Coaching leadership training in High-Tech Settings:

An Analysis of a Coaching leadership program in the Swedish Telecom Industry

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Abstract

There is a continuous need for empirical evidence regarding the impact and experience of coaching leadership. The purpose of this study was to describe the effects from a coaching leadership program. The results indicated that the majority of the participants in the program used the skills acquired during the program (e.g., communication skills, feedback giving/receiving) as part of their managerial practices. Female managers and managers with less leadership experience reported a major improvement in communication skills compared to males and more experienced managers, respectively. The study contributes to the empirical examination of coaching practices in a Swedish Telecom Industry operating globally. Future research may need to explore further how to design programs that engage diverse groups of managers in multicultural settings.

Key words:

Coaching leadership
Coaching culture
Feedback, Active Listening, SBR-model, GROW-model
Introduction

Management and organizational research has shown that increasing managers' capacity for self-awareness, knowledge, and their ability to take responsibility (i.e., empowerment; Garcia, Lindskär & Archer, 2014) is a slow process in many organizations (Rubenowitz, 2004). As a consequence, the hidden potential for good performance among employees is endangered. There is, after all, a consensus in, that leadership has a critical influence on performance (Bass, 1997; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Yukl, Gordon & Tacober, 2002). Therefore, a continuous evolution of managerial models and practices are needed in order to adapt to the ever-changing challenges on the global arena. Modern leadership ought to focus on the development, motivation, and empowerment of the individuals as well as improvement of performance at work and social responsibility (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Evered & Selman, 2001; Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997; Sherman & Freas, 2004; Whitmore, 2009). This approach requires flexibility and good communication flow in modern organizations, in turn, entailing leaders who focus less on formal authority and more on agility, are able to respond to fast changes, and that have good communication and interpersonal skills (Sherman & Freas, 2004). In other words, leaders need to be trained in what is called coaching leadership (Evered & Selman, 2001; Rapp Ricciardi, 2008; Whitmore, 2009). The purpose of the present study was to describe the perceived effects from a training program in coaching leadership. The participants were managers employed at a global Swedish High-Tech Company within the telecommunication industry. Since there is a paucity of research on leadership development (Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber, 2009; Day, 2000; Grant, 2007) and coaching leadership specifically (Gregory & Levy, 2010; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001), this study offers a necessary contribution to the field by empirical examination of coaching practices in a global organization.

Coaching practices in organizations

Frequently, companies apply coaching as a part of their leadership development activities (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). In the USA, 93% of the “Global 100-companies” used professional coaches during 2006 and the coaching industry had a turnover of 1.5 billion USD (Bono, Purvanova, Towler & Peterson, 2009). Today, coaching practitioners originate from a variety of different professions and philosophical approaches and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish coaching from other practices such as counseling and mentorship (D’abate, Eddy & Tannenbaum, 2003; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Feldman & Lankau, 2005). Even though a series of techniques and methods are involved in coaching, it is important to emphasize that the coaching experience ought not to be limited to the use of techniques. Coaching is a ‘mindset’: every individual is worth developing and has a potential that needs to be
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used. The number of published coaching articles has increased exponentially in the last decade (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Grant, Cavanagh, Parker & Passmore, 2010). However, the majority of the publications were of purely theoretical nature (Wheeler, 2011). Hence, there is not sufficient evidence to prove that coaching is efficient (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Joo, 2005; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; MacKie, 2007, Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). In addition, there are mixed indications that a coaching leadership may result in a negative outcome (Kilburg, 2004; MacKie, 2007) or whether it increases productivity and improves learning, self-awareness and development (Kilburg, 2004; De Meuse, Dai & Lee, 2009). Even though the results may be inconclusive and contradictory, there is a consensus that coaching leadership is positively evaluated and efficacious because it positively influences factors such as skills, behaviors, teams’ cohesion and cooperation, work satisfaction.

Coaching leadership training

Coaching leadership incorporates a number of coaching techniques and practices in the managerial/leadership role. The major difference between coaching in organizations conducted by a professional and certified coach and a coaching leader is that the latter are not limited in their focus upon coaching alone, but are required to function as managers and leaders as well. The reason why organizations approach the coaching leadership paradigm, is the necessity of utilizing the employees’ hidden potential and empowering them to accept further responsibility (Gjerde, 2004; Rapp Ricciardi, 2010; Whitmore, 2009; Evered & Selman, 2001). Coaching leadership is based on cooperation rather than competition or the hierarchical ‘mindset’. It presents the assumption that equality and feelings of security provide the basic platform upon which the relationship is founded (Gregory & Levy, 2010; Whitmore, 2009). This situation is achieved by facilitating co-worker reflections on their actions, behaviors, cognitions and feelings; these reflections may then generate a ‘fine-tuning’ of their behaviors for the achievement of efficiency without imposition (Ladyshewsky, 2009). In other words, under these conditions, management is founded upon a constructive dialogue with focus on the development of the employees and stands in contrast with authoritarian leadership models (Rapp Ricciardi, 2008), which in turn increases organizations potential for success (Hunt & Weintraub, 2004).

However, as with the scarcity of research on coaching effects, there are apparently few empirical studies regarding coaching leadership training (Gregory & Levy, 2010; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). Grant (2007), in one of the few studies focusing on coaching leadership training, compared the effects of a longer (13 weeks) and a shorter (2 days) coaching training program for managers and found that both groups increased their coaching skills, although the longer course contributed significantly to
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do the coaching skills and the participants’ emotional intelligence. In another study, Eaton and Brown (2002) reported that coaching training for managers led to increased trust, improvement of delegation and that employees and teams took greater responsibility in their work. Wheeler (2011) found that managers who learned coaching skills also started to use coaching behaviors which in turn contributed to the improved success in fulfilling organizational sales goals. Nevertheless, even if managers should be expected to coach their employees (Latham, Almost, Mann & Moore., 2005) the majority seems not to do so (Heslin, Vandewalle & Latham, 2006). The most common barriers to the practice of coaching leadership are lack of time and the lack of incentive systems within the organization that support coaching leadership (Hunt & Weintraub, 2004). Nevertheless, these barriers can be overcome by training (Ladyshewsky, 2009; Rogers, 2003). In addition, leaders who have been coached use the techniques that they have been exposed to when they lead others (Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker & Fernandes, 2008).

The relationship between the manager and the co-worker, for instance, is a pre-condition for coaching (Gregory & Levy, 2010; 2012; Joo, 2005). Indeed, psychotherapy research indicates that relationships influence positive therapeutic outcomes almost without exception (Horvath, Del Re, Flückiger & Symonds, 2011; Martin, Garske & Davis, 2000). The relationship between leaders and employees has been studied within the Leader-Member eXchange theory — higher quality in the leader-member relation correlates with an increase in productivity and “organizational citizenship” (Ilies, Nahrgang & Morgenson, 2007), work satisfaction, competence among employees and increased motivation and commitment which makes them less interested in quitting their jobs (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Accordingly, successful leaders possess a high level of capability for building positive relationships (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005), such as, ability to deal with social relationships, to be able to listen, to be patient, being able to demonstrate empathy and successful problem-solving (Wasylsyzyn, 2003), and emotional intelligence (Grant, 2007). Also in this vein, feedback, defined as “actions taken by (an) external agent(s) to provide information regarding some aspect(s) of one's task performance (Kluger & de Nisi, 1996), plays a critical role in coaching leadership, especially the use of constructive feedback (Gregory & Levy, 2012). In sum, a leader training that aims to endow the use of coaching leadership needs to include knowledge and experimenting with communication skills that promote positive relationships (e.g., active listening) and increase self-awareness (e.g., reflection).
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Purpose
The present study investigated the reported effects from a training program in coaching leadership. The aim was to investigate:

1. The extent to which the training program increased: a) knowledge and insights, b) communication skills, c) use of techniques that were associated with coaching leadership.
2. The relationships between managers' increased knowledge and insights, increased communication skills, and the use of coaching leadership techniques.
3. Differences in increased knowledge insights, improved communication skills and the use of the techniques from the coaching leadership approach with respect to program participants' age, gender, and leadership experience.

Method
The present retrospective study is based on a web-based questionnaire. It was conducted at a Swedish High-Tech Company in the telecommunication industry. All the participants in the study took part in a 6.5 day-long leadership development program between 2008 and 2010, with five days assigned to coaching leadership. (The other 1.5 days were focused on labor-law [module 1 and communication in large groups (module 3)]. The five coaching days were divided in three modules, where short theoretical mini-lectures were combined with practical exercises in coaching techniques. The first module focused on the formal managerial role and juridical aspects. The second module focused on coaching leadership and the third module regarded communication strategies in larger groups (see Figure 1).
The present study focuses on the effects of module 2. In this module, leadership theory, motivation theory, learning theory, change theory and resistance to change were presented, as well as the coaching leaderships’ philosophical roots. The theoretical framework was connected intimately with the managers’ everyday leadership practices. Theoretical presentations were intertwined with reflective period and a variety of exercises. The techniques that were included in the managers' training contained a combination of cognitive and behavioral techniques such as: Active listening, (Rogers, 2003), Open questioning (Whitworth, 1998), and The Situation, Behavior, and Result Model (SBR-model) (Taylor & Driscoll, 1995). This model is a retrospective inquiry technique originally used in recruitment and it bears many similarities to the ABC-model (Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence) used in Cognitive psychotherapy, the GROW-model (Goal Result, Options, Way forward) (Passmore, 2008; Whitmore, 2009) i.e., a technique for problem solving or goal setting, and Feed-back using the “I-message” (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005), Motivators, (Maslow, 1943) and psychological defense mechanisms (McWilliams, 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Coaches required managers’ ability to:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Module 1</td>
<td>Act in the employer representative role</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Act with confidence in handling difficult leadership situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apply labor law and company values and policies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Module 2</td>
<td>Listen, coach and give straight feedback</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Inspire and create result through others</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reflect on personal leadership</td>
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<td>Module 3</td>
<td>Visualize objectives</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Refine and communicate targets, strategy &amp; actions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inspire, motivate and influence</td>
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**Research**

**Figure 1**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Knowledge building</th>
<th>Enhancing own leadership behaviour</th>
<th>Enhancing skills to refine and communicate targets, strategy &amp; action</th>
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Participants and procedure
A web-based questionnaire was distributed to 1289 Swedish, Italian, Spanish and German managers who had participated in the training program. An e-mail with the invitation to participate in the study was sent out during November 2011. A reminder was sent after three weeks to those who had not answered the questionnaire. The data was collected until February 2012. A total of 385 opened and finalized the questionnaire (289 men, 91 women). According to the company's HR-department, the high attrition rate might be due to managers’ heavy workload during this period and to the many inquiries that the managers are exposed to on a daily basis. Twenty respondents (5.2%) were between 26 and 35 years, 184 (48.8%) between 36 and 45, 160 (41.6%) were between 46 and 55 years and 21 (5.4%) were over 56 years. The majority of the participants (89%) were between 36 and 55 years old. Among the 385 participants 312 respondents (81%) belonged to the Swedish organization, 43 (11%) to the Italian, 11 (3%) the Spanish and 19 (5%) the German organization. 23 respondents (6%) had been employed between 3-5 years, 34 (9%) had been employed between 6-10 years, 112 (29%) had been employed 11-15 years and 215 (56%) had been employed more than 15 years.

Instrument
The questionnaire was in English, the corporate language, and included 193 items organized in sections. The section used in this paper comprised 58 items. The first eight questions pertained to the demographic data, such as background, age, gender and leadership experiences. The training program was evaluated in 45 of the questions (7-point scale, 1 = "Do not agree at all" and 7 = "Fully agree"). These 45 questions also measured the respondents’ level of usage of the knowledge and skills that they experienced/practiced during the program. Examples of questions were: "The program provided me techniques that I have used after ending the program", "The program made me more aware of what motivates me as a manager", and "Coaching techniques made me more efficient in one-to-one talks". Of these 45 questions, 16 where used to operationalize a) knowledge and insights, b) communication skills, and c) use of techniques that were associated with coaching leadership (see Table 1).

Data elaboration and statistical analysis
In order to answer the first research question, whether the managers reported that they gained increased knowledge, communication skills and to what extent they used the coaching techniques, we conducted an analysis of the percentage of participants who answered 5 or higher on the relevant items of the questionnaire. The second question, relating to the relationships between managers’ increased knowledge and insights, increased communication skills, and the use of coaching leadership techniques, was
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answered by creating an index summarizing the questions pertaining increased knowledge and insights (Cronbach’s α = .81), increased communication skills (Cronbach’s α = .88), and the use of the coaching techniques (Cronbach’s α = .64). Then, a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was conducted in order to analyze if the data was normally distributed. The data was not normally distributed (p < .000). In order to answer the third research question a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed, using age-group and numbers of years as a manager as the independent variables and the index increased knowledge and insights, the index increased communication skills and the index the use of the techniques as the dependent variables. Significant differences were further investigated with a Tukey’s post-hoc test. The differences between gender and the indexes were analyzed with a t-test. All analyses were conducted in SPSS version 21.

Results

The first research question focused on to what extent the managers found that the training program contributed to an increased knowledge and insights, improved communication skills and to what extent they used coaching leadership techniques. Ninety percent estimated the experience with a five or higher on the seven-grade scale ($M = 5.7$, $SD = 1.0$) (See Table 1).
Table 1: The participating managers judgment of the effect of the course (percent of those who answered 5-7 on the scale)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Increased knowledge and insights</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The program gave me insights which has been valuable for me as a manager</td>
<td>83%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The coaching-philosophy is very applicable for me in my role as a manager</td>
<td>81%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The program provided me techniques that I have used</td>
<td>76%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The program med me more aware of me more aware of my employees defense</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mechanisms</td>
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<tr>
<td>The program made me more aware of that motivates my employees.</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The program made me more aware of my own defense mechanisms</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The program made me more aware of what motivates me as a manager</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
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<td>I got more knowledge about juridical aspects</td>
<td>55%</td>
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<th>Improved communicative skills</th>
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<tr>
<td>I have becoming better in providing feedback</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have become a better listener</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have become better in accepting feedback from others</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I communicate more efficiently</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I perceive less resistance from my employees.</td>
<td>62%</td>
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<th>The use of the techniques</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active listening</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The GROW-model</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBR-Model</td>
<td>57%</td>
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The majority of the participants claimed that they had achieved a level of knowledge and skills that they were able to apply in their role as a manager. The majority claimed to have improved their communication skills. A large proportion of participants (92%) also reported to have used active listening techniques. The GROW-model had been used by more than 60% of the respondents. In conclusion the majority of the respondents reported that the training program has provided them with knowledge, insights and skills that they have been able to use in their work.

In order to be able to answer the second question, that is, if there were relationships between the three indexes (i.e., Increased knowledge and insights, Increased
communication skills, and Using the techniques), we conducted a correlation analysis between these indexes. As can be seen in Table 2, there is a strong correlation between increased skills and knowledge and increased communication skills (see Cohen, 1988, for effect size guidelines). There is also a moderate correlation between increased knowledge and skills and whether or not the techniques were used. The correlation was moderate also between the increased communication skills and the extent to which the techniques were used.

Table 2. Intercorrelations between (i) increased knowledge and insights, (ii) Increased communicative skills, and (iii) use of coaching techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Increased knowledge and insights</th>
<th>Increased communicative skills</th>
<th>Use of coaching techniques</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased knowledge and</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.70**</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>insights</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased communicative</td>
<td></td>
<td>- .49**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of coaching techniques</td>
<td></td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<.01

The third question concerned the importance of the participants’ age, gender and leadership experience on how they judged the effects of the training program regarding knowledge and insights, communication skills and the application of coaching techniques. No significant differences were found with regard to the increased knowledge and insights index. Specifically, the number of years as a manager (F(3, 365) = 1.95, p=.12), age (F(3, 366), = 1.69, p=.17), and gender (t(363) = -1.31, p=.19) had no effect on this index. For the communication skills index there were significant differences regarding the number of years the participants had been employed F(3, 374) = 5.79, p<.001. Post-hoc test (Tukey) showed that the group of manager that had been employed between 6-10 years (M=5.57) improved their communication skills more than the groups that had been employed 11-15 years (M=4.93), p<.01 or more than 15 years (M=4.89), p<.001. There were however no significant difference between men and women t(372) = 1.32, p=.19 or depending on age F(3, 375) = 1.64, p=.18.
With regard to the index measuring the use of coaching leadership techniques, the analysis showed that the women (M=5.19) used the learned techniques significantly more than the men (M=4.92), t(364) = -2.19, p<.05. However there were no significant difference regarding leadership experience (number of years as a manager) F(3, 366) = 2.18, p=.09 or age, F(3, 367) = 1.91, p=.13.

Discussion

The present study investigated the effects of a coaching leadership development program upon individual coaching skills and the extent to which trained leaders perceive the coaching ‘philosophy and mindset’ as a tool in their leadership practices. The results indicate that training in coaching leadership may have many positive consequences for the participants and the organization, considering that 76% of the respondents reported that they actually used the techniques they learnt far after they had the training. A challenge in many leadership programs is that the serve more as an instrument of “rewarding” the participants rather than providing them with efficient tools in order to improve leadership – employee relationships and company culture (Rapp Ricciardi 2010). The fact that so many apply the techniques and the philosophy is a sign of leader empowerment that will most probably be transferred to the employees by modelling (Bandura, 1977). The large usage of the techniques might be due to the pedagogical model of the program, that is, substantial training opportunities and short focused mini-lectures. The majority of the participants perceived the value of applying the coaching tools such as Active Listening (92%) , the SBR (61%), and The GROW model (57%). The most used tool is the least complicated one (Active listening) and probably the one that could be used in every-day situations. The criticism reported earlier against coaching leadership practices has been that it is time-consuming (Rapp Ricciardi 2010). This may explain why the easiest to adapt technique was the widely most used. In addition, not only did the managers’ report to use feedback techniques to a large extent (76%), but they also were willing to accept feedback to a higher extent (68%) which will probably stimulate empowerment. The acceptance of feedback from ones employees is a challenge in organizations (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005). Feedback must be based on trust and work in a mutual direction. It may be destructive and impair learning if it becomes a unilateral process directed only from the manager to the employee (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005; Argyris 1990).

Increased knowledge, communication skills and insights all correlated significantly with each other. This observation implies that coaching is far more than just the acquisition of a set of techniques but rather the synergism of these techniques with the appropriate ‘mindset’, and the insight of how and when to utilize them. The application of coaching techniques is not always straightforward (e.g. Miller & Rollnick, 2009). The present
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results indicated that the development program had been equally valuable of the manager, independent of age, gender or years of employment at the company. This implies that the coaching leadership model is applicable for many different kinds of managers. It seems significant that the managers with medium company experience (6-10 years) reported to have improved their skills more than the managers with long experience (11-years or more). Although beyond the present study, plausible questions are: why the more experienced managers reported less improvement? Are they experts already or does experience make people overestimate their own capability? Since seasoned managers tend to exert a great deal of impact in organizations, future studies should address these questions.

The female managers, compared to males, reported that they had been using the techniques to a greater extent. Accordingly, Whitmore (2009) observed that female participants of coaching training found it easier to learn coaching skills compared to the male participants Similar results have been observed in sports-coaching circumstances (Millard, 1996). This may indicate general gender differences in communication skills (Luttenberger et al., 2014). While male communication tends to be more hierarchically oriented, female language tends to be more oriented towards concordance and intimacy (Tannen, 1993, 1998). The coaching leadership model seeks to eliminate 'power distance', defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally (Evered & Selman, 2001; Hofstede, 1978) which seems analogous to how women tend to communicate. This notion may explain why the female participants were more receptive to the coaching techniques.

The present findings showed that many of the respondents had positive views regarding coaching leadership and its techniques; this observation should offer an awareness of how coaching leadership is approached in organizations, both sought-after (Grant et al., 2010) and the universal panacea to organizational ailments (Kampa-Kokesh & Anderson, 2001), which may be counterproductive and frivolous. Randolph (1995) suggested that the introduction of empowerment in an organization must be preceded by a change in the structure. In this regard, Bass and Riggio (2006) have postulated that empowerment should be introduced carefully not risking that it may be mixed up with a "laissez-faire" leadership. Nevertheless, whether or not, the coaching techniques are introduced as a part of a strategic plan for the coordination of various leadership development activities, the prevailing climate begs the question: Can corporate enterprises afford not to adopt coaching leadership approaches?
Strengths and weaknesses of the study

The present study was retrospective and based on a self-report questionnaire which has its limitations. An experimental design may have provided more accurate data with a higher degree of generalizability and causality. Unfortunately, it is difficult to convince organizations to introduce scientifically well-designed studies and field research is fraught flaws. The present design offers both pros and cons: the number of managers who actually participated in the training is relatively high and had similar experiences within the same organization. They had varied experiences and worked in different countries. However, the response rate was almost 30%, which limits the generalizability of the study. That being said, the results, according to the company’s HR-department, were similar to the company’s internal evaluations made directly after the course. One could say that 30% is a positive response rate considering that the study was made at least a year after the course had taken place and the fact that online-surveys have high attrition rates.

Future research

Leadership quality is construed to have exerted an impact upon outcome (Yukl et al., 2002) both in organizations and employees' health. A large amount of research indicates that the manager may induce the most stress in the organization (e.g. Hogan, 2007; Mosadeghrad, 2013). Hence, it should be of great value to investigate to what extent personality influences the ability to accept and use coaching in an appropriate way, as a leadership tool. Another issue that should be addressed is how managers from different cultures perceived the coaching leadership framework. Following the notion of Hofstede (1997) one could expect cultural differences in the attitude of the coaching leadership approach. A third issue that could be explored further is how the organizational culture may have contributed to the positive perception of the coaching leadership approach and if it facilitated the implementation of coaching practices.

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disorders and well-being, mostly using twin studies, person-centered methods, and computational methods to quantify text (e.g., Latent Semantic Analysis). Dr. Garcia is also interested in issues/research on free will, responsibility, happiness, well-being coaching and human performance in different settings such as work and school. Dr. Garcia is also director of the Blekinge Centre of Competence, which focuses in education, research, and development of public health and healthcare.

Trevor Archer
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