

Multi-stakeholder contracting in executive/business coaching: an analysis of practice and recommendations for gaining maximum value

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Abstract

Multi-stakeholder contracting for coaching takes place in organisational settings worldwide. This article presents the results and implications of an international study which explored its use in executive and business coaching, with the aim of sharing best practice and achieving maximum value for all participants. Respondents (n=651) were recruited through major coaching bodies (AC, EMCC and ICF), *Coaching at Work* magazine and other organisations. A web-based survey in 2014 of executive and business coaches, organisations and clients found considerable agreement among participants on the impact, benefit and challenges of multi-stakeholder contracting. Collated suggestions are included to maximise effectiveness for all parties involved.

Key words: Multi-stakeholder contracting, executive coaching, business coaching, supervision

Introduction

The coaching industry continues to demonstrate considerable growth. The ICF 2012 Global Coaching Study estimates there are 47,500 professional coaches worldwide generating close to \$2 billion (USD) in annual revenue/income (2012, p. 5). This was based on the 2012 survey achieving more than double the responses (n=12,133) than in 2007. While there is much anecdotal evidence about the positive impact of coaching on clients and their organisations, less attention has been paid to the interaction of the individual, the organisational representative(s) and the coach in setting up coaching or the role of stakeholders in positive outcomes.

Kilburg (2000) is among those who have advocated executive coaching to have benefit to both the individual client and the organisation. Kilburg defines *executive coaching* as a helping relationship: “to assist the client to achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client’s organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement” (2000, p. 65).

The Association for Coaching’s definition of *corporate/business coaching* (online) states the specific remit of a corporate coach is to focus on supporting an employee, either as an individual, as part of a team and/or organisation to achieve improved business performance and operational effectiveness.

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In both these definitions, however, the nature of the relationship between individual and organisation in coaching is underspecified. Indeed, while coaching is a widely accepted developmental intervention there are still many gaps in research. In 2011 Passmore and Fillery-Travis identified “Critical features of the coaching relationship” as a central concern for the coaching profession and a significantly under-researched area. Their call for further research includes the impact of goals being set by others such as the organisation (2011, p. 81). Stober and Grant (2006) also reference the need for more research on the impact of coaching at both individual and organisational levels (2006, p. 367). Apart from noting the pitfalls of clients feeling coerced into coaching, the role of stakeholders lies outside the scope of the common themes they describe as effective in coaching.

A primary role for multi-stakeholder contracting is setting outcomes for the coaching understood and agreed by all the parties, and the literature has suggested more attention be given to this. The Ridler Report 2013 (with the EMCC) stated there was evidence that “good contracting practices build the foundations for evaluation processes ...and successful coaching outcomes” (p12). Three-way meetings between the coach, coachee and coachee’s line manager were seen as a key mechanism for good outcomes for the individual and the organisation. However, this is not always implemented in practice. In one public sector study Carter and Miller (2009) found that less than one in five coaching objectives were directly aligned to organisational outcomes. They argue “uninvolved line managers can be a point of real weakness... (but) when line managers are involved as active and engaged sponsors it can make a real difference to coachees...” (2009, p. 9).

The focus of the research presented here is on executive and business coaching, exploring the role of multistakeholder contracting where other stakeholders, in addition to the individual client, have a say in setting outcomes. To date there has been no published data on the impact, benefits and challenges; this article analyses data from coaches, organisations and clients to determine key themes that emerge.

The interest of the researchers arose from case studies coaches brought to supervision when multi-stakeholder contracting had created challenges, for example feeling they were being used in place of a manager, or being requested to provide information to a line manager without the knowledge of a client. It is the first large-scale piece of research of its kind, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data about multi-stakeholder contracting in coaching, and updating supervision research. It goes on to share research-based best practice so that all parties may gain maximum value from the coaching, combining the researcher-practitioner partnership advocated (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011, p. 70).

In this study we defined multi-stakeholder contracting as: “any contracting that takes place involving more than two people – the coach and the individual client”. This is distinct from Hay (2007, p. 117) where “multi-party contracting” refers to situations where more than 4 participants’ interests are represented. There is no one term used for this form of contracting throughout the industry so we made clear our definition in the introduction to the web-based questionnaires: “Stakeholder contracting, multi-stakeholder contracting, sponsor contracting, three or four way plus contracting - refers to contracting for coaching where a representative(s) of the organisation is involved in setting and evaluating outcomes alongside the coach and the individual client.”

Objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to explore the process of multi-stakeholder contracting and the elements that contribute to its success if coaching takes place on this basis. The main objectives were to:

1. Gather and compare the views of all parties to multi-stakeholder contracting – coaches, clients and sponsors, and in doing so see how widely it is practiced.
2. Consider the impact and, potential benefits of, and challenges to, multi-stakeholder contracting
3. Provide research-based guidance on how to carry out multi-stakeholder contracting most effectively, in what circumstances it is most effective, and common pitfalls to avoid
4. Find out whether this aspect of contracting was taken to supervision and consequently update the research on how many coaches use supervision globally; to update attitudes of organisations to supervision; and uniquely seek clients' views on its use. These aspects are outside this paper's scope but can be found in Turner and Hawkins (2016).
5. Identify further research opportunities and make recommendations as appropriate arising from the findings, for example related to training.

Literature research

The earliest reference to three-way contracting is from English (1975, p. 383) who describes a “three-cornered contract” in relation to workshops she was contracted to run by a third party. She used the term to describe “great powers” (the organisers), the people in the workshop and herself. The theme of three-cornered contracting has been taken up and developed by many researchers and authors (Hay, 2007; Rogers, 2008; Eriksson, 2011; Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011; Ogilvy and Ellam-Dyson, 2012; Cowan, 2013). Hay uses the three corners to represent the client, the practitioner and the organisation (2007). However, she also offers a four-cornered contract which adds the line manager to the organisation (alongside HR) because the line manager “can provide valuable developmental support to your clients provided they understand the nature of the coaching” (2007, p. 115). Hay refers to multi-party contracting as something additional, for example, where a coach might be employed by a consultancy that has contracted with the client's organisation, or the coach works with a teacher meaning the local education authority, parents and pupils are all stakeholders, even if some are ‘silent’ (2007).

A further theme in the literature is the need for organisational involvement for successful coaching (Stewart *et al.*, 2008). One key area highlighted is around clear outcomes that meet the needs of all parties to coaching. Rogers (2008, p. 123) believes “The more you and our client can include the whole system, the more effective the coaching is likely to be”. Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) point to the relevance of a wider support network for coaching. Kilburg (2000, pp. 65-66) makes links between the roles of consultant (coach), individual client and the organisation in defining executive coaching:

... a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioral techniques and methods to assist the client to achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and consequently to

improve the effectiveness of the client's organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement.

Sandler talks about the need for a three-way meeting and liaison with the HR sponsor to ensure that "the key organisational stakeholders feel their perspective has been sufficiently taken into account" (2011, p. 93). She argues the need for engaging with the client organisation, that has commissioned and funded the coaching, at the outset and throughout to "maintain the balance between getting alongside our clients and not becoming too influenced by their client's view of the world" (2011, p. 96).

Multi-stakeholder contracting brings to the fore the question "Who is the client?" alluded to by Sandler in relation to dual accountability (2011). Eriksson (2011) talks of a lack of clarity in setting outcomes and expectations at the start, and its impact on discussing boundary issues or in setting up evaluation. St John-Brooks gets very different coach responses in her own research on internal coaching, ranging from a respondent who thought employers' interest was so fraught with difficulty it was not worth considering, to the organisation being the primary responsibility (2014). Cowan's (2013) respondents also differed on the degree to which the needs of the organisation and the wider system should be considered (2013). Eriksson highlighted a contrast between the executive coach group who "emphasize a more personal and holistic individual "life as a whole" level and the purchasers more result-oriented focus with a task/result oriented focus tied to company development." (2011, pp. 4-5). Scoular (2011) goes further in describing the contractual situation as "tricky" because the "real client is not the person sitting in front of you, it's the organisation paying the bill" (2011, p. 64). She believes those "usually former therapists... (who) maintain that the 'client' to whom they have primary and sole responsibility is the person sitting in front of them... [are] wrong ethically, and indeed legally; if the coach is contracted with the organisation then the organisation is the client" (2011, p. 65). Brown argues that the future of coaching lies in the coach becoming "absolutely necessary to the organisation as well as the individual" (2015, p. 7).

There is evidence from a number of sources that management support can have a positive impact on coaching outcomes (e.g. Goldsmith, 2004; Knights and Poppleton, 2007; Stewart *et al.*, 2008; Ogilvy and Ellam-Dyson, 2012; Carter and Miller, 2009; Ridler & Co, 2013). However, there is little published research about the means to achieve this. Practice seems varied. Coutu and Kauffman talk of "sketchy mechanisms for monitoring the effectiveness of a coaching engagement" (2009, p.27), referring to research done with 140 coaches. The authors noted that all but eight of the coaches said the "focus shifted from what they were originally hired to do"; and while 3 per cent said they were hired to address personal issues, 76 per cent responded positively when asked if they had ever assisted executives with personal issues. Peterson (2009, online) states "The problem is when organisations ask for one thing and get something else. Often companies have no idea what the coaches are really doing". He adds that "One reason seems to be that coaches can be very lax in evaluating the impact of their work and communicating results to executives and stakeholders." The practice of multi-stakeholder contracting is one way to ensure there is shared agreement on outcomes and therefore shared understanding and responsibility for evaluation.

Eriksson's (2011) research in Sweden with 85 organisational representatives, including coaches, also evidences a lack of joint outcomes. She finds that "In this study it is apparent that there is no communication between the three parties (coachee, purchaser and executive coach)" (2011, p. 24). Eriksson proposes a seven-stage executive coaching buying-in model where stage four is contract and implementation. She advocates a series of three-way meetings to "make necessary

clarifications around the commission” and also monitor the quality and the outcome and discuss evaluation.

Ogilvy and Ellam-Dyson (2012) report similar findings from their research based in the UK - while more than half of managers were involved in the decision for their direct reports to have coaching, none of the participants identified manager involvement in contracting. Their research with coachees and line managers examined the line manager’s role in their direct report’s coaching and examined the impact of this on coaching effectiveness. None of the fifty goals identified was linked to organisational outcomes, although forty-eight had some link to business needs such as developing better relationships with colleagues and stakeholders. There was little reported management involvement in evaluation and from the coachees’ perspectives barriers to effective coaching included managers who did not take an active interest, did not model coaching, showed disinterest and took an unstructured approach towards their direct reports. Ogilvy and Ellam-Dyson make six recommendations including holding a three-way meeting at the start to explain how the coaching process works and how line manager involvement can be beneficial. They also suggest that the client seek feedback on their performance and areas for development from their manager before their first coaching session. Clutterbuck believes that one of what he calls the “eight coaching myths/misconceptions” is that the client is the focus for the coaching, when you need to pay attention to the systems too (2015, pp. 9-10).

Cowan (2013, p. 14) interviewed six coaches with between five and twenty years’ experience who had been involved in multi-stakeholder contracting. The aim was their “understanding the experiences of external executive coaches working with coachees’ assigned goals, finding out about the issues they face in working with multi-stakeholder contracts and exploring how they manage that process. There was agreement about the skill of the coach in facilitating a three-way meeting, the need for agendas to be overt and to maintain integrity as a coach. Cowan also notes that:

The process for 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 (2013, p23)

In summary, this review reveals that there is no detailed or consistent approach to:

- i) the use of multi-stakeholder contracting
- ii) the involvement and role of the organisation in setting and monitoring outcomes or
- iii) providing guidance around the setting of goals when more than the individual client is involved.

The literature suggests that in practice the involvement of organisational representatives in setting outcomes is sporadic, and while there is a common theme that multi-stakeholder contracting could be helpful, there is less agreement about how widely it is done and how to gain most benefit from it. The review has identified that there can be challenges associated with it but these are only alluded to, with no research done in depth from the different stakeholder perspectives.

Research Methodology

To our knowledge this is the first wide scale study of the use of multi-stakeholder contracting, drawing directly on all parties' experiences. The research was piloted in autumn 2013 and carried out during 2014. Data collection involved coaches, coachees and organisations who employ coaches. Respondents were asked to complete an internet-based questionnaire designed specifically for this purpose. Invitations to take part and links were sent out through major coaching bodies (AC, EMCC and ICF) as well as a number of key employing organisations, *Coaching at Work* magazine and personal contacts. Participation was voluntary and both anonymity and confidentiality were assured.

The survey was aimed at business and executive coaches as they are the coaches most likely to be working within organisations and therefore get involved in multi-stakeholder contracting. There were three separate questionnaires, for coaches, organisation representatives, the vast majority of who were from HR and L&D (see Table 3) and clients. There were core areas of questioning on demographic information; coaching background and experience; views on, and experience of, multi-stakeholder contracting including who was involved, frequency, appropriateness, impact, benefits and challenges; what respondents would like the data to answer and their 'top tips' for successful multi-stakeholder coaching. It also researched supervision arrangements (coaches) or requirements (organisations/clients) and these are reported elsewhere.

Some of the questions emerged from supervision groups and individual supervision that the authors had conducted over many years. The questions were of two kinds: several multiple-choice questions to provide data that could be analysed quantitatively, and open questions to provide opportunities for participants to write in qualitative responses, without word count restriction, and these were analysed thematically. Not all questions were appropriate for all respondents and there was a piloting phase to gather feedback.

The epistemological stance used in the research is phenomenological, following the social constructionism approach that "reality is not objective and exterior, but is socially constructed and given meaning by people.....through sharing their experiences." (Easterby-Smith et al, 2004: 29). The authors, based on their own extensive supervision experience and review of the literature, did start with a working assumption that multi-stakeholder contracting took place in many, but not all, executive coaching assignments, and that its use, method and benefits were complex and contested areas, but remained agnostic as to what would emerge in all of these areas. The emerging data was used to come up with suggested approaches to make multi-stakeholder contracting clearer and as effective as possible. While understanding that the researcher will always influence the research and effect how it is analysed (Easterby-Smith et al, 2004, p. 61), we challenged each other's beliefs to get as close as possible to a "freedom from suppositions" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85).

Using an online survey made it much easier to collate data across a number of people globally (McLeod, 1994). In fact, it was a mixed method approach in design mixing both qualitative and quantitative data (Cresswell & Clark, 2007) though in their categorisation it was a "study employing minimum qualitative research" (2007, p. 11). Analysis of the multiple choice questions was done using descriptive statistics, drawing on the Excel tables and graphs generated by the tools available from the survey provider, SurveyMonkey. An inductive approach was followed in the analysis of the qualitative data, allowing the theory to "follow the data" (Saunders *et al.*, 2000, p. 88). There were, for example, 260 responses to requests for 'top tips' for multi-stakeholder contracting, and hundreds of responses linked to impact, benefits and challenges. With multiple responses, all the comments were put into Word and manually analysed in two stages using substantive coding as outlined by Holton (2010). It involved, in the first stage, reading through all the comments and assigning specific, open codes. The codes were descriptive and a note was made of every theme/issue arising from the

comments. There were no pre-existing codes in mind or any particular expectations with regards to the data before analysing it. The post-doctoral researcher who did the two-stage coding did not have any background in coaching which supported them in being neutral and open minded.

In the second stage the text and the initial codes were re-read several times, comparing the respondents' statements and codes and making connections and grouping them into wider, more conceptually representative themes, thus saturating the codes. These codes appear in the article as part of the findings.

One of the limitations of this study is that coaches, organisational representatives and clients who have some experience or understanding of multi-stakeholder contracting were more likely to take part. Additionally, the main method of accessing coaches was through the coaching professional bodies, so the sampling frame may not have been representative of all coaches. Coaches who belong to professional bodies are self-selecting and choose to adhere to a code of ethics for example. Another limitation is that the authors rely exclusively on self-report data, so there has been no attempt to consider outcomes using, for example, performance appraisal data or 360s.

651 surveys were completed: 569 coaches, 52 organisational representatives and 30 individual clients. Nearly two-thirds of the coaches surveyed overall were female, although in Europe and Asia there were slightly more male than female coaches. The vast majority were aged 40+ with the most popular age range 50-69. The remaining 10% (n=57) of coaches were mainly spread across the age ranges 30-39 and 70+. Just four coaches in total were aged 29 or under and four chose not to give their age. The majority of coaches had some form of accreditation (68.8%, n=390) and were external coaches (66.5%, n=377). The UK had the lowest rate of external coaches at 58.8% (n=177) and had more internal or associate coaches than other regions. Just over half the coaches came from the UK, just under a quarter from Europe and just over 10% from the USA/Canada.

Overall (n=569)	40-49	50-59	60-69
Total	27.1% (n=154)	46.6% (n=265)	16.3% (n=93)

Table 1: Coach Age Profile

HR/Learning and Development	38.2%	n=212
Public sector (e.g. education, NHS, other)	37.5%	n=208
Senior manager	36.9%	n=205
Running own company	24.1%	n=134
Psychologist, psychotherapist or counsellor	18.0%	n=100

Table 2: Coach Backgrounds

The most common backgrounds of coaches (with respondents able to tick multiple responses) were HR/L&D, the public sector and senior management. There were few geographical differences; in the UK there was a high number of NHS staff (16.6%, n=49), there was a higher number in the

psychologist, psychotherapist or counsellor category in Europe (26%, n=33) and in Australia/New Zealand (32.1%, n=9).

In organisations (n=50) the respondents had mainly HR/L&D backgrounds which means that few line managers were involved in the research:

Learning and Development (including a senior L&D manager)	44.0%	n=22
HR (including a senior HR manager)	28.0%	n=14
A line manager (however senior)	18.0%	n=9
A coaching manager (not as part of HR or L&D)	4.0%	n=2
N/A	6.0%	n=3

Table 3 Organisation Backgrounds

The majority of the organisational respondents were in the UK (71.1%, n=37) and Europe (19.2%, n=10) allowing limited geographical comparison. Females predominated (73.1%, n=38) with males making up just over a quarter of respondents (26.9%, n=14).

Key findings

The findings section begins with an examination of the quantitative data to see how widespread the practice of multi-stakeholder contracting is, how it is viewed, who is involved, and at what stages in the coaching programme. Next, themes drawn from the impact, benefits and challenges are presented. Finally, best practice advice for multi-stakeholder contracting is collated, using qualitative responses within the questionnaire. Themes emerge around clarity, confidentiality and the importance of context when coaches contract with organisational representatives and individual clients. The potential tension between an individual's objectives and the outcomes an organisation requires are also highlighted. These quotes give a flavour of what emerges:

...There is often an implicit trade off of delivering what the stakeholder expects and also dealing with deeper issues within the sessions that the coaching client does not bring to the 3-way session. (Female coach, 10+ years, UK, with HR/L&D background)

I do have an underlying belief that if the coachee works on things that are important to them, then this will have a ripple effect on their performance...but I also think that they may have blind-spots that the business needs to help them to identify as goals for the coaching. (Female coach, 10+ years, UK, who previously ran their own company)

The current practice of multi-stakeholder contracting

The vast majority of coaches (87.8%, n=454) who took part in the survey had experience of contracting in coaching which had involved a third party beyond the coach and coachee. When

analysed by coach experience the figure rose to 96.0% (n=212) for those working for 10 years or longer as a coach. There was little variation in this across the world. The overall result is similar in organisations where again the majority (81.3%, n=26) of those responding said that a line manager, HR, L&D or a coaching manager had been involved in such meetings. The data in Table 4 is supported by 42 coach comments which make clear that context is crucial:

Stakeholder contracting is neither good nor bad, except as the stakeholders and coach(es) make it so. This type of arrangements requires exceptional clarity on the part of the coach to ensure each party is clear about the agreement and expected results. (Female coach, 10+ years, USA/Canada, who has a background up to CEO/Chair level in a variety of settings)

I agree that in certain circumstances, stakeholder contracting is good practice. (Female internal public sector coach, 5-9 years, UK)

Stakeholder contracting is...	Coaches (n=506)	Clients (n=25)	Organisations (n=32)
good practice	81.8% (n=414)	44% (n=11)	78.1% (n=25)
poor practice	1.4% (n=7)	0%	3.13% (n=1)
unnecessary	0.2% (n=1)	4% (n=1)	3.13% (n=1)
I do not have strong views	16.6% (n=84)	52% (n=13)	15.6% (n=5)

Table 4 What is your view on stakeholder contracting within organisations?

Multi-stakeholder meetings: attendance, length and frequency

A similar number of organisations and coaches (51.7% v 43.7%) reported having been involved in multi-stakeholder contracting more than half the time over the last twelve months. However, for two fifths of organisations (41.4%) and business/executive coaches (40.1%) this form of contracting is still relatively unusual (1 in 4 coaching programmes or less).

The research shows that a significant amount of time is given to multi-stakeholder contracting when it does take place. In organisations (n=28) more than three-quarters of respondents say that meetings are at least one hour long (82.1%, n=23), with several taking at least two hours (19.4%, n=6). For coaches (n=473) an even higher number are at least one hour in duration, with only 11.8% (56 of 502 responses) suggesting they took less than an hour. 17.3% were at least 2 hours in duration.

When it comes to who is involved in these meetings and at what stage, coaches (n=436) state that the most common practice is, as a minimum, to have the individual client, HR/L&D or the coaching manager and line manager involved before the first meeting. The views/involvement of other parties are sought in many cases, such as “A more senior manager than the line manager” (mentioned by 146 (33.5%) coach respondents), or The Board/Executive Team (noted by 72 (16.5%) coach respondents). In comparison Organisations (n=28) stated that the most likely people to be involved prior to a meeting were the individual client (75%, n=21), HR (46.4%, n=13), the coach (75%, n=21), the line manager of the client (57.1%, n=16) and/or L&D (39.3%, n=11).

Four-fifths of organisational responses state that the client, coach and HR/L&D were most likely to attend an initial three-way meeting, with the line manager being involved in two-thirds of responses. For coaches this was similar. For both coach and organisational respondents, the involvement of a more senior manager than the line manager was reported around a quarter of the time or less, mainly after the coaching had ended. Clients (n=11) mentioned the involvement of the line manager most often (72.7%, n=8). So across the data this means there are four key figures that are normally involved in multi-stakeholder contracting: the coach, client, HR/L&D and line manager, though not necessarily all of them in every meeting. The involvement of other participants, such as peer colleagues, more senior managers or direct reports is relatively limited, so HR/Learning and development and the line manager are the likely sponsors and representatives of the organisational perspective. From written comments members of The Board only tend to be involved when coaches work with the most senior people, such as CEOs.

There were 101 written coach comments relating to who should be involved for those who believe multi-stakeholder contracting is good practice. More than half can be summarised in one key theme: “it depends on the context and purpose of the coaching and on the organisation’s culture” (53 comments), as illustrated here:

These responses really do depend on why the coaching is being done and in what sort of organisation. (Male coach, 2-4 years, Europe, with an HR/L&D background).

Who is involved when really depends on the specific context of the coaching engagement. No black or white. Key thing is transparency to the coachee at all times! (Male coach, 5-9 years, UK, with Blue Chip background).

So from this research we can conclude that: most coaches use multi-stakeholder contracting sporadically, that meetings are most commonly 60-90 minutes in length, the meetings usually involve the coach, coachee and a line manager and/or a representative from HR or L&D and the involvement of different participants is context-led.

The role of multi-stakeholder contracting

Coaches (n=466) saw their main roles in the contracting meeting:

1. To ensure that each person is aware of the role they will play in the coaching relationship e.g. individual client, organisational representatives and coach (85.62%, 399)
2. To make sure there is an agreed understanding about what coaching is (81.76%, 381)
3. To be the facilitator of the dialogue (72.75%, 339)

There is consistency about the four circumstances when coach, organisation and client participants believe stakeholder contracting is appropriate:

1. when it is for the client’s development: as part of a leadership/management programme, to develop skills for their current role, to support someone preparing to apply for promotion or to help them develop skills without which they may lose their job or be demoted.
2. when the organisation is paying.

3. when the coachee agrees.
4. When the coaching goals lend themselves to evaluation and review.

Coaches see their role in goal setting, both personal and organisational, is to facilitate the discussion so there is clarity about what is agreed.

One difference is noticeable. Coaches are twice as likely to believe multi-stakeholder contracting should happen only when the coaching client agrees, compared to organisational representatives (coaches 69.7%, n=354, organisations 35.5%, n=11). This links to a consistent theme in the comments made by coaches, of maintaining confidentiality. This emphasis is not mirrored by the organisational representatives and could be a source of tension.

The impact and benefits

There were three key impact areas mentioned by coaches, clients and organisations:

1. aligning outcomes to organisational needs and strategic development
2. setting clear and specific goals
3. making the coaching more focussed on outcomes and action.

Coaches also mentioned that such contracting helped them retain a sharp focus and provided background information.

It raises key issues that are often not explicitly discussed. It increases honesty and clarity of objectives... I often think the 3 or 4-way meeting ... is the most valuable moment in the coaching programme... These meetings also make the coach more aware of the organisational context. (Male coach, 10+ years, Europe with an Education background)

The impact of the meetings directly linked to the benefits the participants felt came from this form of contracting. All three groups of respondents selected the same top four responses providing solid data for how coaches, organisations and clients view the benefits:

1. greater clarity of outcomes
2. agreement on what coaching can/cannot deliver
3. better alignment of individual and organisation objectives
4. ensuring support to apply their development back in the organisation.

The responses also point to other benefits, particularly around ensuring clear boundaries around confidentiality and ensuring the coach is not used in place of line management. Overall, there is clear agreement on both the impacts and benefits of multi-stakeholder contracting, between the three groups of participants. These could be summarized by providing greater clarity and transparency, and a link between the individual and the organisation.

The challenges

The coach and organisational participants agreed there were many challenges in carrying out multi-stakeholder contracting. The key concerns were:

1. that coaching is being used by the organisation to deal with something a line manager has avoided
2. it creates challenges around boundary management between the three parties to the coaching (coach, client and organisational representative)
3. it creates challenges around maintaining confidentiality; this included the organisation sometimes seeking progress without the individual coachee's knowledge or agreement for example in "off-line" meetings or phone calls
4. it creates challenges around setting outcomes that are agreed between the individual client and the line manager

Forty-five written coach comments could be summarized as ensuring clarity, confidentiality and how information and progress would be discussed. Another challenge, albeit less frequent, (eight respondents) alluded to the difficulties, time-wise, of getting parties together in the first place and then maintaining the engagement of the sponsor(s).

My experience is that it is important to clarify what will be shared and not shared between sponsor and coach. Even so, some managers try to get more information. The contract then helps to state what can be shared and what not. So contracting can release some of these challenges but then helps to overcome them since an agreement has been signed in advance. (Female coach, 2-4 years, Europe, with a media background)

It has created challenges in scheduling meetings with 4 people (coach, coachee, line manager, HR). (Male coach, 10+ years, UK with an HR/L&D and financial services background)

The important thing is to contract who will be updating whom and on what. (Female coach, 10+ years, UK, with an HR/L&D background)

Some stakeholders have difficulty understanding their continuing role in the development of others. (Female coach, 5-9 years, UK, with a medical HR/L&D background)

This links to the question "If you think stakeholder contracting is good practice, but sometimes do not do this, what is the reason?" Time and the reluctance of the coachee were important factors, and the key ones for the organisation. But for coaches the key factor was coaching being part of a leadership programme. This is at odds with the finding above when being part of a leadership development programme was given as a reason to carry out such contracting. There are few clues emerging from the written responses to explain this apparent contradiction.

So the authors put forward a number of hypotheses. These could be sessions directly linked to embedding learning from leadership programmes, and happen off site during the training over a short period or they could be one-off sessions where stakeholder contracting would be inappropriate (mentioned by a few coaches). It is also possible generic multi-stakeholder contracting was carried out in the designing of the leadership programme and in agreeing the focus of the training and the

coaching. Additionally, some coaches state that managers want coaching to be developmental only, not operational, and therefore feel no need to engage in contracting.

The literature does not yet address this, however, Eriksson (2011 p. 5) highlights a lack of dialogue about “clarifying and setting mutual expectations; expected outcomes; boundary issues; how the intervention will be followed up; ethical considerations; or feedback procedures”. She advocates a seven-stage process beginning with a three-way meeting to ensure the organisation’s responsibility. She defines executive coaching as:

A collaborative and agreed business-oriented process that aligns individuals with organisational goals, supports leaders in their role to further and facilitate the enhancement of professional performance and development and personal growth and learning (Eriksson, 2011, p. 26)

Cowan’s qualitative research points to the complexity of accountability in executive coaching with some participants suggesting “they worked for the organisation, and others saying their loyalty was primarily to the coachee” (2013, p. 8).

The participants in the research have broadly agreed that multi-stakeholder contracting is good practice. Further research would need to identify why it often doesn’t happen when it is part of a leadership programme.

The role of supervision

Given that multi-stakeholder contracting presents a number of key challenges, these require the coach to have sufficient skills for it to be carried out effectively, and a minority of coaches and organisational representatives indicated a lack of confidence in doing so. There is also a role for supervision in providing a space to discuss this. When asked if they do three way contracting (n=517) while 87.8% of coaches said yes (n=454), two-thirds of those coaches (65.2%, n=249) discussed stakeholder contracting in supervision and a third (34.8%, n=133) did not. This has implications for supervisor and coach training, addressed in our article on supervision (Turner & Hawkins, 2016).

Best Practice Advice

A key ambition of the research was to share best practice by all parties on multi-stakeholder contracting. In optional written responses coaches, clients and organisational representatives were asked “What would be your top tip for successful stakeholder contracting?” The comments from organisations (n=8) and clients (n=6) have been excluded because of small response rates; each participant offered one suggestion.

Top Themes	Coaches (n=253)
1 Clarity	Be clear on expectations (of stakeholder, client and yourself), boundaries, confidentiality and what coaching is and isn’t. (34.8%, 88)
2 Honesty and transparency	Ensure honesty and transparency in communication. Do not fear to challenge the line manager and/or ask the important questions. Coach the line manager so

	he/she is able to provide meaningful feedback. (14.6%, 37)
3 Leading and planning	Take the lead in contracting. Plan ahead, provide a clear, concise contract. (8.7%, 22)
4 Setting outcomes and measures	Establish clear desired outcomes and measures of success. (6.7%, 17)
5 Impartiality	Be impartial. Listen. Be curious. (4.7%, 12)
6 Engaging and encouraging	Engage with the client and stakeholder as partners in the coaching. Encourage the individual client to lead the interim meetings. This is a good way for the client to strengthen their interactions with their manager and HR (4.4%, 11).
7 Flexibility	Be flexible – respond to individual circumstances and stick with professional management practice and responsibilities (4.4%, 11)
8 Being brave	Be brave and firm. Do not fear to walk away if stakeholder expectations are unrealisable (4.0%, 10)
9 Understanding the problem	Aim to understand what really lies at the root of the problem (3.6%, 9)
10 Rapport and a safe space	Put effort into building a positive rapport and creating a safe space (3.2%, 8)

Table 5: Top Ten coach themes for successful stakeholder contracting

In the analysis of the coach responses, the largest number focus on the need for clarity of expectations of all parties for both the contracting process and the coaching process, including clarity of boundaries, objectives and confidentiality. The number of suggestions indicates that coaches' views on multi-stakeholder contacting have moved on from some studies that indicated little involvement of the organisation in conversations about coaching programmes (Carter & Miller, 2009; Ogilvy & Ellam-Dyson, 2012). Themes 1 and 4 above, around clarity and setting outcomes and measures with organisations involved, appear to back the best practice advocated in the literature but not previously tested (Kilburg, 2000; Hay, 2007; Stewart et al, 20008; Rogers, 2008; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Sandler, 2011; Eriksson, 2011; Scoular, 2011). While honesty and transparency are implicit, this study demonstrates, both in the suggestions and in answers throughout the questionnaire, that this is key, as summed up by one participant's "tip":

“Total transparency and sometimes brutal honesty.” (Female coach, 5-9 years, UK, civil service background).

The other themes are mentioned for the first time in the context of multi-stakeholder contracting.

Conclusion

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The research presented in this article reveals that a large majority coaches and organisations employing coaching see stakeholder contracting as an important ingredient of successful coaching at work. It has demonstrated that there is significant, if sporadic, involvement by organisations in setting coaching outcomes and in evaluating outcomes (as advocated by Stewart et al, 2008, Rogers, 2008, Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011). The results are different from those found by Eriksson (2011) and Ogilvy and Ellam-Dyson (2012) which had shown no involvement in contracting on the part of organisations.

The key benefits of multi-stakeholder contracting are seen as setting a clear frame for the coaching, clarifying the roles and expectations of all parties, establishing clear boundaries and protocols and jointly setting a focus for the coaching that will deliver both individual and organisational benefit. Challenges arise when there is lack of clarity, for examples around boundaries, leading to coaches being used in place of line managers, where there has not been transparent discussion of how information will be shared, when and by whom, when the coach may be put under pressure to disclose information threatening confidentiality, and when there is a lack of engagement.

When asked what they would like the research to highlight, both coaches and organisation representatives wanted the other party to recognise the benefits of this form of contracting. The authors' hope is that through this research there will be more open discussion about multi-stakeholder contracting between coaches, coachees and the organisational sponsors of the coaching, and greater knowledge developed of its impact, benefits and challenges. The "top ten" themes in Table 5 above can be used as the basis for discussion between all participants. For the first time, the study has identified clear guidelines, based on the responses of research participants, on what makes multi-stakeholder contracting most effective.

Recommendations for further research and for practice

The findings point to other areas that could benefit from future research. In this study the role of the managers in setting goals has not been explored and a future study could focus on their role in the contracting for coaching. Where managers do not get involved one potential explanation, as yet not discussed in the literature, is around their confidence and capability in contributing to setting goals. There are also some comments that suggest executive and business coaches may not always feel equipped to deal with the range of issues resulting from multi-stakeholder contracting, so there are implications for the training of coaches. Participants also mentioned the varying degrees of managers' engagement with the coaching process and the support and challenge they might need. In addition, while the short-term impact of multi-stakeholder contracting has been noted, as yet there has been no discussion of the long-term impact of organisational involvement on goal achievement, in particular whether it aids outcomes being met, the degree to which they are met, and whether achievement is long-lasting.

One recommendation for practice is for coaches to brief organisations and clients about the role and purpose of multi-stakeholder contracting in advance of the meetings. These could cover the ten points coaches highlight (Table 5). This guidance could then be referred to during stakeholder meetings. While not discussed explicitly in the literature the expectation is that the representative (sponsor) will take a systemic role and represent more than their own vested interest within their team or division and draw on the requirements of multiple stakeholders. This is true of the coach too, taking on the role of the facilitator to draw from multiple perspectives in setting outcomes. Both the

organisational representatives and the coach may need practical skills support. For the representative this could be in communication, clarity of outcome-setting, dealing with difficult conversations.

The coaches' key challenges arising from this research would be in planning and briefing participants, supporting and challenging all parties, handling the emerging dynamics, addressing potential areas of conflict and ensuring there is clarity of outcome and expectations. In particular coaches may need to overcome resistance in themselves, the coachee and/or the stakeholders, develop skills in deciding when multi-stakeholder contracting is appropriate and being able to present the benefits of it, facilitating generative dialogue between all parties, clarifying the roles both in the contracting and the coaching programme. This would elicit aligned clear, outcomes and evaluation on which all parties are agreed and exploring concerns from any of the parties.

There are also implications for the future training of coaches and coach supervisors linked to developing systems thinking, skills in handling multi-stakeholder contracting meetings and the dynamics arising from them as well as contracting around supervision to ensure multi-stakeholder contracting is addressed.

For coaching to provide greater value to both the coachee and their organisation through individual, team, organisational and wider system transformation, effective multi-stakeholder contracting is an essential element. We hope that this research will support this endeavour.

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