

Do we need alliance factor definitions unique to coaching? Clients' operational definitions of research-based definitions

Mercedes L. Lopez, Florida, USA

Email: merciel@aol.com

Abstract

Vague definitional descriptors of the Coaching Alliance Common Factor measurement threaten construct validity in coaching research. Further, differing coach and client perceptions of the helping relationship, and coaching and therapeutic client dissimilarities compound the risk. Ten clients representing a global leadership coaching practice identified and prioritized the most helpful Client Characteristics, Coach Qualities, and Client/Coach Relationship during the program. Following, the respondents operationally defined the prioritized descriptors during an interview. Client multi-dimensional meanings, descriptors unique to coaching, and the importance of relationship bonding separated from and related to the work findings in the case study reinforced research's call for definitional clarification and a distinct coaching model and instrument.

Keywords: Coaching Alliance definitions, client characteristics, coach qualities, client/coach relationship, leadership coaching research and practice

Introduction

Even though psychotherapy and coaching can be viewed as significantly different in some cases Smither, (2011), Mckenna and Davis (2009a) contended that four factors: client characteristics, therapeutic/coaching relationship; placebo search effects; theory/techniques; and similar approaches account for the most systematic variance in both disciplines. The authors concluded that applying psychotherapy findings to coaching is acceptable. In this article, we seek to study helper alliance definitions from research in both disciplines in order to understand differences and similarities to support the search for distinct coaching definitions.

In some studies therapeutic client, therapist, and the client/therapist relationship consistently accounted for much of the effect on client change demonstrating the significance of studying the relationship (Assay & Lambert, 1999; Lambert & Barley, 2001; McAleavy & Castonguay, 2014; Wampold, 2001). The coaching research overview by De Haan, Duckworth, Birch and Jones' (2013) also showed an increase in client/coach relationship research indicating its importance. Yet, few studies address the problem of using different descriptors for the same factor, and the same descriptors for multiple factors in the research (Grencavage & Norcross, 1990;). Clarifying, Lampropoulos (2000) stated common factor research contains "...vaguely

defined common factors, different common factor definitions within models...” placing “...limitations on practicing professionals such as lack of operational definitions” (p.286). Further, Lampropoulos (2000) indicated that research authors’ philosophies and practice preferences determine the design of common factor models and descriptors thus weakening the scientific study of common factors. Smith, Borneman, Brummel, and Connelly (2009) suggested that “Only with well-defined and measured criteria can we begin to accurately describe the relationship between the active ingredients in the executive coaching process and effective outcome” (p.289). Operational definitions, observable actions, behaviours, and scenarios (Kansas Institute for Positive Behavior), could be a step in addressing the research gap and supporting coaching practitioners. The qualitative case study exploration of ten leadership coaching leaders’ operational definitions of the coaching alliance in a six month coaching programme was designed to provide initial steps to clarify the common factor grouping, client characteristics, coach qualities, and client/coach relationship. The purpose of the case study is to provide preliminary evidence showing the need for a unique coaching instrument by exploring clients’ operational definitions of the coaching alliance, an identified critical factor for coaching success.

Coaching client perceptions can compound the prior definitional issues. Bedi, Davis, and Arvay (2005), Horvath, Tapia and Symonds (2010), Krause, Altimir, and Horvath, (2011) posited that clients can have different perceptions of element importance in therapeutic and coaching alliances. More specifically, the therapist sees the relationship as a way to achieve a goal while the client sees it as trust development within the process supporting the change. McKenna and Davis (2009b) asserted that coaching clients are more open to interventions and client issues are less severe emphasizing the therapeutic and coaching client differences. Moreover, Krause et al. (2011) stated that “Relatively little has been done to clarify how the alliance is experienced by the participants” (p. 267). The research suggests that coaching and therapeutic clients differ and few studies address the coaching client view during the process. Definitional meanings interpreted by clients can differ from researcher and practitioner intent. Misinterpretation may cause risks to well-developed studies and coaching. The preceding research informed our research question: How do clients operationally define most helpful client characteristics, coach qualities, and the client/coach relationship in a leadership coaching process?

Background of the Alliance Definition

Historical research offers broad definitions such as Freudian transference, partnership, working alliance, therapeutic alliance, and helping alliance (Krause et al., 2011). In 2003, Tracey, Lichentenberg, Goodyear, and Claiborn separated Grenavage and Norcross’s (1990) 35 alliance factor commonalities into three distinct common factor clusters (bond relationship, information shared, and therapeutic actions). The definitions narrowed and researcher philosophies began to emerge.

Other authors studied the interrelatedness and separateness of the work and relationship. Krause et al. (2011) evolved Bordin’s (1976) and Luborsky’s (1976) mutual patient/therapist relationship and work responsibility to: 1) client and coach support each other

and are committed to specific parts of the process, and 2) “the affective or emotional bond between therapist and client” (p. 269). Unlike Bordin and Luborsky, Krause et al. separated the therapist and client bond from the partnership doing the work. Differences in philosophy began to drive analysis and measurement of the alliance.

Agreeing with Krause et al., Pargament, Lomax, McGee & Fang (2014) defined sacred moments as a necessary spiritual connection between the therapist and the client not connected to the work process. Similarly, de Haan and NeiB (2012) defined critical moments as “...exciting, tense, or significant moment experienced during coaching sessions” (p.200). We propose that the definitional study of client, coach, and relationship helpful behaviours during the program may be as important as how the factors influence the outcome. Clients' operational descriptions of helpful observable behaviors, actions, and scenarios may provide factor definitional information unique to coaching showing how the relationship developed and blended with the work during the program.

Method

Case studies answer ‘how and why’ and include exploration, descriptions, and explanations of participant experiences. The goal of a case study is to discover hypotheses and new information to support theories and practitioners (Yin, 1994; Flyvbjerg, 2006). The article’s qualitative case study design includes describing, exploring, explaining, and discovering similarities in coaching clients’ experiences for a deeper understanding of participant perceptions of what happened and why during a common coaching program. The intent of the design is to provide preliminary data from the results to answer the question: “Do we need Alliance Definitions unique to coaching”? Interview data, patterns across quantitatively measured therapeutic and coaching research data sources, and documentation of participants’ past coaching activities offer a triangulation to achieve data credibility and trustworthiness.

Kvale (1995) stated that trustworthiness in a qualitative study is demonstrated if the study process documentation allows repeatability. Presenting the current article’s procedures as accurately as possible may support others who wish to repeat the current study. To that end, we present descriptions of the population sampling, participant review document and interview procedures, and summary of design process in a flow chart.

Population sampling and process

Our leadership coaching practice spanned global and domestic corporations of different sizes, types of industries and organisational cultures. To examine consistency and similarities of responses in the study, we selected 20 participants representing our leadership coaching practice who participated in a six-month coaching programme.¹ The purposeful maximum variation sampling characterized the leadership practice by gender, age, countries, cultures, and management levels ranging from mid-management to president. Samples representing a mixed variation of participants different on dimensions need to be large enough (10-20) to achieve saturation of data therefore giving the opportunity for small to large diverse agreement

¹ Program process, approach, and population demographic descriptions are available from authors in graph form

(Patton, 2001). Ten of the twenty leaders who received email invitations, a study description, and a request for a phone conference confirmed their involvement by email. A follow-up phone call reconfirmed participation. Upon request, participants returned signed American Psychological Association consent forms to be interviewed and taped. Roese & Vohs (2012) proposed the use of recall material reminders to minimise participant hind-sight issues and enhance credibility and quality in a qualitative study. During the past coaching programme, the coach documented each leader's area of need, progress, exercises, and pre-post coaching assessment results. To ease recall of the past coaching experience, the ten participants received the prior documentation. The following week, the participants received the review document described in the next section. After the completion of the participant review document, the participants and the interviewer scheduled phone interviews.

Participant review document design and process

Two goals of the review document were: to provide a definitional framework to familiarise the participants with research-based descriptors of Client Characteristics, Coach Qualities, and Client/Coach Relationship, and to elicit a list of most helpful prioritised descriptors from the participants. Each coaching alliance factor had a set of descriptors drawn from frequently mentioned and recommended descriptors in psychological, psychotherapeutic, family and marital counselling and coaching research, and published instruments. We limited the review document to research-based common factors and descriptors to add internal consistency to the study. We used Grenavage and Norcross (1990) research as a base and included new categorical descriptors from post-1990 common factor studies². We edited out repeated descriptors reducing the descriptors to 129 descriptors for the three alliance factors, Client Characteristics, Coach Qualities, and Client/coach relationship³. Two rounds of prioritisation for 'most helpful' during the process reduced the list of 129 descriptors to 49 for the interview definitional process and data analysis. The introduction described each factor in general. Instructions requested the participants to select the descriptors found to be most helpful during the leadership programme (Round 1). After a first step of marking the most helpful in the list of descriptors, the participants responded to three requests (Round 2).

- 1) Considering your personal experience, please select three top descriptors from the previously marked most helpful descriptors.
- 2) For each of the three top selections, please write an example of the attribute/skill on how it was demonstrated, and how you think it helped.
- 3) Please add other attributes/skills/events that do not appear in the list for each factor and how it helped and how it was demonstrated.

Interview design and process

The objective of the telephone interview was for each participant to operationally define Round 1 and Round 2 descriptors prioritised as most helpful. The interviewer asked each participant for operational definitions of the individual's descriptor marked as most helpful (See interviewer question examples below). Questioning was an in-depth flexible and dynamic semi-structured approach with the interviewer setting up the conversation as equals to comfort

² Post-1990 common factor research sources have an asterisk in the References section.

³ A table of Participant Review Document Descriptors is available from authors.

the participants and foster open responses. (Taylor & Bogdon, 1984). Secondly, the interviewer purposely identified and set aside personal biases (Leedy & Ormond, 2015), and focused on the interviewees' perspectives to avoid pre-judgments and preconceptions using disciplined bracketing and constantly thinking on subjectivity of process (Glesne, 1999). Dwyer and Buckle (2009) stated the core ingredient is to be "...open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one's research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately represent their experience" (p. 59).

Taping the interview and keeping notes supported the accuracy of the information. The interview design included an open-ended introduction tailored to each participant that allowed the client to ask questions and chat before the interview. The introduction also had a description of the interview process and the time (1 hour and rescheduling if necessary, the goal (further defining Round 1's and Round 2's most helpful definitions), and clarifying review document's written responses). A specific instruction asked: "What was the client's personal meaning of the descriptors marked as most helpful and how the client saw them demonstrated during the leadership programme?" The interviewer probed and asked for 'think-alouds' when applicable and used open-ended questions regarding thoughts, feelings, stories, and experiences to gain insight into the thought processes of the respondent's deepest definitional meanings. Examples of questions for each coach alliance factor were:

- 1) Client Characteristics: "Please tell me how you think you demonstrated relationship building skills? What did you say or do that showed others that you wanted to build a relationship? Do you have an example?"
- 2) Coach Qualities: "What behaviour did your coach demonstrate that told you that she had confidence? How did she show empathy? What did the coach do or say that showed you she was challenging you? Please give an example."
- 3) Client/Coach Relationship: "What did you mean by mutual trust and please describe a scenario that illustrates what you mean? How would you describe the actions and scenarios that showed rapport between the coach and yourself? How did you act and how did your coach act when you detected rapport being built and established? Can you give an example?"

An additional quality check that tested for past recall of events was the last question asked in the interview: "How confident were you in responding to the questionnaire about a past leadership program? If confident, why?" Illustrated below is a flow chart summarizing design process.

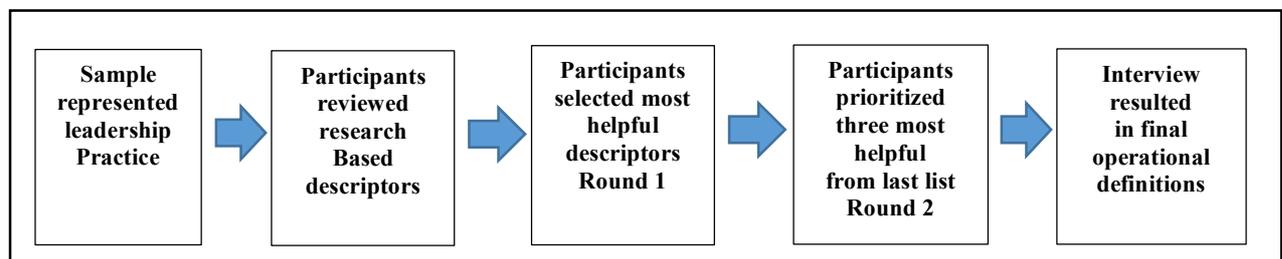


Figure 1. Summary of Design Process

Data Analysis

In phase one of the analysis, the principal investigator examined the 10 completed review documents and made a master list of the participants' most helpful descriptors (Round 1) by factor. Next, factor descriptors selected by more than six or more participants yielded a shorter list for the article. Phase two's goal was to match each individual's three top priority factor descriptors (Round 2) in the review document against the shortened Round 1 list to ensure inclusion for definitional analysis. The final list yielded the most consistently appearing from Round 1 and Round 2 results selected by the majority of participants for the interview definitional process.

Participant review document and Interview definitional data analysis

The independent manual analysis of the most helpful factor definitions by each author focused on selecting similar and different item definitions separating concrete general to specific phrases, and focusing on actions, expressions, patterns, and meanings. The aim was to document observable behaviors and scenarios using completeness, clarity, and objectivity criteria. Elements of an operational definition used in the analysis were a brief behavioral description, physical movements, behaviour intensity (Kansas Institute for Positive Behavior). Each analyst manually sorted, cut, and analysed the documented interview data independently. Comparison of the two manual analyses results generated a list of final operational definitions. The authors edited operational definitions and key factors for clarity, grammar, and anonymity. Summaries allowed inclusion of differences across participant responses. Following are the results and findings by coaching alliance factor.

Results and Findings

The research question for the study was: How do clients operationally define most helpful client characteristics, coach qualities, and client/coach relationship in a leadership coaching process? Eliciting scenarios and probing in interviews for observable actions yielded Operational Definitions (ODs) and Key Factor Items (KFIs). Key factor items were participant responses not meeting the operational definition criteria of completeness, clarity, and objectivity but deemed important to share.

Round one: Most helpful client characteristics

Six or more participants selected seven descriptors as most helpful during Round 1: *Motivation to change*, *Buy-in to coach*, *Accept responsibility to change*, *Reflective thinking*, *Recognise the need to change*, *Practicing new behaviour*, and *Self-awareness*.

Analysis yielded three consistencies in the client characteristic data. First, of the seven listed, *Buy-in to coach*, *Self-awareness*, and *Motivation to change* actively involved coach behaviours (see *Buy-in to coach* and *Motivation to change* definitions below in Round two). Participants consistently defined *Self-awareness* as "Coach helped me to avoid blind spots and was upfront with me". The focus for the *Self-awareness* definition was on the coach's behaviour support of awareness. The results support coach's involvement in the de Haan et al. (2012) and de Haan & Page (2013) coach/client interaction model. Second, the importance of peer, subordinate, and supervisor involvement appeared in the following descriptors: *Accepting responsibility to change* (see definitions below); *Reflective thinking* – "Made me see how others saw me"; *Recognising the need to change* – "Stopped doing what was impacting subordinates and peers" and "Non-supportive subordinate actions helped me to see reality and address issues"; and *Practicing new behaviour* – "Helped me to work with constant firefighting with staff". The involvement of "subordinates, peers, and staff" is unique to coaching in

organisations. Including organisational support descriptors influencing leadership growth in a coaching alliance instrument could provide a helpful systemic perspective for scientists and coaches. Third, participants reported observable and non-observable actions. *Practicing new behaviour* was an observable action, “Changing my body posture increased interactions in meeting”. The remaining descriptors were client thoughts and feelings leading to action as described above. Practitioners may need to listen and question deeply and effectively during the coaching process to detect and support internal drivers. In summary, the multi-dimensions and content of the definitions suggest that the preceding helpful coaching client definitions may be an important area to explore further as suggested by Assay and Lambert (1999).

Round 2: Prioritised client characteristics

More than six participants selected *Motivation to change*, *Buy-in to coach*, and *Accepting responsibility to change* as most helpful.

- *Motivation to Change* ODs: Assessing, debriefing; taking appropriate feedback and acting on it; making significant contributions; showing positive changes; processes and understanding the need to change gave me hope; and, peer, and subordinate feedback. KFIs (internal motivators) included fear of failure, wanting to succeed, and motivated by desire to attain higher position.
- *Buy-in to Coach* ODs: coach showed consistency, kindness, and was firm; coach demonstrated honesty and believability through words and actions; coach showed she had track record; application of new approaches in real-time. KFI was coach understood I was scared.
- *Accept Responsibility to Change* ODs: Embracing debriefing and feedback by developing measurable action plans; supervisor made need to change clear; showing hard work committed me. KFIs were take action, not be a victim, made me determined.

The results show that *Motivation to change* ODs and KFIs displayed internal (fear of failure and wanting to succeed) and external motivational sources (debriefing and feedback). The results support Ryan and Deci’s (2000) motivation definitions and Deci and Ryan’s (2012) Self-Determination Theory which posits different intrinsic and extrinsic motivational sources along a self-determination continuum. The *Motivation to change* results also support Assay and Lambert (1999) and Grencavage and Norcross (1990) reports that self-motivation, acceptance and responsibility for change were important to study in coaching.

During the interviews, participants commented that one could recognise the need to change but not accept responsibility to change suggesting the sequence of different motivational factors may be needed to accept responsibility to change. Clarifying the motivating drivers may enable coaches to help clients build motivation at an opportune time and add definitional insight for research and practitioners. The results suggest that the two separate descriptors in a coaching alliance measurement could provide helpful information.

Buy-in to coach was operationally defined as related to a coach attribute. Action linked to client/coach relationships suggesting that what a coach does and who the coach is influences coaching clients’ perception of helpfulness during the program. The *Buy-in to coach* definitions also included the importance of leader, supervisor, and external expectations suggesting a need to explore the viability of the organisational descriptor. Even though the

descriptor was not well-represented in the common factor literature⁴, it was consistently selected as most helpful by the participants and could provide additional information for coaches and scientific inquiry.

Accepting responsibility to change related to commitment, external motivation, and perseverance. The Transtheoretical Model of change has three behavioural variables: commitment, confidence in ability to change, and belief in the importance of changing happening in different stages of change (Prochaska & Norcross, 2007). Interestingly, confidence in the model is defined as self-efficacy, a well-represented critical self-change component in the literature (de Haan et al., 2012; de Haan & Page, 2013; Moen & Skaavlik, 2009, Stewart, Palmer, Wilkin, & Kerrin, 2008). Self-efficacy was not selected consistently by the majority of participants. All participants but one stated during interviews that they believed in the change and expressed the capability to accomplish what is needed early in the programme process supporting the Prochaska model. A possible reason for not selecting self-efficacy as most helpful could be that leadership coaching clients at higher levels of management typically are already successful, feel confident and able to change to achieve success. The multi-dimensional meanings, coaching and psychological client differences, and the findings on sequential motivating factors support the need to further clarify coaching alliance definitions with a scientific method.

Round 1: Most helpful coach qualities

The most frequently selected Most Helpful Coach Qualities were: *Credibility, Honesty, Empathy, Trustworthy, Insightful, Business experienced, and Communication skilled.*

The high representation of coach personal attributes (who coaches are perceived to be rather than what they do) followed by skills and experience propose a focus on client/coach interpersonal relationships. Some examples for *Empathy* included: “Coach showed understanding of frustrations, constraints”, “Showed me respect by sitting next to me”, and “Used language familiar to me, Adjusted personal views to help me understand”. Dagley (2010) concluded that “Exceptional coaches may be artisans and ...what differentiates them is not what they do, but the exquisite expertise in how they do it – and the essentially human and personal qualities that underpin such expertise” (p.77). De Haan, Culpin, and Curd (2011) in executive coaching and Jowett and Cockerill (2003) in sports coaching reported similar findings and commented on importance of coach attributes.

Definitions for *Business experience* included: “Examples and questions showed management experience”, and “Knew how to improve business and organisational processes”. Others can be seen below in remaining descriptor definitions. “Credibility” (see below) aligned with learning from business and coaching experience. Unlike working with therapeutic clients, “Business experience” appeared to have more weight than psychological experience in terms of credibility although responses to *empathy, credibility and trustworthiness* implied appreciation for psychological experience. The latter results agree with Bozer, Sarros, and Santora (2014) who found that coach credibility and academic background in psychology

⁴ See starred studies in the reference section used in questionnaire development.

correlated positively. The current study results suggest that both business and psychological experience are important in the coaching process and both may need to be considered when measuring alliance influencers.

Round 2: Prioritised coach qualities

Of the prior list, the participants most frequently selected *Credibility, Honesty, Insightful, Communication skilled, and Trustworthy*.

- *Credibility* ODs: Spoke from experience not academically nor credentials; Showed understanding of organisational structure/environment; Translated coaching to business concepts; Direct interventions, follow-through, data; could see and relate root causes; Developed plans to improve that worked; Competence. KFIs were knew how to help people grow, conversations, made sense, no psychobabble.
- *Honesty* ODs: Shared the good/bad/ugly; Disagreed openly; Managed difficult situations with calm demeanor, Pinpointed specific troublesome behaviours, Coach informed me how my explosive anger was upsetting others, Looked me in the eye. KFI was no hidden agendas.
- *Insightful* ODs: Stopped probing when appropriate; Made connections I couldn't see; Saw and used big picture; Said things that showed she could see into me; Used organisation, culture, politics to support me, coach met my family which helped her to know me. KFI was understood team dynamics.
- *Communication Skilled* ODs: Framed issues; Used right words/formulated questions to achieve results; Put issues into perspective; Made direct eye contact. KFIs were used clear verbal/nonverbal communication and active listening skills effectively.
- *Trustworthy* ODs: Built friendly/engaging relationship; Kept confidences/sensitive information; Shared openly, coach's stories made me trust that she knew what she was doing.

Research supporting the findings include Cooper (2008) and de Haan & Curd (2011) studies showing therapist/coach attributes central to success are empathy, understanding, respect, warmth and authenticity listening, and encouragement. The participants named the preceding when defining the prioritised qualities. Corroborating evidence indicates the definitions taken from research-based descriptors could serve as credible clustering items for the Coach Qualities construct.

The participants expressed a need for the coach to listen, to be open, to share, to be direct regardless of discomfort, and to understand with a calm demeanor. West and Milan (2001) described successful coaching conditions as Psychological Space (e.g. authentic and non-judgmental), Support (e.g. empathy), and Challenge (e.g. honest feedback). The preceding framework supports the current study results and presents a roadmap on what could be important in developing bonds for coaching success. The findings add support to the de Haan and Page (2013) inference that the coach plays a primary role in building the coaching relationship. According to the preceding authors, "It pays off in coaching to make the relationship as strong as we can by reaching agreement on the way we work, and the objectives we are seeking to achieve; and making the chemistry, the 'click' or bond between the coach

and the client, as strong as possible” (p.586). Further exploration into the role of coach *empathy, credibility, and trustworthiness* as coach quality elements in the client/coach relationship could be fruitful. *Insightful, business experienced, and credibility* ODs showed preferences for learning individualized organisational and business leadership ideas from coaching rather than “cookie cutter” as expressed in the *business experienced* definition. Perceived listening skills and coaching communication skills were noted throughout the list supporting the need for the coach to understand the client before and during a leadership coaching programme.

Round 1: Most helpful client/coach relationship descriptors

Ten most frequently selected Client/Coach Relationship descriptors were: *A quality and deep relationship, Rapport, Mutual trust, Honest coach who was a good fit, Coach supported and challenged appropriately, Client/coach open relationship, Honest coach, A coach concerned with client welfare, Mutual agreement on what was important to client, and Collaborative conversations about concerns.*

Five of the most frequently selected helpful descriptors refer to client/coach relationship bonding elements (*Quality/deepness, Rapport, Trust, Openness, Good fit*), three to coach qualities (*Honest coach, Supporting/challenging, and Concerned coach*) and two to mutual contractual agreements related to emotional client needs (*Mutual agreement on importance to client and Collaborative conversations about concerns*). Trust and transparency arose as core trends in the responses. Few related directly to tasks and goals.

The research-based questionnaire descriptors in the participant review document included the O’Broin and Palmer (2007, 2009) working alliance items. The model is based on Bordin’s (1976) therapeutic model (mutual agreement on goals, desired outcomes, tasks, roles, and mutual bonds related to empathy and trust). However, the working alliance model’s primary focus on behaviours, thinking, and feeling are related to collaboration on tasks and goals. The model does not directly address feelings, behaviours, and cognitive bond relationship influencers (Baldwin, Wampold & Imel, 2007; Jowett, Kanagoglou, & Passmore, 2012). The participants’ responses on helpfulness, collaborative and bonding relationships and coach qualities support the preceding authors’ findings. Adding client/coach relationship bonding feelings, behaviours, and cognitive bond influencers to work alliance measurements may offer additional information on the client/coach relationship during the process.

Round 2: Prioritized client/coach relationship descriptors

Six or more leaders selected the top three most helpful Client/Coach descriptors from the above list.

- *Mutual Trust* ODs: Coach spent extra time to build relationship and didn’t “dive in”; Coach demonstrated she had my back and I had hers; The coach opened up to me and knew the real me, my feelings, as a wife, a mother, and as an employee, she listened non-judgmentally; I could tell coach anything, she was my life preserver, feeling very comfortable sharing everything about me defined our deep relationship; talking to the coach now seemed the same as when we were working together; Allowing the coach to

interact with my leaders, peers, and subordinates showed the nurturing trust we had with each other.

- *Coach supporting/challenging client appropriately* ODs: Coach observed core issues and would present “here’s what you could do differently to be successful in that situation”; Coach saw into my world and helped me develop credible actions to improve; Conversations were positive and gentle but not easy to have; Didn’t avoid areas needing to be addressed; Coach feedback from peers was not easy to hear, yet due to the kind and nurturing style, I knew I had the support needed to become successful; Other responses were ‘Consistently front and centre; over and above appropriately and necessary’.
- *Collaborative Conversations about Client Concerns* ODs: Coach fed my concerns back into the organisation anonymously which were responded to seriously; Company’s senior leaders asked for coach feedback showing sanctioning of my ideas and proved powerful; Multiple two-way conversations consisted of concerns, coach listened, and posed questions to deepen conversations and get more information, offered ideas and suggestions to involve others; If progress didn’t happen, coach and I worked on improvement points; Writing the goals together and what wasn’t working helped us change the needed future direction together; Coach was part of my job, and knew what was going on with me, she was “live” in the environment, and understood my concerns, she could see my challenges; Coach alerted me to what was happening and we worked together on the improvement points.

Mutual trust and Collaborative conversations about client concerns had embedded relationship items that included both client and coach and revealed the importance of bonding. The results support Boyce, Jackson, and Neal (2010) findings that shared coach and client rapport, trust, and commitment are important. The participant responses included Jowett et al. (2012) relationship model elements, Closeness - mutual trust and respect, Complementarity – working well together with collaboration and openness. Commitment, the third element is reflected by participant responses in other descriptors such as “Mutual interactions felt like I was a peer being mentored by a peer” suggesting mutual commitment. Similarly reflected was: “Coach and I developed a relationship that didn’t dissolve”; and “it was a peer mentoring relationship that was very sustaining” suggesting a long-lasting relationship and supporting Jowett’s relationship model. The “peer relationship” comments differentiate the coaching client from the therapeutic client who typically depends on the therapist/counsellor for expert guidance unrelated to ‘peer’ status.

A difference can be seen in *Coach supported and challenged client appropriately* where participant comments inferred that listening, empathy and developing trust were linked to coaching task behaviour. Empathy and Listening appeared throughout the participant responses using words such as “kind and caring, knew the real me, listened without judgment”. Even though the prior responses support Machin (2010) findings on the importance of empathy and listening in a coaching relationship as demonstrated by the “person of the coach” (p.43), the *supported and challenged* definitional responses are more in line with the Bordin model and are related to coach work alliance tasks. Also supported is the Baron and Morin (2012)

conclusion that the quality of the relationship could depend on coach relationship activities. The data suggests that a quality client/coach relationship needs two elements for success: 1) coach/client interpersonal bonding separate from work process skills, and 2) bonding related to work skills.

Mutual trust

The leaders revealed the building of trust to be an important first step in developing the relationship in the initial coaching stages. In probing for an explanation of “diving in”, responses to other descriptor inquiries included “not getting to the business/organisational issues too quickly” and “wanting to know the coach more deeply beyond credentials before trusting”. The *Mutual trust* results also contained comments on the coaching process, coach communication with the organisation, and individualising a coaching program revealing how coaching activities could improve or deter trust. According to the results, the coach’s effort to build trust early and throughout the process could positively affect the development of trust and in turn the client/coach relationship and the work.

Coach supporting/challenging client concerns

Definitions show that the leaders perceived direct communication as support and challenge “Front and centre”. Coaching support is more highly represented than coach challenge in the literature on coaching helpfulness (Cooper, 2008; Dagley, 2010; de Haan et al., 2011). In coaching, support can be defined as an expression of empathy (West & Milan, 2001). An expression of empathy is an interpersonal behaviour within the affiliation to dominance continuum in interpersonal theory (Kiesler, 1996). Affiliation participant responses were “positive and gentle, kind and nurturing, and the coach knew the real me” illustrating interpersonal theory components.

Challenging the client resides in the other interpersonal theory dimension, dominance. West and Milan (2001) suggest honest feedback means direct behaviour. Examples are “helpful conversations that were not easy to have, and hearing difficult peer reports during coach feedback. The results support Machin’s (2010) statement that trust “enables a level of challenge” and that challenge means “holding the client to account” (p.41). The leaders’ responses show that helpfulness during the coaching process contains coach dominant-friendly behaviours (*challenging and supporting*) as described in the Circumplex Interpersonal Model adapted from Kiesler’s 1996 model (Ianiro & Kauffeld, 2014). The Ianiro and Kauffeld model depicts coach empathy, listening, a non-judgmental attitude, congruence and client readiness as inputs into trust, producing psychological depth and allowing the coach to challenge the client. The model and the current study findings support the importance of developing the client-coach relationship early in the process, developing trust, and the use of support and challenge during the coaching process.

The element of timing during the coaching program was noted by the participants with such words as “*early, before diving in*”. Taking time to know the client before working on issues supported the importance of coach action timing when developing a relationship. Further understanding the verbal and non-verbal elements demonstrated when supporting and challenging the client, as well as when they occur, could support scientific definitional inquiry.

Collaborative conversations about client concerns ODs

The participants identified three major points as helpful: 1) The coach carrying client concerns to the organisation and the subsequent organisational support that resulted; 2) The coach's knowledge of the culture and the business; and 3) The content and process of the collaborative conversations. The former relates directly to the current study coaching practices. As an example, we meet with company executives, Human Resources, client and key stakeholders in our planning stages to understand the context. In initial discussions, the company contracting executive and Human Resources agree to limitations of company access to coaching client's conversations, reports, and the programme to secure the leaders' privacy. Progress reports to administration are reviewed by the leader prior to delivery. We ask permission from the organisation leaders and the client to interview coaching client's executives, business peers and subordinates to understand business processes and the culture. The knowledge gained enables us to better understand the client environment. The coaching skills we use are typical co-active skills such as listening, intuition, curiosity, action/learning, and self-management (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Syndahl, 1998). The preceding leader responses provide evidence that coaching skills demonstrated through tasks can affect the quality of client/coach relationship during the coaching process.

Discussion

Two trends related to coaching alliance definitional issues surfaced in the results. The trends are: 1) Participant selection of both dominant and non-dominant research descriptors; and 2) Descriptors related to the development of bonding, and separately, the bonding related to the work. The two trends support the need for standardised alliance factors as recommended by Lampropoulos (2000) and Smith et al. (2009).

Dominant/non-dominant coaching alliance descriptors.

Client Characteristics had the least number of dominant research based-descriptors. Only two participants selected self-efficacy, a well-represented research variable, as most helpful in the first round of prioritisation and defined it as "the non-confrontational approach facilitated the capability to do the work on my own" and "repetition and focus enabled me to act on my own" supporting one research based meaning for self-efficacy (self-capability to act). The other research based self-efficacy definition, 'acting in a balanced way' (Evers, Brouwers, & Tomic, 2006) may be representative of therapeutic clients rather than coaching clients.

Client motivation and acceptance of personal responsibility to change also were not dominant in therapeutic and coaching studies but were prioritised by participants. Coaching and therapeutic client differences could be the reason. Brickley (2002) states that in therapy, the client wants to be 'fixed' and in coaching, a person wants to improve. Therefore, therapeutic/counseling client motivation might be different because part of accepting responsibility begins with personally choosing to get help. Typically, the coaching client has no choice because the organisation assigns the coach. The leadership coaching participants expressed differences in client motivation, outcomes, and ultimate purpose adding support to Bachkirova's (2007) assertions. The coaching/therapeutic client differences provide evidence of the value in pursuing the standardisation of coaching alliance factor descriptors.

Collaborative conversations about client concerns ODs

The participants identified three major points as helpful: 1) The coach carrying client concerns to the organisation and the subsequent organisational support that resulted; 2) The coach's knowledge of the culture and the business; and 3) The content and process of the collaborative conversations. The former relates directly to the current study coaching practices. As an example, we meet with company executives, Human Resources, client and key stakeholders in our planning stages to understand the context. In initial discussions, the company contracting executive and Human Resources agree to limitations of company access to coaching client's conversations, reports, and the programme to secure the leaders' privacy. Progress reports to administration are reviewed by the leader prior to delivery. We ask permission from the organisation leaders and the client to interview coaching client's executives, business peers and subordinates to understand business processes and the culture. The knowledge gained enables us to better understand the client environment. The coaching skills we use are typical co-active skills such as listening, intuition, curiosity, action/learning, and self-management (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Syndahl, 1998). The preceding leader responses provide evidence that coaching skills demonstrated through tasks can affect the quality of client/coach relationship during the coaching process.

Conversely, the participants selected the majority of the most dominant descriptors in past research for Coach Quality and for Client/Coach Relationship. Two Client/Coach Relationship descriptors worth mentioning that may be different are *Psychological depth and Challenging by coach* not often found in past coaching research. Machin (2010) found that mutual trust and psychological depth were critical to the coaching alliance. Lee (2003) refers to psychological depth as a coach's core competency. He defines it as a "...curiosity and willingness to engage with possible answers to the question, why" and "...it is through constructions about underlying motives that the coach understands what factors will influence the potential for successful change" (pp 143-144). The participants showed psychological depth in the relationship when defining mutual trust as 'The Coach opened up to me and the coach knew the real me, my feelings, as a wife, a mother, and as an employee'. Another participant said '...feeling very comfortable sharing everything about me defined our deep relationship'. Overall, the results suggest in general that research-based construct descriptors of the coach quality and client/coach relationship in the therapeutic research are also useful for coaching research. Considering the coaching client and therapist differences and the complexity of the alliance uncovered in the current results, pursuing coaching client operational definitions could be useful for practitioners and scientists. Further, according to Ianiro and Kaufeld (2014), the dynamic nature of interpersonal verbal and non-verbal communication behaviour adds complexity and needs to be considered.

Coaching alliance descriptor relationship to bonding and work

At times, respondents emphasized bonding related to the task in *Mutual trust, Buy-in to Coach, Coach honesty, Empathy, Trustworthiness and Communication skills*. [*Coach supporting/challenging client appropriately, Collaborative conversations, Accepting responsibility to change, Credibility, and Motivation*]. The results support that bond (Mutual trust, Acceptance, and Confidence) and the work (Task and Goals) are critical elements of the coaching alliance as reported by Bordin (1994). Bordin stated that "The bonding of the persons in a therapeutic alliance grows out of their experience in a shared activity" (p. 16). However,

the current study results showed that bonding can begin before the start of shared activities and be separate from the work suggesting that bonding timing before the work and with the work is also important. The participants illustrated that the bond can be separate and affect the work and the work can affect the bond. The Client/Coach Relationship construct is complex and the study results support O’Broin and Palmer’s (2010) call for further research and stated that the ingredients for influencing working alliance still need to be discovered.

Krause et al. (2011) analysed the following self-report instruments, the Working Alliance Index(WAI) by Horvath & Greenberg (1986), the California Psychotherapy Alliance Scale, CAL-PAS, (Gaston and Ring, 1992; Marmar, Weiss, & Gaston, 1989), and the Helping Alliance Questionnaire, HAq-1 and HAqII, (Luborsky, Barber, Siqueland, Johnson & Najavits, 1996). Analysis of the results showed the four instruments had an emphasis on different coach and client perspectives, stronger and weaker importance on bond, change, negotiating goals or tasks, and a failure to fully capture the relationship. The participant results showing therapeutic and coaching client difference and the prior research suggest further exploration is needed to measure elements that influence the coaching alliance. The results support Allen’s (2014) statement that even though the broad psychological alliance categories appear to be standard and definitions are wide in research, the definitions appear to be limited to researcher philosophy. Balancing coaching bonding and work alliance variables to measure influence on the coaching alliance could add helpful information for coaches and scientists.

Limitations

The arbitrary deductive method designed for the selection of the most helpful descriptors was a limitation to the study. Choosing a mixed method to select the most helpful descriptors would strengthen the study. A mixed method approach (a quantitative selection of most helpful and a qualitative method for defining coaching alliance constructs) could provide generalisation from a large sample to a population and generalization of in-depth data. Qualitative research generalisation refers to in-depth informational results used to seed hypotheses, theory and practitioner craft and does not generalise to a population. Therefore, the data from the study sample of 10 representing a mixed variation of participants showed saturation of data qualifying the study only for the generalisation of in-depth information. Further, in qualitative studies, the researcher is an involved party and risks bias due to the interpersonal nature of the inquiries even though involvement enables deeper information. The interviewer made dedicated attempts to reduce interviewer bias through disciplined bracketing, avoiding pre-conceptions, and consistently using self-awareness, yet both interviewer and analysis bias could have altered the quality of the results. Using external interviewers, additional analysts, and different approaches to analyse the data in future research could enhance results. Thirdly, the participants’ confidence level in remembering and responding to the prioritisation and interview process averaged 8 on a 10 point scale. Reasons cited were the review of personal areas of coaching needs, progress, exercises, and assessment material from participants’ past coaching programme prior to the study to reduce hind-sight issues (Roese & Vohs, 2012). Duplicating the study immediately following the coaching programme would avoid hind-sight bias risk. Lastly, an interesting insight from an anonymous reviewer was that a well-defined construct could limit creativity. The possibility of a practitioner using the

preliminary information to concretely define a coaching alliance construct is probable and a limitation. Hopefully, readers will understand that the results of the study yielded preliminary information to support the scientific process of defining a distinct coaching alliance making the information possibly useful but not definitive.

Delete

Coaching practice implications

Coaches may need to listen and question more often and deeply during the coaching process to detect and support internal motivational drivers and support success. Results and research showed that clients may see the coach as instrumental in building client self-awareness and self-motivation by expressing objectivity, giving appropriate feedback, and communicating the need to change. Additionally, learning how to create a feeling of connection could enable coaches to initiate and sustain successful coaching relationships: Campbell, Quick and Macik-Frey (2004) explain that “deep interpersonal communication” requires an open, trusting and non-threatening conversation (p.69). The study participants consistently defined the coaching alliance as a safe haven important to success allowing disclosure of positive and negative feelings. Coaches creating a safe haven for clients early could prevent derailment of the coaching process due to lack of trust. As coaches, we learn from our successes and our failures. Being aware that our clients look to our behaviour for signs of empathy such as ‘sitting next to me’, ‘using language familiar to me’, and adjusting personal views to help me understand’ could also support success. The U.S. Center for Creative Leadership and the Coaching Training Institute include a high behavioural emphasis on teaching coaching skills necessary to build client/coach relationships. Other coaching schools could benefit from teaching behavioural skills. Additionally, knowing that the knowledge of the business environment and psychological understanding appears to be a credibility source for clients can help us establish ourselves more quickly in the coaching alliance through our behaviour. The results consistently showed that the client holds us responsible for the client/coach relationship as is reported in past research. Understanding what we can do to support the alliance can be helpful.

An organisational coaching implication was how organisational staff support (peers, subordinates, and hiring executives/Human Resources, and leaders) can be helpful in the coaching process. Contracting up front with the organisation to ensure coach / client privacy became a first step in building trust and transparency with the client. Receiving permission from the organisation and the client to work with the staff, peers, and subordinates validated client assessment information and initiated credibility and client trust. Organisations and coaches could benefit from using similar contracting terms and processes. Grant (2012) in his core areas of study for the teaching of coaching includes the need to teach coaches to operate from an evidence-based approach to practice and to include a more systemic (group process) view of coaching.

Science Implications

Our intention was to capture the client view of operational definitions of the coaching alliance factors to answer the question: “Do we need alliance definitions unique to coaching?” Coaching and Psychological therapy/counselling differences emerged from the results possibly putting high quality quantitative coaching studies aimed at developing coaching alliance models and measuring outcome success at risk. Participants identified helpful descriptors in

the three coaching alliance factors that are not found in the measures being used in current coaching studies. Moreover, the study results revealed that bonding can begin before the start of shared activities and be separate from the work suggesting that bonding before the work and with the work are both important. The participants illustrated that the bond can be separate and affect the work and the work can affect the bond. The Working Alliance Index is a coaching alliance instrument currently used in coaching research (Baron & Morin, 2012, Horvath & Greenberg, 1986, Ianiro & Kaufeld, 2014, and de Haan et. al., 2013). The research has provided valuable information but includes only bonding related to tasks and plans. The study results of most helpful client characteristic, coach qualities, and client/coach descriptors and the bonding differences not found in current coaching reinforce the call for a coaching alliance with unique model and measurement. The current study is offering some results that indicate that though we can and should continue to use psychological research as a base to study coaching because of the similarities, we may need to note the differences and begin the scientific process of developing a unique coaching alliance instrument. In his appeal to further develop the science-practitioner model for coaching psychology Lowman (2012) suggests that to be taken seriously as a science and as a practice, a discipline needs both evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence to stay viable and creative.

Future Studies

Two types of potential future studies surfaced from the study results. The first one addresses the client definitions and patterns. The current study results support Assay & Lambert's (1999) assertion that motivation to change is important to study in coaching. Participant responses indicated internal and external motivators were helpful during the process. A study further exploring the Deci & Ryan (2012) Self-determination theory from coaching clients' perspectives could help coaches further understand the motivators that drive coaching. Related to motivation, the finding that one could recognise the need to change but not accept the responsibility to change may indicate that different motivators may be needed to accept responsibility to change. A study exploring how to recognise the motivators required to act on change from the client perspective could be helpful. Does readiness to change (a current research-based descriptor) mean ready to act on change? Another area of study that would be helpful to the coach and science is the study of the psychological depth required in coaching conversations to build trust and transparency. If trust and transparency are as helpful to clients throughout the process as indicated in the study results, a future study could reveal important information in building coaching relationships.

The second type of future study is related to the scientific need for unique coaching alliance definitions. The study results indicated that some client characteristics and client/coach relationship factor descriptors were unique to coaching. Only when assessing the most helpful coach quality factor did the majority corroborate the psychological research-based definitions. Client characteristic differences are described in the prior paragraph. The client/coach relationship helpful responses focused on building specific deep relationships to build trust, coach balancing of supporting and challenging, the integration of organisational support, peer-like client/coach relationship, and most important, the bonding unrelated to the work tasks and plans. The data suggests that further study may be needed to develop a unique coaching instrument and model. Future mixed method studies to discover client operational definitions

could be a start. Survey authors state that operational definitions can solve the problem of reducing abstract constructs so that they can be measured (Forza, 2002). Future studies exploring operational definitions of helpful descriptors modeled after Schermuly and Scholl's study (2012) of the operational definitions of different coaching styles could reveal important behaviour in detail. Results of such studies combined with available rich psychological research could provide the first steps in developing a unique instrument. An accepted general methodological approach (Zeller & Carmines, 1980) to develop valid scales includes the "... logical clustering of identified key terms, operationally defining the key factors, constructing the scale to examine the factors, and interpreting the results and implications based on factorial structure, validity, and reliability of the scale" (p. 65). Psychological and coaching research has provided the key factors for a start. In the approach described by Zeller and Carmines, operationally defining the coaching alliance factors is a necessary first step. Completing the process to develop a scale unique to coaching could be of value to coaching researchers and to coaches.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to provide preliminary evidence to initiate interest and research in a unique coaching instrument and model. The limitations of the study prevented the data from being sufficient. Our study findings offer some preliminary evidence supporting other coaching scientists' appeal for a distinctive coaching model and measurement. Creating operational definitional studies could help to minimise the risk caused by vaguely defined factors and different factor definitions in the research. Designing scales scientifically could also lessen the risk caused by scales driven by authors' philosophies and practice preferences. Using client perspectives could also clarify how clients see their coaching worlds so that we can minimise the risk of coach bias. It would also be productive, as an anonymous reviewer suggested, to repeat the current study on both client and coach populations to understand any differences in views. Having the research-based factors provides a beginning. If interest exists, future research could include quantitatively and qualitatively describing the coaching alliance construct. Hopefully, future researchers and practitioners will benefit from what we have offered.

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⁵ Starred references were used to develop the descriptors for each common factor in the questionnaire.

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<p>Mercedes L. Lopez is the retired president of a global executive coaching, organisational change management and process improvement company. Currently, she mentors executive coaches and teaches doctoral students. She has a Ph.D. from the University of Florida.</p>
