching has grown in recent years (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011). Definitions of both concepts are wide-ranging. To maintain focus and establish relevant context, a review of literature was carried out to examine what is known about goal-setting which may

be relevant to executive coaching, to identify knowledge of the nature of assigned goals in executive coaching, and to establish what is known about the experiences of executive coaches therein.

### ***Goals and wellbeing***

For some, the nature of the goal and the way we feel about striving for it has a direct impact on wellbeing. For example, Brunstein (1993) monitored the characteristics of a sample of undergraduates' goals and the changes in their subjective wellbeing, over one semester. The results show that subjective wellbeing can be predicted by goal commitment, goal attainability and progress towards goal achievement. Such theory may be usefully applied to coaching, although it should be noted that the evidence is from a limited sample: students who, generally, have been incentivised with financial reward or extra credit, which may undermine the reliability or applicability of the results (Locke and Latham, 1990).

Looking at motives and goals, researchers have examined the differential impacts of goals which are either implicit (directly correlated with a person's innate values) or explicit (linked to external motives, such as social demands and duties). Self-determination theory, for example, suggests that goals must reflect an individual's innate needs and values in order for them to thrive: a conflict between goals and values leads to poor motivation, performance and wellbeing (Deci and Ryan, 2000). In research with managers, whose goals conflicted with implicit motives, psychological distress increased (Kehr, 2004).

While the argument for goals to be closely aligned with inner values is justified, it might imply autonomous decision-making or a choice in goal pursuit. This position has been criticised for not reflecting the nature of business goals which may be obligated or assigned (Latham, 2007).

### ***Goals and performance***

While much research into goals and wellbeing implies a level of autonomy in goal choice, the research on goals and performance appears to focus on organisational contexts and goals which are allocated rather than chosen. Indeed, executive coaching is likely to be initiated by a manager or HR professional (Coutu and Kauffman 2009), who may also expect to set the aim of the coaching and the associated goals (Stokes and Jolly, 2009; Walker-Fraser, 2011).

Goal type can have implications for performance. The effects on performance of either learning and performance goals, for example, have been examined across a number of research studies, but with varying conclusions. Learning or mastery goals are characterised by the acquisition of skills or knowledge, while performance goals focus on an intended outcome. It has been suggested that when someone lacks ability, they need to focus on *how* they will achieve (a learning goal), rather than *what* they will achieve (a performance goal) (Seijts and Latham, 2012).

Setting someone a task without ensuring they have the skills to achieve it can result in stress. Indeed, it has been suggested that "Coaching has a mastery oriented goal structure" (Moen and Skaalvik, 2009, p.44) and that those who engage in coaching may be learning goal oriented by nature (Scriffignano, 2011). Reporting on research carried out in a simulated business environment, Seijts and Latham (2005) found that performance was highest for those with a learning goal.

The significance of goal difficulty is emphasised by Locke and Latham (1990) as more of an influencing factor in goal outcome than goal origin: the harder the goal, the greater the increase in performance. However, they offer a caveat: "If the goals set are not within the ability of the person to attain, they will not be attained" (1990, p.223). From a coaching perspective, it is therefore important to determine if goals are realistic, and if they are better approached as learning tasks, or are outcome and performance-focused. Unachievable goals may be detrimental to confidence, commitment and

wellbeing. No research was identified which documents the experience of coaches when working with unachievable assigned goals.

### **Goal origin**

The research on goal origin is contradictory. Indeed, Locke and Latham describe it as “both voluminous and controversial” (1990, p.125). Some research suggests that autonomous, self-set goals are inherently intrinsic, and therefore motivating and beneficial (Sheldon *et al.*, 2004). Indeed, it has been suggested that coaching has an andragogical framework, underpinned by the notion of self-direction (Cox, 2006). Conversely, it has also been suggested that self-set goals can be limiting, particularly in the face of a complex task. Assigned goals may instead lead individuals to improve their knowledge, raise their expectations and increase their motivation (Osman, 2012). Where an employer sets the goal, the coachee may feel manipulated, but the coach can help them find an autonomous rationale for the goal (Spence and Oades, 2011). How this is experienced by the coach, with a responsibility to both coachee and organisation, remains unexplored.

Seijts and Latham (2012) suggest that enabling participation in goal-setting, between organisation and coachee, can lead to more ambitious goals, and therefore higher performance. In the practice literature Hay describes the “three-cornered contract” (1995, p.52) between coach, coachee and organisation, while Rogers (2008) extends this to four corners with multiple stakeholders involved in setting goals. Both suggest this type of multi-stakeholder contracting will meet the needs of all parties, but the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) acknowledges potential conflicts between organisational and individual objectives (Jarvis, 2004; Knights and Poppleton, 2007). No research was identified which explored the experience of multi-stakeholder contracting from the coach’s perspective.

### **Methodology**

The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of external executive coaches working with coachees’ assigned goals. The literature review highlighted a lack of analysis of experiential data on the topic. The objectives were therefore: to interview executive coaches about working in situations where goal-setting has involved a third party; to understand how they perceive this phenomenon; and to explore what it is like for them to experience it.

The research topic was chosen for its relevance to the coaching profession. However I was conscious that my interpretations would be inextricably a part of the research process, so a reflexive approach was required in order to manage my subjectivity (Willig, 2008). Ontologically, I think reality is constructed, subjective and open to multiple interpretations. Epistemologically, I therefore think knowledge can be based on people’s experiences and the way in which they interpret and relay them (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). The study was therefore located in an interpretivist paradigm.

This meant that the research question was best answered through an inductive, exploratory and qualitative approach. Hence my methodological choice of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a branch of phenomenological research which is “committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.1). IPA seeks to explore experience from the research participant’s perspective, but acknowledges the implications of the researcher’s world view and interaction with the participant (Willig, 2008). It takes a hermeneutic approach, so involves the traditional phenomenological focus on description (Moustakas, 1994), but also invites interpretation and thus the revealing of new aspects of a phenomenon (McLeod, 2001). IPA’s idiographic nature means that is concerned with the particular, seeking to understand an outcome but examining individual cases (Coyle, 2007), without making claims at group or population level.

IPA does not test hypotheses (Reid *et al.* 2005), and so is appropriate for an under-researched issue. One of the limitations of IPA however, is that while it interprets, it does not try to explain. However, it has been suggested that phenomenological methods can generate unexpected insights, challenge assumptions (Willig, 2007). IPA recognises that individuals' accounts are partial and not conclusive, but by allowing interpretation IPA research can offer insights for policy and practice (Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). A further limitation is that IPA relies on individual accounts, and is thus limited to participants who can talk about their experiences. The data gathered are thus a language-based construct of an experience, further removing the researcher from the experience itself (Willig, 2008). By relying on participants who were happy to talk about the issue, and therefore had an interest in it, there may be respondent bias in the findings. The findings are subjective interpretations of others' descriptions, but they are not definitive explanations, and they should be extrapolated with caution.

### ***Data collection***

The research required input from participants who identified as executive coaches, worked as external contractors and had experience of working with assigned goals. I employed a purposive selection strategy, promoting the project to my existing business contacts and via online professional networks. I made it clear that they needed to be able to offer insights as external executive coaches with experience of coachees' assigned goals, and left them to self-define as such. Potential participants were sent an information sheet and, if happy to proceed, were asked to sign a consent form. The final participants were four female and two male executive coaches, with experience ranging from five to 20 years coaching. They worked across a range of settings with small and large private, public and voluntary sector clients, although many of the examples given for their work with assigned goals focused on their corporate clients.

One-to-one interviews were carried out either in person or, for two participants, over the telephone. Each interview was informed by a semi-structured topic guide containing seven questions, plus various probes depending on answers. Themes included the role of an external executive coach, contracting for goals, the meaning of assigned goals and requests for examples of working with coachees' assigned goals. These were recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were coded as Research Participant (RP) 1 to 6.

IPA takes an idiographic approach, where each transcript is analysed gradually and in detail before identifying themes, hence limiting the participants to six. Being new to IPA research, I adopted Smith *et al.*'s (2009) model, an iterative case-by-case process where each stage of immersion in the data informed the next. The term 'organisation' is used to describe the third part involved in the contracting, alongside coach and coachee.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Analysis of the data resulted in the identification of three key themes: beliefs about goals; contracting for assigned goals; and assigned goals and accountability. These are discussed below.

#### ***Beliefs about goals***

A literature review identified multiple examples of goal-setting as a component of executive coaching practice. All interviewees focused on the notion of goal-setting and its implications for contracting, as opposed to the theories of goal type and technique highlighted in the literature. However, not all participants placed an equally strong emphasis on the necessity of goal-setting.

Some participants were absolutely clear that coaching needs goals, with assigned goals needed to deliver productive coaching sessions, and as a means of evaluation:

*It's all about the goals for me, absolutely. The goals, setting goals means that the conversation is purposeful. So for me everything comes back to those goals. It's the way we evaluate the success of coaching for the client essentially. The role of the goal is to work out why you even want this stuff, it's so important [...] So if I couldn't have goals I don't know where I'd be!* (RP2)

RP6 suggested that assigned goals enable an organisation to measure value for money, and they help the individual measure and evaluate their progress:

*If they're sitting there for a couple of hours once a month they have to have a sense that those two hours were well spent. [...] They can look back at some of the goals and areas we've covered.* (RP6)

RP4 made clear that they are a fundamental aspect of executive coaching and an accepted part of her work:

*Assigned goals means written down, prioritised, agreed by all parties, and it's what you're paid to do whatever else happens.* (RP4)

She suggested that there was typically synergy between assigned goals and the coachee's own goals, even if they are expressed differently, or the coachee's goal is more personal. Her experience of coachee commitment to organisational goals perhaps demonstrates Locke *et al.*'s (1988) theory that an authority figure setting the goal enhances goal commitment.

Other participants expressed different beliefs: goals are a starting point, but may not predict the ultimate outcome of the coaching. RP1 felt that meaningful coaching goals were best identified through a gradual process of emergence and discovery. The notion of assigning goals was therefore frustrating and flawed:

*You know, no matter how much time you spend with the goal-setting, they're going to have changed by the time you're three or four sessions in. But there's a kind of belief system around the importance of setting clear goals at the start. And it's certainly what an organisation understands. [...] I just think it's based on a faulty assumption that we know where we're headed.* (RP1)

RP1 suggested that, culturally, organisations are goal-driven, and it has been argued that the coaching profession is reinforcing that culture (Jinks and Dexter, 2012). RP1 felt that trying to assign a goal at the start of the coaching led to the setting of superficial goals, which are neither wholly helpful to coachee nor organisation. She describes assigned goals as “the tip of the iceberg”:

*That's what you can see and that's what you can measure, but for me, the real stuff is going on underneath the surface.* (RP1)

Feeling under pressure from organisations to focus on their goals, RP1 suggests, has unhelpful consequences for all parties, including the coach, where the focus remains at a superficial level, and the opportunity to make real and significant progress or change is missed. While RP4 suggested convergence between a coachee's and an organisation's goals, RP1 observed a greater level of motivation and energy when a coachee works on self-set rather than assigned goals.

RP3 also described experiences of coaching goals taking time to emerge, where the outcome of coaching may even be the identification of a meaningful goal. RP5 described the role of goals in executive coaching as providing “a bit of an agenda around contracting.” For him, an assigned goal

provided a starting point, but was not necessarily indicative of an outcome, or something he as a coach feels tied to:

*I treat it more as a presenting issue than anything we have to worry away at all the time, and, you know, you might keep coming back to it and looking at it from different perspectives, but it's a belief of mine that you can make progress with things by kind of letting go of the goal...*  
(RP5)

The notion of 'letting go' and allowing the goals to emerge organically echoes recent papers on liberation from coaching goals (Clutterbuck, 2010; Jinks and Dexter, 2012). RP5 did not seem to suggest that this was in contrast to the cultural norms of the organisations for which he worked, and therefore the potential tension of this dynamic did not feature in his interview.

### ***Contracting for assigned goals***

The research found that the process of contracting for assigned goals among multiple stakeholders was, for some, complex, challenging and had the potential to create an uneasy power dynamic. The most commonly-described feature of the process of identifying assigned goals was the three-way meeting. Here, having talked informally with both parties, the coach meets with both the coachee and either a line manager or a representative of HR, or both, to discuss what each stakeholder wants the coaching to address. The importance of each player is acknowledged in HR coaching guidance (Jarvis, 2004), and is a key means of ensuring that the coaching relationship incorporates the organisation's perspective (Ogilvy and Ellam-Dyson, 2012). However, the reality of the three-way meeting's set-up and delivery from a coach's perspective appears to be less documented. The present research captured a range of coaches' feelings about the three-way meeting, including motivation, fascination, discomfort and frustration.

Participants suggested a range of benefits of a three-way meeting. It enables the coach to understand the coachee's working context and to gain insight into the dynamic between the coachee and the organisation. The three-way meeting can also be beneficial to the coach in terms of self-protection. By contracting openly with all parties, understanding the organisation's needs and agreeing the goals for the coaching in an open forum, coaches are protecting themselves from unrealistic or unspoken expectations and subsequent disappointment on the part of the organisation:

*I'm thinking about my own accountability and making clear what I'll be held accountable to.* (RP5)

While the three-way meeting may avert the risk of an organisation being unclear about or unrealistic in its expectations of the coaching, participants also described the range of challenges associated with the three-way meeting. RP3 frequently described the three-way meeting as "not comfortable". The organisation itself can create challenges which impact on the coach's experience, such as when HR has commissioned coaching for an individual, but the line manager is not engaged. Sometimes line managers may not make time for the three-way meeting. The implications of this are ambiguous: they may trust the coach and the value of the coaching process; or they may not value it at all. Some participants felt that an organisation's contribution to a three-way meeting needed to be managed correctly to be successful. However, this can be problematic if an organisational representative lacks the skills required or is not prepared to have difficult conversations. While this is beyond the coach's control, it can still have an impact on the contracting, and therefore the nature of the work:

*So the sponsor not living up to their role is a real problem. I think it's very, very hard for them to have that conversation. I do think the three-way is very stressful for both, in fact for all*

*three because the coach picks up on it. I think a sponsor often thinks 'you just go away and fix it', and they don't realise the degree to which they are really critical. (RP4)*

Coaches described how organisations might 'use' a coach to deliver a difficult message or to manipulate or 'fix' a coachee's behaviour, masking it as the assignment of a goal. RP1 introduced the notion of hidden agendas in coaching, where the organisation may not be completely upfront about its purpose for the coaching. It may be using it as a means of achieving a covert goal, such as being seen to follow due process prior to instigating disciplinary procedures, posing a possible threat to the purpose and integrity of the coaching:

*I've been an HR person and I know that organisations are Machiavellian. They have all sorts of agendas, some of which you never know about, and coaching is a double-edged sword: sometimes it's used as a reward, sometimes it's used as an avoidance tactic, you never really know. So when you meet somebody who's come for coaching, and you see a set of objectives which you think are unrealistic, you start to wonder 'is that simply that they don't realise the limitations of coaching? Or is it that they're making it look like they're trying but they don't expect to succeed?' (RP1)*

RP2 described part of her role as a coach as deciphering the agendas, and potentially having to challenge the organisation. She describes the ambiguity and uncertainty in those early stages of contracting as "quite stressful", particularly where she had had to go against the organisation's agenda. In one example the organisation was a high-paying client, and the loss of that business would have had serious implications for the coach. RP5 also described how coachee and organisation could have different priorities, stressing the importance of not being drawn into "a covert agenda", but adding that he would be likely to prioritise the coachee's agenda. He relays no sense of risk about following his professional instincts and not the organisation's agenda:

*The attitude I take is, at the end of the day, I focus on the client and what the client wants to do and I work to the best of my ability with the organisation's agenda, as long as it is visible to the client, and I won't get involved in a covert agenda. (RP5)*

While the power of individuals in help-giving professions, and the potential for abuse of that power, is recognised (Hawkins and Shohet, 2006), it could also be said that the external executive coach's position is precarious. A coach's work may be judged against a change or action instigated by someone else, which the coach cannot control. Future remuneration may depend on that judgement. This has direct implications for how a coach experiences the goals which the organisation has assigned, particularly if the coach feels the organisation's agenda is unclear or unhelpful, but is unable to change that. The findings make a link between remuneration and integrity: a coach's decision to challenge may put remuneration at risk, but the need to act with integrity may be stronger, both in terms of taking money for the right reasons, and doing the right thing by his or her own standard of ethics. RP2 highlighted the dynamic between a coach's integrity and remuneration, where the organisation could theoretically put the latter in jeopardy:

*You are aware that [the organisation] has commissioned you and that they are paying. So, you want to make sure that you're doing something that will benefit them. So what I had to do was be really brave because what they initially wanted wasn't actually what was best for them. There was a judgement call there: would they have preferred just a coach that would have followed the party line? I could have just done that, taken the money. (RP2)*

The coach's integrity is a key factor in managing power dynamics. However, RP1 emphasised the reality of a competitive market place, creating tension between economics and ethics when

approaching a multi-stakeholder situation where potentially unrealistic or inappropriate goals have been assigned:

*Well the reality is, you don't bite the hand that feeds you. It's a tough world out there. There isn't enough coaching work to keep everybody happy [...] there is an imbalance of power. And so it's about values and beliefs and morals and all the rest of it, and there will be times where you know you can't be true to yourself to continue. But there's a whole blurry line where you'll put up with it because it means you get to do interesting work you wouldn't otherwise do.* (RP1)

Sherman and Freas (2004) suggest that a coach should have the confidence to walk away from an uncomfortable contract, but the present research suggests that this decision is not straightforward.

### ***Assigned goals and accountability***

The research explored how executive coaches experience the ongoing coaching process following multi-stakeholder contracting to assign goals. Hawkins suggests that in order to create value, a coach “must be clear about what and who my work is in service of” (2008, p.36). However, while the organisation may assign goals and pay for the coaching, the coach’s ongoing direct relationship is with the coachee. Accountability in executive coaching is therefore complex, with some participants suggesting they worked for the organisation, and others saying their loyalty was primarily to the coachee. RP5, for example, demonstrated a loyalty to the coachee underpinned by his developmental, seemingly person-centred approach to coaching:

*Ultimately I take the view, okay I'm employed by the organisation but my first loyalty is to the client. And in extremis I'm prepared to suffer the hit on reputation, I suppose, if the manager thinks 'this person hasn't got the development out of the coaching I was looking for.'* (RP5)

RP1 described working with a coachee to conclude the coaching by revisiting the organisation’s agenda, to satisfy its expectations, even though in reality it had not been a major feature of the coaching:

*[The coachee] felt she'd made quite a lot of progress, and I said 'well before we leave this we need to go back and look at what we said we were going to do, and see if we've done it'. There was a kind of jokey way around it, as it really hadn't been that much of the central focus for us in previous sessions. [...] There's a recognition that there are the goals that the organisation wants us to work to, and then there's the 'real work.'* (RP1)

The notion of the ‘real work’ being the non-assigned goals fits with RP1’s belief about goals being emergent, and assigning goals being potentially unhelpful or superficial. This process, which RP1 suggests is known but not articulated, could be described as collusion. Hawkins (2008) suggests that coach training’s focus on person-centred approaches runs the risk of encouraging collusion. He describes a ‘drama triangle’, where coachee is victim, organisation is persecutor and coach perpetuates this by becoming rescuer.

Yet it has also been suggested that good coaching is defined by the strength of the relationship between coach and coachee. In a study of internal and external coaches, Hall *et al.* (1999) emphasise the trust which coachees expect to have with an external coach as someone with whom they can be vulnerable. It could be argued that a greater bond between coachee and coach, conceptualised as a risk by Hay (1995), is created by necessity, and that the distancing of the organisation from that relationship is a natural consequence. The findings of the present research suggest that how coaches conceptualise their relationship with the coachee affects how they experience assigned goals.

Some participants emphasised a sense of responsibility towards the organisation, to deliver a return on their investment and to contribute to the organisation's goal or purpose. For some, this felt like an ethical imperative:

*I can't imagine that I could justify my fee without [assigned goals], how can you go and take all that money without finding out what you've been paid to do? I just don't understand and would not even attempt to do that. (RP4)*

RP4 suggested, however, that not all coaches have integrity or a sense of accountability, making her anxious about the reputation of the profession:

*I'm nervous about what's happening in the coaching industry at the moment. It's quick, it's cheap, it's fast and you can get away with taking money without being accountable, and then you drag the rest of us down. (RP4)*

Of all the interviewees, RP6 put most emphasis on the organisation as the primary beneficiary of coaching, as opposed to the individual:

*So sometimes we are quite blunt in saying that the coaching is not for the individual's personal benefit. We can hope they grow from it and that for their personal development there is, of course, something that they find useful in the long term, but all the areas we talk about, it's to support the bigger goal. (RP6)*

For him, the individual is located in a larger system, articulated by assigned goals that align the coaching assignment with the organisation's strategy. Another participant, however, expressed a concern about a stigma surrounding coaches who prioritise the needs of the organisation, perceiving them as being "a bit mean or cut-throat because they're just thinking about who's paying them" (RP2). It therefore could be argued that the emphasis practice literature has put on person-centred approaches has affected the development of arguments for coaches prioritising the organisation, which in turn impacts on experiences of working with assigned goals.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of the research was to explore the experiences of external executive coaches working with coachees' assigned goals. Goal-setting literature is complex and contradictory, consisting of theories stating the greater effectiveness of both self-set goals and assigned goals, as well as the differential impacts of various goal types. Coaching literature emphasises the importance of coachee-led goal-setting, drawing from an evidence base underpinned by andragogy and person-centred psychology. However, literature on executive coaching underlines the importance of delivering outcomes for both coachee and organisational agendas. It is acknowledged that organisations may assign executive coaching goals, and that this can be challenging. What has not been explored is the nature of this experience for the coach. The present research sought to address this.

The findings suggest that when working with assigned goals, a major determinant of a coach's experience is not the nature of the goal, but rather his or her fundamental beliefs about goals and goal-setting. These are diverse. The research was not designed to determine the most effective type of goal-setting for coaching, whether defined and assigned, or emergent. However, for buyers of coaching, the varied findings suggest that it might be beneficial to reflect with their coaches on how they work with goals, and their reasoning for adopting particular methodologies or beliefs, to contribute to the management of expectations and to encourage reflexive and transparent ways of working.

A three-way meeting is a common process for contracting for goals in executive coaching. Participants noted that this can be a challenging meeting, but that there are also important benefits. The success of a three-way meeting is seen as linked to the skill of the coach, who facilitates the process. However, the engagement of both organisation and coachee is also crucial, and the process can be severely jeopardised should one party be unable or unwilling to contribute fully. Additionally, coaches' experiences of the multi-stakeholder contracting process in which coaching goals are assigned seem to not only be affected by their beliefs about goals, but also by the settings in which they operate. This includes the extent to which their beliefs are aligned with the organisation's culture and approach. The matching, and mismatching, of coaches' beliefs and organisational culture is an interesting concept with implications for training and practice, which has not been extensively explored. Future research could examine this.

The findings highlight a complex dichotomy: the organisation employs the coach to deliver its objectives, and the coach does this by forming a relationship directly with the coachee, based on trust and confidentiality, to the exclusion of the organisation. Coaches conceptualise and respond to this dynamic in various ways. The research found that some coaches feel primarily accountable to the organisation investing in coaching, while others say that their priority is the coachee. Collusion between coach and coachee was presented in both negative and positive terms, as a threat to objectivity and productivity, and as an enabler of meaningful work. Further research could usefully explore this, and its practical and ethical implications for both buyers and recipients of coaching, as well as for coaches.

As far as it is possible to tell, this is one of the first studies to examine the experiences of external executive coaches working with coachees' assigned goals. While the research only profiled the experiences of six coaches, the findings suggest that the issue is complex and highly varied, with implications for professional practice from coach, organisation and coachee perspectives. No judgements have been made about the different approaches described by the research participants. However, in a multi-sector profession in which many coaches work alone, it seems that the process of contracting for and managing assigned goals presents opportunities but also pitfalls, to which a less experienced or reflective coach may be vulnerable. This has implications for the profession in terms of standards and training.

In conclusion, this study highlights the diversity and complexity of the experiences of external executive coaches working with coachees' assigned goals. It is hoped that future studies will build on this and further enhance the coaching professions' collective knowledge of a key component of the executive coaching process.

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