

Executive Coaching: A Brief Summary of the Evidence

Psychological Health Center of Excellence

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Overview

This brief report summarizes our findings from an examination of systematic reviews of executive coaching. Specifically, we address the following questions about the scientific evidence for executive coaching:

1. What is the efficacy/effectiveness of executive coaching?
2. What are the required or recommended competencies?
3. Are there any differences in effectiveness based on background/specialty (i.e., is any one specialty, such as psychologists, more effective than other groups)?
4. Is there a recommended gold standard for certification (e.g., International Coaching Federation (ICF), International Consortium for Health and Wellness Coaching)?

Search Strategy

We conducted a search of literature that included free text keywords for the concept of executive coaching (“executive coach**”). We limited our searches to two databases: MEDLINE and PsycINFO. We performed additional searches using Google Scholar. Titles and abstracts were screened by a single reviewer using the following exclusion criteria:

- Not English language
- Not executive coaching
- Not systematic review or meta-analysis

Search strategies:

Ovid MEDLINE (run on 6/7/18)

1. “executive coach**”.ab,ti. (51 results)
 - a. 5 not executive coaching
 - b. 45 not systematic review
 - c. 1 included (Grover SR)

PsycINFO (run on 6/7/18)

1. “executive coach**”.ab,ti. (650 results)
2. review.ab,ti. (329449 results)
3. 1 and 2 (86 results)
 - a. 14 not executive coaching
 - b. 70 not systematic review
 - c. 2 included (Athanasopoulou SR; Grover SR)

General Findings

- As an unregulated field of practice, executive coaching (also known as business coaching or leadership coaching) has a number of definitions. It typically refers to a brief, formal relationship between a client seeking to enhance their executive abilities and a consultant who “coaches” the client to increase those skills and abilities. Executive coaching is usually understood to involve a non-clinical client-coach relationship. It includes interventions that promote learning and cognitive and behavioral change for increasing self-awareness and improving job and interpersonal performance. Executive coaching can address both personal and professional development with a focus on the acquisition of new skills.
- Executive coaching is a flourishing practice in business and industry, with approximately 28,000 practitioners worldwide and nearly \$2B in revenue.
- At least two international trade groups provide credentialing and accreditation (e.g., International Coaching Federation; The International Consortium for Health & Wellness Coaching). There also are professional organizations devoted to strengthening the profession (e.g., Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching; The Graduate School Alliance for Executive Coaching)*.
- Executive coaching is distinct from mental healthcare services that are administered by licensed and credentialed providers. This distinction requires that the individual providing the coaching understands the limits of their competence

*Please note: This is not intended to be either an endorsement of the examples cited or an exhaustive list of executive coaching organizations.

and credentials. Executive coaches need to be knowledgeable about state and federal laws/regulations pertaining to the practice of licensed mental health services so as not to engage in regulated practice without a license and/or credentialing to provide services.

What is the efficacy/effectiveness of Executive Coaching?

- The scientific literature on executive coaching is nascent, with most experimental trials emerging within the past decade.
- We identified three systematic reviews for consideration (one identified via Google Scholar). All made explicit statements about the poor quality of empirical research in the field.
- The most comprehensive systematic review (Grover & Furnham, 2016) concluded that; “it is clear there is not enough data to make a definitive judgment about the effectiveness of coaching on each of the outcomes investigated in these studies because few of them have been investigated multiple times, with experimental rigor or with large enough sample sizes.”
- Despite a lack of rigorous studies, the three reviews did suggest that, based on the current research, executive coaching may be an effective intervention across different outcomes. Some examples included:
 - » Individual benefits: increased personal well-being, improvements in work-related attitudes, acquisition of new coping strategies, and improved attainment of self-directed goals
 - » Organizational benefits: reductions in shortening the learning curve for new roles, improved job satisfaction, and improvements in interpersonal relationships (including increases in work engagement by subordinates), and leadership/management skills
- While executive coaching is undertaken with the goal of improving performance in the one being coached, the current empirical data can demonstrate only that coaching is effective at improving the coachee’s self-perception about improvements to themselves and the workplace.

What are the required or recommended competencies?

- We could identify no evidence to support recommended competencies for EC. The designation of “executive coach” is at this time a voluntary title without any specific training and/or experiential requirements. The International Coach Federation (ICF) provides a trade group for coaches, including executive coaches, and has a certification program for individual coaches with several levels. ICF has also developed an accreditation program for executive coaching training programs. As an example, American University in Washington DC has an accredited Executive Coaching Program which requires 135 hours of in-person training including 12 days of in-class instruction, weekly telephone conference calls, plus assigned reading and a coaching diary. Participants begin to practice coaching early in the program and receive feedback to help hone their skills.

Are there any differences in effectiveness based on background/specialty (i.e., is any one specialty, such as psychologists, more effective than other groups)?

- We could not identify any research that addressed this question.

Is there a recommended gold standard for certification (e.g., International Coaching Federation (ICF), International Consortium for Health and Wellness Coaching)?

- Although there are multiple certification programs, we could not find any evidence in the literature to support a gold standard for certification.

Scientific Limitations in the Executive Coaching Research Literature:

- The literature on executive coaching is relatively nascent and narrow. For instance, Burt & Talati (2017) identified only 11 randomized controlled trials, two of which were published academic theses. Moreover, seven of the 11 publications were produced by the same research group.
- As with psychotherapy research, the context of executive coaching involves the idiosyncratic application of interventions which are customized for each coachee. This discrete tailoring makes it difficult to make comparisons across individuals receiving services. Firmer scientific conclusions can be drawn only if the field adopts more rigorous and consistent methodologies.
- The use of self-reported self-efficacy as an outcome measure is inherently problematic, as is the use of retrospective data and small sample sizes. The field needs to develop better standardized and objective outcome measures.
- Current consensus in the literature may be misleading or biased because it relies on a majority of publications emanating from one research group with results derived from a single data set.
- There is inherent bias in self-report from individuals receiving coaching and from organizations employed to provide the coaching. More objective measures for coaching outcomes need to be developed and evaluated.

Conclusions

Executive Coaching is a growing industry, with approximately 28,000 world-wide practitioners and more than \$2B in revenues. The field is not regulated by state or federal governments, and has more than one credentialing organization. There is no empirically derived gold standard for evaluating Executive Coaches, accredited training programs or accrediting organizations. The field of Executive Coaching has an emerging empirical literature characterized by a narrow source of studies with varying quality. Initial research suggests that executive coaching may exert a positive effect on individuals and organizations. However, more rigorous research is needed to substantiate the effectiveness of executive coaching.

References

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