

A temporal multi-stakeholder perspective on the perceptions, expectations and experiences of coaching in a team context

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Abstract

Concerted efforts have been made to define and distinguish coaching as an emerging discipline and profession to develop confidence in the potentiality of coaching. Multiple perspectives on coaching exist, which are influenced by perceptions, expectations and experiences of coaching. This article draws on an instrumental case study situated in a team context to offer a temporal, multi-stakeholder perspective on the perceptions, expectations and experiences of coaching, to contribute to understanding the relationship between coaching perspectives and engagement with the coaching process.

Keywords: coaching, perspectives, perceptions, expectations and outcomes

Introduction

There have been concerted efforts to define coaching and distinguish this emerging discipline and profession from related fields such as mentoring, psychotherapy and counselling. These efforts are considered relevant as the development of the field is being undermined by the lack of shared understanding of basic definitions, theoretical orientations, and consensus on validated outcomes. These challenges also exist in the related field of leadership development (Day & Dragoni, 2015), which has implications as coaching contributes to the field of leadership development.

Multiple definitions of coaching exist, reflecting the different influences that have contributed to the field, including sport, psychology and business. For example, coaching can be defined as “a human development process that involves structured, focused interaction and the use of appropriate strategies, tools and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the client and potentially for other stakeholders” (Bachkirova, Cox & Clutterbuck, 2014:1).

Another example is the definition for leadership coaching, which can be defined as a “one-to-one adult development process that uses appropriate strategies and techniques to optimise, enhance and transform individual leader understanding for the benefit of leaders themselves, their organisations and, ultimately, the society in which they operate” (McLaughlin & Cox, 2016:3). Within these definitions, attention is drawn to coaching as a developmental process, which has implications for multiple stakeholders, not just the individual being coached. These stakeholders include the sponsoring organisation, the individual being coached and the broader team, as the development of the team leader will have an influence on the team. A central theme throughout these coaching definitions is individual development to support understanding and action, which aligns to leader



development. Further, the definitions reflect the foundational influences of the related adult and leader development disciplines, illustrating the multi-disciplinary nature of coaching. According to Day and Dragoni (2015:134), scholars have defined leader development as the “expansion of the capacity of individuals to be effective in leadership roles and processes”, whilst leadership development was defined by McCauley, Van Velsor and Ruderman (2010:20) as “the growth of a collective’s capacity to produce direction, alignment and commitment”. There is an overlap between leadership coaching and leader development and the broader definition of leadership development suggests a wider perspective on coaching would be beneficial. This perspective is alluded to in the coaching definitions, which recognise that the benefits of coaching may extend beyond the individual being coached.

There is ongoing debate on whether a universal definition of coaching can be developed, given the multi-disciplinary foundations of coaching, the wide range of knowledge bases, theoretical models and approaches applied across different contexts (Bachkirova, Spence & Drake, 2017). Within the sports coaching field, Lyle and Vergeer (2013) contend that a generalised definition of coaching is implausible, given the divergence of perspectives in coaching science and the range of coaching behaviours. A different perspective is offered by Barnson (2014:381) who suggested that the field of sports coaching science “may well become a hodge-podge of theoretical camps that only foster the divide between researchers and more troubling, between theorist and practicing coaches”. Similar tensions exist in the leadership and executive coaching fields, with some coaches distinguishing coaching psychology from other coaching genres. Some tension also exists between developmental coaching and goal-orientated performance coaching (Ives, 2008), which adds to the complexity in understanding what is expected from coaching, in terms of outcomes. This lack of consensus around coaching outcomes contributes to the confusion over defining the purpose of coaching, which has implications for the field emerging as a discipline and a profession.

Within the literature, a range of individual coaching outcomes have been identified by scholars. For instance, Grant (2013) focused on engagement and well-being, while Cox (2013) drew attention to learning and Tschannen-Moran (2014) identified skills and performance. Coaching is also recognised as useful for both individual and organisational development (Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck, 2014; Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh & Parker, 2010, Theeboom, Beersma & Van Vianen, 2013). Scholars (Fillery-Travis & Passmore, 2011; Bozer & Sarros, 2012; Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018) have recognised a lack of consensus on coaching outcomes, which can have implications for how coaching is perceived.

The focus within the coaching literature is predominantly on individual development and does not generally address the impact on the broader team or organisation. In their recent systematic review of executive coaching outcomes, Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018) recognised the multidimensional interrelationships between the different stakeholders and suggested reframing executive coaching as a social rather than an individual intervention; where the organization, the coach and the coachee co-create meaning embedded and shaped by the social context within which the coaching is applied. Team coaching has emerged in response to the call to address the social dynamics. Clutterbuck (2011) originally defined the role of the team coach as a catalyst who stimulates open dialogue in the team, providing support for the team to define its purpose and priorities, understand the environment, identify performance barriers, create a team learning plan, develop confidence, and internalise coaching. In contrast to the organisational context, team coaching is well established in the sports context, where coaching expectations focus on various behaviours, including instructing, motivating, goal-setting/talent development and organising/planning (Barnson, 2014). The dominant focus in sports coaching appears to be on performance



coaching. These definitions and range of outcomes in both the organisational and sports coaching fields highlight the potentiality of coaching to contribute to both individual and organisational development and performance.

Within this multiplicity of definitions, outcomes and approaches, there is also a lack of empirical evidence on how coaching is perceived by different stakeholders. Research is needed to understand how coaching is perceived prior to the coaching engagement and how these perceptions shift over time and influence engagement with the coaching process. Only two studies were identified that consider the impact of coaching expectations on coaching efficacy. De Haan, Culpin and Curd (2011) found that positive expectations of coaching were correlated to coaching effectiveness. A practitioner perspective is offered by Sports coach UK, who conducted a study in 2015. This study found that positive perceptions of coaches and coaching lead to positive attitudes towards sports participation, suggesting a relationship between coaching perceptions and engagement with the process. More research is required to address the knowledge gap around coaching perceptions, expectations and experiences, to understand how these elements influence perspectives on coaching and engagement with the coaching process. This study focuses on how coaching is perceived by multiple stakeholders, including the directors of the sponsoring organisation, the coaches, the team leaders and the team members. A temporal perspective of coaching perceptions is offered, which describes the perceptions prior to and during the coaching engagement and how these perceptions shifted and influenced the expectations and experience of coaching across time. The study makes a contribution to practice and theoretical knowledge by exploring how the multi-stakeholder perceptions of coaching influence coaching perspectives. Further, the research explores the temporal shifts in coaching perspectives and how these shifts influence engagement with coaching. The next sections cover the methodology, findings, discussion, conclusion and implications for theory and practice. Suggestions for future research are also offered.

Methodology

The main aim of the research was to explore the multiple perspectives on coaching within a team context across an eleven month coaching intervention, that shall be discussed below. The research was designed from an interpretivist, social constructionist theoretical perspective to explore the perceptions, expectations and experiences of the different stakeholders embedded within a socially dynamic team context. An instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995) was chosen, to enable rich data collection from multiple stakeholders to understand the interplay between perceptions, expectations and the lived experience of coaching. The study was inductive and guided by the research question: How is coaching perceived by the different stakeholders and how do these perceptions influence expectations and the experience of coaching over time?

The objectives of the study were to explore the different perceptions and expectations of coaching across multiple stakeholders. Further, the research explored how these perspectives shifted and influenced the engagement and the experience of coaching.

The research context was an eleven month global sailing race, where 12 amateur teams were each led by a professional skipper on evenly matched boats. The crew were paying customers of the race organiser. The race organisers appointed an external coaching team to support the skippers in transitioning into team leaders, as it was recognised that the skippers were influential on the crew experience. The coaching commenced with a four day learning group session prior to race start, followed by a range of individual and team coaching as the race progressed. The research design was informed by my experience as a crew member on the previous race, which contributed to an awareness of the multiple



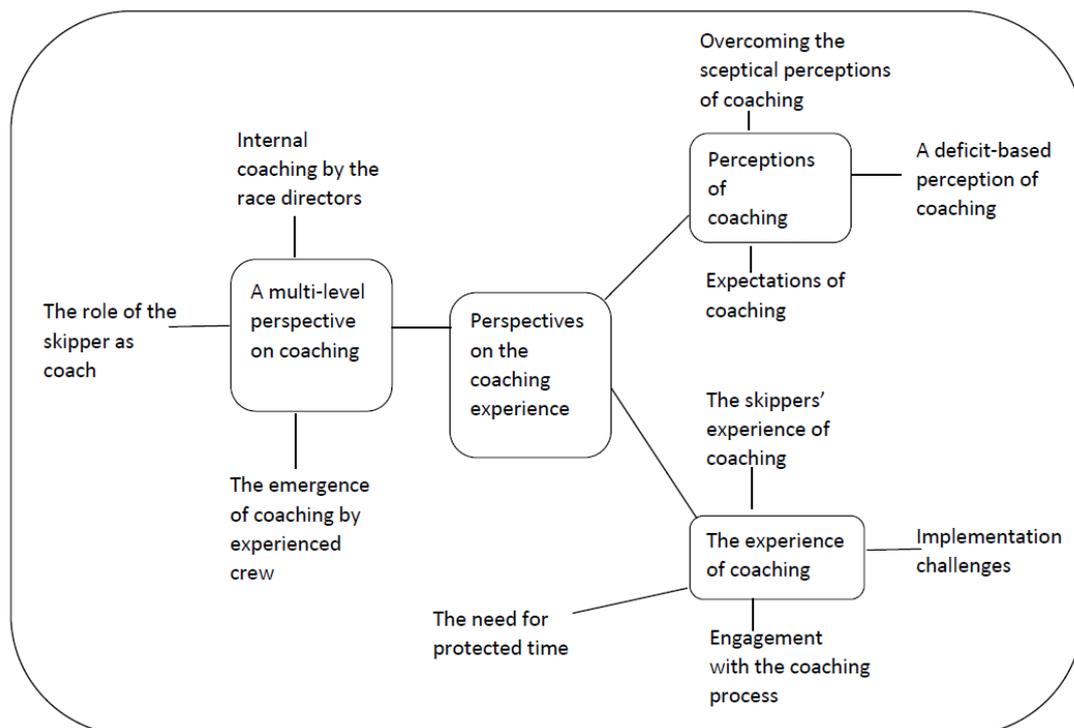
perspectives on leadership and how these perspectives are socially constructed, temporally dynamic and influenced by team performance.

A purposive sample was drawn from the different stakeholder groups to provide multiple perspectives on coaching. Fifty semi-structured interviews were conducted across multiple levels, including four race directors (representing the sponsoring organisation), three coaches from the external coaching team, eleven skippers and 25 crew members. The balance of the interviews consisted of five pilot interviews and follow up interviews with the external coaching team. Daily skipper blogs and additional documents including a crew survey (166 respondents) conducted by the race organisers, the coaching manual and race data were collected. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to develop themes from the data and Nvivo software was used to manage the volume of data generated. Thematic network analysis diagrams (Attride-Stirling, 2001) were used to analyse the latent themes.

Findings

Thematic network analysis diagrams highlighted the interplay between the perceptions, expectations and experiences of coaching, which illustrated the complexity of coaching team leaders embedded in socially dynamic teams. The interrelationship between the perceptions, expectations and experiences of coaching is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Thematic network of perspectives on the coaching experience



Three basic themes were identified in relation to the perceptions of coaching: overcoming the initial scepticism about coaching; a deficit-based perception of coaching; and the expectations of coaching arising from these perceptions. The findings identified implementation challenges during the coaching, which suggested a need for protected time

for coaching. The thematic network also highlights that coaching was not limited to the formal coaching conducted by the external coaching team; rather an informal coaching network developed over time, with both formal coaching by the external coaching team and informal coaching by the race directors, the skippers and experienced crew emerging as the race progressed. As the perceptions of coaching are considered influential on engagement and the experience of coaching, the themes relating to these perceptions are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Overcoming scepticism about coaching

The initial research focus was on the directors of the race organisation, as they were responsible for commissioning the coaching. A director initially expressed scepticism about coaching:

I'm a little cynical of it [...] I'm not sure I would have gone into coaching if it wasn't for (the coaching organisation), because I admire what they've done in their lives, because they've been at the serious coal face of life. – Director4.

This director expressed an initial scepticism and identified the relationship with the coaches and their experience as influential in supporting the decision to implement coaching. One of the managers from the race organisation, who had prior experience of coaching, recognised the challenge of promoting coaching in this context:

It must be a really hard sell for (the coaching organisation) [...] to talk about it, coaching, because if I look at the people who would have made that decision about coaching, none of them would have been exposed to coaching. – Manager1.

This participant recognised how the lack of exposure to coaching influenced the director's perceptions of coaching. Further, the manager shared questions about coaching that had been raised by director4: "so, why would people want someone to tell them all the answers, do you think it would work?" and "I don't understand why someone would pay, or want someone to tell them all the answers". In contrast to this perspective, one of the external coaches expressed surprise that people would be sceptical of coaching. Whilst this coach was not aware that coaching could be perceived with scepticism, the second coach supported the notion of scepticism, based on an incident at a previous organisation, where coaching was perceived with scepticism. It was interesting that the lead coach requested a clear, comprehensive definition of coaching that could be used to engage future clients. These different perspectives on coaching suggest that more attention needs to be focused on how coaching is defined and perceived by coaches, sponsors and clients.

Another director shared this perspective:

I guess it's allowed them or taught them of a different avenue of attack if you like. – Director3.

Skippers also referred to: "the teachings from (the coaching organisation)," and "(coaching) is pretty much how they taught it anyway". These comments suggest that coaching was perceived as prescriptive. There are several possible explanations for this perspective, including a possible power imbalance in the coaching relationship, or the perception that coaching presented a challenge to the skippers' personal identity. For example, a skipper commented:

I guess certain characters are almost protective of the fact that they are a skipper. They must know and so if they've come up with a plan or an idea, they



don't like the thought of going back and changing their mind. You know, it can show a bit of a weakness in many people's eyes, if you change your mind on something. – Director3.

Identity preservation appears to influence engagement with the coaching. Another explanation is that some skippers had a background in sailing instruction, and expected the coaching to be instructional. This perspective relates to the repeated references to “teaching”, which positions coaching as prescriptive.

Despite the initial scepticism, there was recognition from the directors that the coaching was valued:

We've got to do more of it. – Director4.

If coaching wasn't brought to my attention, I would say no [...] as I've gotten older and more experienced and opened up to the world of opportunities, I would certainly say now, that I am more receptive to, and open to it and it certainly has its place and its usefulness and it certainly does add value. It certainly adds value to any organisation. Do I think there should be more emphasis on it in the future – absolutely. – Director2.

These extracts highlight the perceived value of coaching and draw attention to the role of experience in influencing the perceptions of coaching, both as a proxy measure of value and as an influencer of coaching engagement. A coach offered a different perspective:

Once we explained the ideas, they began to open up. – Coach4.

The coach recognised that the resistance shifted as the skippers developed an awareness of coaching. The skippers also recognised the value of the coaching, particularly the initial learning group coaching as preparation for transitioning into the team leader role, prior to the start of the race.

A deficit-based perception of coaching

The second theme encapsulates *why* the coaching was implemented. Participants perceived coaching as being remedial to address problems. For example, one of the race directors suggested:

Some people respond to it more than others as they feel they have a need to respond to it or a deficiency in certain areas of management. – Director2.

This perspective exposes the underlying assumption that some people have a need for coaching. Another race director perceived the coaching as relevant to addressing problems:

We seem to have as many problems, just different problems [...] I'm sure that's any business that's growing [...] I'm expecting them (coaches) to recognise problems as they arise and then look for guidance from us [...] also to be made aware of. – Director4.

There is a clear expectation that the coaches will focus on recognising problems. This perspective is shared by a skipper:

He (coach) was very much asking us what problems we had, what we wanted to do, and he had some, some good suggestions for helping [...] that was quite useful, but I didn't really buy into the whole thing and I don't think it changed how



I worked with the team. I know, some of the other teams, who weren't so happy, they would have (coaching) sessions with or without the skipper. I don't think any of my guys ever did. I think they always, they were similar to me, they sort of thought, nothing was broken, so we don't need to fix it. – HPSkipper2.

The skipper recognised that other teams engaged with coaching to resolve problems within their teams. Further, the skipper highlighted the social construction of perceptions in explaining that the crew shared the perspective on coaching as a remedial process. A crew member from the same team agreed:

Initially the ones for crew were kind of sold to help sort out conflict in the team and we didn't have any. – HPRTW6.

Neither the skipper nor the team engaged with the coaching process, based on their perception that coaching was associated with fixing problems. This finding highlights the risk of positioning coaching as remedial, as this positioning can undermine engagement with the coaching process. A director expanded on this perspective:

Coaching shouldn't be a tool just to fix something. It needs to be pre-emptive and avoid us getting into the mess in the first place". – Director3.

Coaching appears to have been implemented as a remedial strategy to solve problems and address deficits in team leadership. However, this remedial focus contributed to the scepticism around coaching and undermined engagement with the coaching and a more proactive approach is considered appropriate.

Expectations of coaching

The third theme relates to understanding *what* is expected from coaching, as there is a lack of clarity around coaching outcomes in the literature. For example, a director commented:

The pressures from the crew – you're talking about CEOs and chairmen from major PLC companies giving you orders and some of those are nice people and some of them get a bit more heavy on the skipper, and that puts pressure on them – so they need a lot more help – and we didn't realise it. Ideally you want less dropouts and more people finished the race, and pleased with what's they've done and I think that will come from the skippers and the race director. – Director4.

A tension exists between a concern for the skippers' wellbeing and improving the crew wellbeing to address the dropout rate. The influence of the skippers on addressing the dropout rate is highlighted, which suggests a link between the development of the skippers and contributing to the organisational objective of improving the crew experience. The director explained how coaching can support the organisational agenda:

I think it's just about getting a better understanding with people that are on the coalface and managing crew to understand the whole of what's expected of them. To a degree, what we expect from them. And so they don't set off thinking it's one thing, and the reality is something else. – Director4.

There is a clear expectation that the coaching will contribute to the performance management of the skippers, by managing expectations relating to the team leader role for the skippers. Another director shared how the initial coaching session provided insight into the challenges facing the skippers:



We take for granted that people can do certain things, and it's very easy to put a race skipper in charge of a boat, a crew and say there you go, sail around the world [...] but actually the experience gave us quite an insight into what it involved to get the best out of the crew, to motivate the crew and coach them and debrief them and deal with conflict. – Director3.

Whilst this director focused on the team leadership aspects such as motivation, team coaching and conflict resolution, another director focused on the personal development of the skippers:

I felt it would make a real difference to the skippers and I think it has, I think it's shown that we have, more than ever, taken an interest in them, in their personal development by doing it. – Director2.

A crew member also emphasised the individual development aspect of coaching:

He's probably like a lot of young people at that point in his growth, he's kind of on the edge of his capability, it's stretching him [...] so in the right circumstances, the right person coaching and mentoring him he can go a lot further than he already has, and he has already gone a damn long way already. – HPRTW1.

This crew member identified that the context offered a developmental challenge and highlighted the potential for coaching. Further, there is recognition that leader development had occurred during the race. A tension also existed between focusing on personal development and the contrasting perspectives offered by several of the participants:

How to get your boat to go faster – performance coaching. – HPSkipper4.

Very close to the podium, getting very frustrated with not quite getting that podium [...] some guidance. – LPSkipper1.

About the last five percent, fine tuning things. – HPRTW1.

All about the one percent for them [...] what a lot of elite teams do and that's the difference between winning and not winning isn't it? – Director2.

All these participants expected coaching to be focused on enhancing performance, which contrasts to the developmental perspective.

Within this lack of clarity of purpose, a director explored the challenge of assessing the value of coaching:

It always worried me that there's a complicated cost to coaching [...] I'm not sure you ever really know until it's happened, what you've got out of it, and it could be a long time afterwards. The general idea of coaching is it solves the problem [...] I think with coaching that would be the worry of not knowing [...] what good it's doing, but with coaching, it can be very expensive. – Director4.

This director reiterated that coaching is remedial and also highlighted the temporal dimension that needs to be considered when assessing coaching. This was also the only participant who considered the cost of coaching for the organisation. Most participants focused on how the coaching supported either the skippers or the crew, without considering the impact on the organisation. Further, the director reflected on the complexity of identifying the link between coaching and business success. A coach reflected on the challenge of

implementing coaching and the relevance of coaching perceptions in supporting the process of coaching:

“If (directors) really believed in it, they would make time for it [...] part fault from us of not demonstrating the importance of it and partly due to everything that happened” – Coach4.

This extract reflects both the importance of contracting to manage expectations with stakeholders and recognition of the contextual challenges that can impact the implementation of the coaching process. The complexity of coaching teams is compounded by contextual issues and a lack of clarity on the purpose of coaching. The implication of this complexity is that coaching can be perceived with scepticism as it is difficult to assess the benefits associated with coaching. In summary, the perceptions of coaching shifted as the coaching progressed. Despite an initial scepticism about coaching, most of the skippers valued the initial coaching before the race start as the coaching supported them in transitioning from technical experts to team leaders. The coaching experience during the race was more varied and characterised by classic themes of conflict and crucial conversations related to the social dynamics within the teams and implementation challenges related to contextual dynamics. A coaching network emerged over time, with the coaching extending beyond the external coaching to include informal coaching by the race directors, the skippers and experienced team members. This coaching network suggests that the benefits of coaching extend beyond the individual being coached.

Discussion and conclusion

An initial scepticism was found to exist around the construct of coaching, which was perceived as both remedial and prescriptive “teaching”, which can undermine engagement. This finding aligns with the work of Bozer and Sarros (2012), who suggested that a lack of a systematic empirical review of coaching outcomes raises scepticism about the effectiveness of coaching. The deficit-based perception of coaching contradicts the literature, where coaching is defined as a growth and development opportunity (Mihiotis & Argirou, 2016). Further, the prescriptive perspective of coaching in the findings also contrasts with the coaching literature. For example, Whitmore (2003:8) referred to coaching as “helping them learn rather than teaching them”. One explanation for the perception of coaching as prescriptive “teaching” is the instructional focus in sports coaching (Gallimore & Tharp, 2004).

A temporal shift in perspective occurred from the initial deficit-based, remedial coaching perspective with a problem focus, towards recognising that coaching is value adding. This finding aligns with the work of Petriglieri, Wood and Petriglieri (2011) and Barnson (2014), who recognised the potential to reframe past experiences or challenges in the regressive domain into growth opportunities. Mihiotis and Argirou (2016:459) suggested that coaches position coaching in a productive way that “diminishes second thoughts and misconceptions” to encourage engagement. The focus on problems provided an opportunity for the team leaders to review action with the coaches and develop new approaches and processes to contribute towards growth and performance.

A lack of clarity also existed around the expectations of coaching, generating paradoxical tensions between development and performance and between an individual and collective perspective on development. This disparity in coaching expectations links to the tension identified by Ives (2008) between personal developmental coaching and goal-orientated performance coaching. Whilst the espoused purpose was to support the well-being and development of the individual team leaders, the findings indicated that the focus was also on



enhancing the collective team experience, by focusing on performance managing the team leaders. Within this lack of clarity, the complexity of assessing the value of coaching was explored. The temporal dimension was also highlighted as a consideration in assessing the value of coaching.

A challenge exists for practitioners and researchers to overcome the initial scepticism associated with both the lack of awareness and clarity of coaching purpose and expected outcomes. This finding highlights the importance of contracting as a process for managing expectations about coaching. A clear focus on aligning individual growth and development to team performance is necessary to shift the deficit focus of participants towards a growth-orientated, performance focus, to ensure that participants do not perceive coaching as being associated with problems. By framing challenges as opportunities for development, which are aligned to team performance, team leaders are more likely to engage with the coaching process. This finding is supported by recent research (Grant (2017:37), which identified a third 'generation' of workplace coaching that extends beyond conceptualisations of coaching as remedial and "explicitly focuses on enhancing both the performance *and* the well-being of individuals and organisations in ways that are sustainable and personally meaningful". By focusing on the well-being and development of the team leaders, the coaching contributed to addressing team well-being by reducing the drop-out rate within the teams. This issue is similar to the challenge of employee retention, identified by Grant (2017) in an organisational context.

The temporal emergence of an informal coaching network highlights the organisational benefits of coaching the team leader embedded in a team context. The development of the team leader has benefits for the well-being of the team. This finding is supported by other research conducted by O'Connor and Cavanagh (2013), who recognised the "coaching ripple effect", where the positive impact of individual coaching spread throughout the organisational system. These benefits are also reflected in the definitions of coaching, which recognise that coaching potentially has benefits for the organisation and other stakeholders.

Implications for theory and practice

The study highlights the importance of communicating the benefits of coaching to a broader audience of organisational sponsors, directors and teams to raise awareness of the value that coaching can contribute to team leaders, teams and the broader organisation. Further, the findings highlight the role of contracting in positioning coaching as a solution-focused, leadership development process aimed at aligning individual development and team performance, to address the initial scepticism that can exist. By focusing on team leaders, organisations benefit from a coaching "ripple effect", which contributes to the well-being of the teams. The findings are relevant to both organisational coaching, where team coaching is emerging as a field of study, and sports coaching, where coaching the athlete leader is emerging as nascent.

Suggestions for future research

More research is required to further explore strategies for addressing the scepticism that exists around engaging with coaching. Research could explore how the multiplicity of perspectives, definitions and approaches are contributing to the scepticism that exists around coaching and how this issue can be addressed. Research could also explore how the emerging debates between the different coaching practitioners are contributing to the confusion in the field. Other areas for further research include focusing on the optimal combination of leadership and team coaching to support team leadership development.



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