

Coaching sticks

The study in brief

We spoke to 53 ex-coachees, people who had been coached one, two, three, four, five, or more years ago. The overwhelming majority of coachees reported long term impacts of being coached. These long term impacts didn't always relate directly to coaching goals established at the time. Their retrospective accounts of the impact of coaching referred more often to the personal changes they experienced in achieving those objectives and how those transformations helped them more generally in becoming more effective. Participants talked also about how coaching had helped them to learn differently, and to operate differently at times of change. The reflective nature of coaching helped participants to become more self-aware, which in turn helped them to relate more effectively to others, to adopt a bigger-picture perspective, and to become more confident and resilient. The results are discussed with reference to coaching evaluation, and the potential value of coaching as part of a change intervention.

Introduction

Evidence suggests that coaching has significant positive effects at the time of coaching; on performance, attitudes, resilience, wellbeing and self-regulation (e.g. Theebom et al, 2013). Few studies however, have explored the impact of coaching beyond the end of the assignment. The lack of studies into the longitudinal impact of coaching may mean that the impact of coaching is as yet not fully appreciated. Clutterbuck (2012) hints at this in suggesting that a focus on short term coaching objectives may detract from a focus on longer term, sometimes more meaningful, outcomes.

We found five studies into the long-term impact of coaching. Grant (2001) reported that a cognitive-behavioural coaching approach enhanced the academic performance of trainee accountants, increases that were sustained six months later. Miller et al (2004) found that clinicians receiving coaching and training demonstrated higher levels of motivational interviewing skills than did those who only attended training, four months after coaching finished. Libri & Kemp (2006) reported the impact of a coaching/training intervention on a male finance sales executive, who showed enhanced sales performance and core-self evaluation 6 and 18 months after the end of the program. Green et al (2006) found that group undergoing a life coaching program demonstrated higher levels of goal striving, well-being and hope than a control group, with gains maintained up to 7 months later. Franklin & Franklin (2012) studied the impact of two coaching programmes on independently evaluated academic

performance at a Sydney university. Students undergoing 7 weeks of coaching achieved significantly higher academic marks than control groups 6 months after the coaching finished, and this improvement was maintained a further 6 and 12 months later.

Given that coaching is often used to achieve specific goals; such as a successful transition into a new role, or to facilitate improved relationships in the workplace, or to complete an important task successfully; why should clients be particularly interested in the impacts of coaching beyond the end of an assignment?

One reason, obviously, is that both client and coachee will be ultimately disappointed if changes achieved are not sustained. If a coachee successfully transitions into a new role by demonstrating a different style of leadership, for example, but reverts to old ways within six months, then the benefits of coaching may only be regarded as transient. The Green and Franklin studies were designed to test for sustainability.

The second reason relates to the nature of the change achieved. Arthur et al (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of training in organisations with reference to the Kirkpatrick (1977) model. Kirkpatrick identified four types of evidence for evaluating training programs; *reactions, learning, behaviour* and *results*. Arthur et al found that whilst training is an effective means by which to impart *learning* (the knowledge participants acquire as a consequence of attending a program), within-study analysis suggests that this learning doesn't always appear to translate into sustainable changes in *behaviour*. The authors suggest this may be because training outcomes tend to be specific to certain environments. In other words training works well to impart the teaching of a new skill in a particular context; it may not work so well in imparting deeper changes applicable to a wide range of circumstances and situations. So does coaching serve to facilitate a change in behaviour specific to a particular context? Or are the changes more deep-seated, more personal and transformational?

In Research Bulletin 5 we studied 271 coaching assignments through the lens of single-loop and double-loop learning, or the extent to which the focus of the coachee appeared to be solely on external factors (single-loop) or else included aspects of self awareness and intrinsic motivation (double-loop). We found 50 - 60% of coachees appearing to engage in double-loop learning. We might expect the impact of double-loop learning to be more durable and transferable than the impact of single-loop learning.

If coaching is particularly effective in facilitating personal, or transformational, change, then it may be a potent component of any change programs whose explicit objective is to facilitate long term, sustainable, changes in behaviour and attitude. Many change programs however place more emphasis on training than coaching (Rodgers, 2007), usually as part of a broader effort to 'communicate' the rationale for change effectively. 'Communication' in this context often means the outward dissemination of information rather than dialogue or debate (van Vuuren & Elvig, 2008). Training, and workshops built into change programs, don't often allow for discussion or reflection on the rationale for change; they are usually designed to ensure the employee is made aware of their role in effecting the change. In some change programs reward and remuneration policies may be adapted to reflect the desired changes in behaviour, further shoring up the focus on extrinsic motivation. Attempts to query the direction of change may be framed as 'resistance' rather than an attempt to make personal meaning out of the changes proposed (van Dijk & van Dick, 2009).

Practitioners and academics alike continually decry how unsuccessful most change efforts are (Burnes, 2011), and the implicit focus on sources of extrinsic motivation stands out as a possible contributing factor. If coaching can be shown to have an enduring and transformational impact on attitudes and behaviours, appealing to more intrinsic sources of motivation, then this has obvious implications for the designers of such programs.

We might hypothesise then, that when coaching involves double-loop learning; in other words when coachees reflect upon themselves as part of the dialogue, then the impact of coaching may be more transformative and sustained. In this study we set out to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent, and in what form, are the outcomes of coaching sustained?
2. What is the nature of the process by which sustained changes are facilitated?
3. Does coaching change the way coachees learn?
4. Does coaching change the way coachees operate at times of change?
5. What implications do the results have for the deployment of coaching within organisations?

The Study

We selected an initial long-list of potential participants who had been coached in the past through our organisation, based on a review of goals & evaluation forms from our database. Coaches and coachees complete 'goal and evaluation' forms for most assignments conducted by WhyteCo. These contain goals and objectives, action plans, progress reports, and the coachee's post-assignment comments on their experience. We selected only for assignments that included at least 8 sessions of coaching, and for which goals & evaluation forms had been fully completed.

We then sorted the forms into categories based on how long ago coaching assignments were completed and sent e-mails to everyone on the list inviting them to participate in a phone interview. Where the coachee had moved to another organisation

we used LinkedIn to try and contact them and sent a short invitation through that medium. We aimed to speak to 7 - 10 people in each time bracket. We invited a total of 85 people of whom 53 replied, agreeing to participate:

Table 1: Participants

Category	Time (months) since assignment finished	No. people invited	No. accepting	% people accepting
1 year	6 - 18	12	11	92%
2 years	19 - 30	11	8	73%
3 years	31 - 42	17	9	53%
4 years	43 - 54	16	9	56%
5 years	55 - 66	19	9	47%
5+ years	67+	10	7	70%

We conducted one 20 - 30 minute phone interview with each participant, during which we asked them to confirm when their coaching finished, how many sessions they had completed and so on. We then asked them to outline the original context for coaching, what they felt at the time they had achieved, the greatest impact of coaching at the time, how the process worked, and what (if any) long term impact the coaching had. We also asked two supplementary questions, specifically asking if they felt coaching had had any impact on the way that they learned, and the way that they operate at times of change. In analysing the data, we looked at the following items, including the extent to which they appeared to reflect single-loop and double-loop learning:

- » Goals set as recorded in the original evaluation form
- » Commentaries recorded on the 'goal and evaluation form'
- » Participants descriptions in the interview of:
 - Their achievements as a consequence of coaching
 - The impact coaching had on them at the time
 - Any long-term impact coaching had on them
 - Any impact of coaching on the way that they learn
 - Any impact of coaching on the way that they operate at times of change

In categorising responses in terms of single-loop and double-loop learning, we adopted a similar methodology to that used in *Research Bulletin 5*. If a written or verbal comment referred to goals or achievements without an explicit reference to self-awareness or consideration of self, it was categorised as 'single-loop' or externally focussed. An example of an externally focussed achievement would be; "I successfully completed the strategic plan and presented it to my peers."

If a written or verbal comment made an explicit reference to self-awareness or consideration of self, then it was categorised as 'double-loop' or internally focussed. An example of an internally focussed achievement would be; "I developed better interpersonal skills based on a more profound understanding of my own motivations and needs".

Results

Coaching outcomes

Figure 1 shows four different measures of the outcome of coaching. First, 100% of participants recorded on their form, completed soon after the end of their coaching assignment, that they achieved their goals (achievements/form).

When asked in retrospect about their achievements, during the research interview, 50 of 53 people confirmed they had achieved their goals. Of the three who said in retrospect they didn't achieve their goals, one said coaching may have had a delayed effect.

Similar numbers of people reported an immediate impact of coaching as said they felt they had achieved something through coaching, though the language used to describe an achievement was different to the language used to describe an impact.

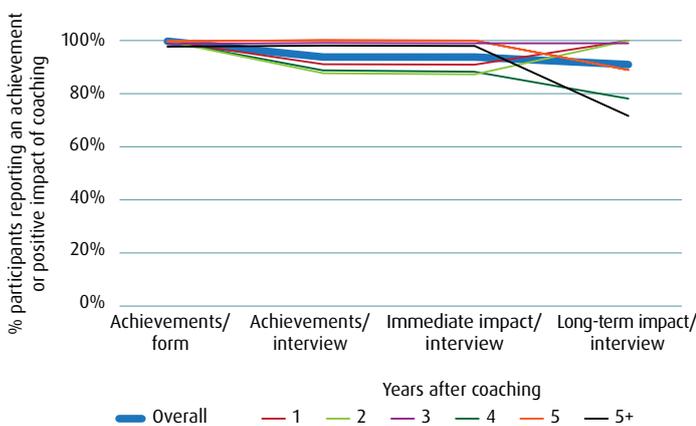
Only 3 participants reported having experienced an immediate impact, but no clear long-term impact.

The overwhelming majority of participants reported a *long term* impact of coaching, including 89% of those coached five years ago and 71% of those coached more than five years ago. Only 3 participants reported having experienced an *impact* at the time, but no clear *long-term impact*. For example:

"I don't think it had a long term impact; perhaps a bit more self awareness? Perhaps it focussed me more on rigorous planning, sticking to plans, reviewing plans. I wasn't doing all that before coaching. Coaching started me on that path."

"Self awareness, but it doesn't change my interactions with others and I still get into trouble for being too direct. I don't think it changed me long term - that's my personality. I wish I could do it forever, once a quarter."

Figure 1: Impact of coaching



Focus - internal vs external

We also looked at the relationship between reported long-term impact and single-loop vs double-loop learning. Overall 64% of 'goal and evaluation' form commentaries made explicit reference to double-loop learning.

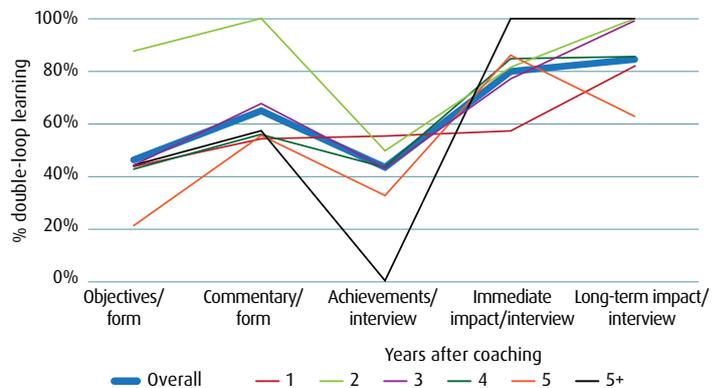
Figure 2 shows the proportion of responses that reflected single-loop, double-loop learning for each of the following stages in the process:

» The 53 participants recorded 156 *objectives* between them on goal and evaluation forms (average 2.7). Just over 20% of those objectives included some reference to self analysis or self-consideration. 47% of participants included at least one goal that included a consideration of self.

» 64% of immediate post-assignment commentaries, again recorded on the goal and evaluation forms, made at least one explicit reference to double-loop learning.

» Moving ahead in time to the phone interviews, 44% of achievement descriptions included reference to double-loop learning, as did 79% of impact descriptions and 87% of long-term impact descriptions.

Figure 2: % double loop learning vs stages in the process



Both *objectives* and *achievements* were often described with an emphasis on task and accomplishment of that task, whereas *commentaries* and *impact* statements were more likely to make reference to process. To illustrate the point, consider the responses from one participant in particular:

1. Objectives (from the goal and evaluation form)

The following objectives focus on outcomes. There is no explicit reference to double-loop learning:

1. To provide high quality leadership
2. To build the commercial arm of my organisation
3. To sharpen the thinking around my career

2. Commentary (also from the goal and evaluation form)

The commentary, completed immediately after the assignment, makes explicit reference to double-loop learning:

"I now better understand myself as an executive. I liked the strategy of seeking feedback from people who know me in work and non-work settings. These were useful self-insights that provided a steep learning curve for me. My coach never gave me a direct piece of advice, but led me to come to my own conclusions and understandings - self awareness."

3. Achievement (from the phone interview)

The participant's articulation as to what they achieved from coaching is again focussed on outcomes. The reference to tools is often, though not always, indicative of an externally focussed approach to learning. There is no explicit reference to double-loop learning.

"Coaching supported my capacity to lead a new organisation and I gained useful tools."

4. Impact

In describing the impact of coaching, the participant makes explicit reference to self-awareness:

"It validated the things I do well, and drew my attention to areas of myself I needed to be mindful of and work out."

5. **Long term impact**

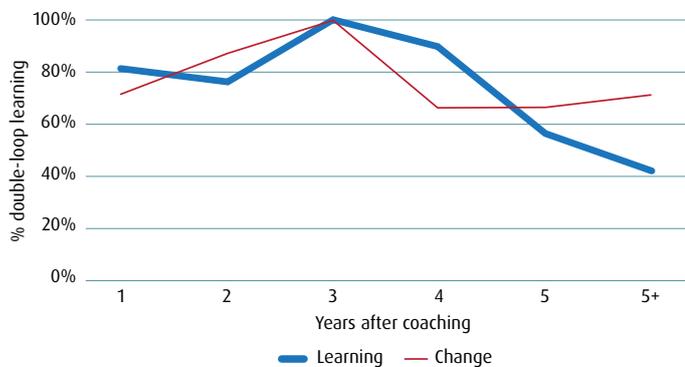
The long term impact of coaching again makes explicit reference to self-awareness, playing down the use of tools:

“Coaching sharpened my sense of self awareness in context of my role here. I haven’t drawn on specific tools too much; it’s been more sensory, self awareness. I’m now more conscious of how I impact on others and how they impact on me. I understand the mindfulness required to lead and have developed a sensitivity around different styles.”

Learning and change

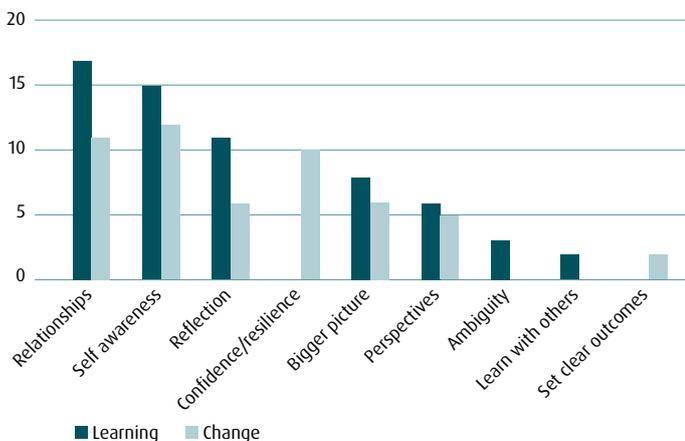
We asked participants if coaching had changed the way that they learn and/or the way they operate at times of change. 75% said that it had changed the way they learn, and 77% said it changed the way they operate at time of change. Figure 3 shows the data by question and group.

Figure 3: Impact of coaching on learning and approach to change



Participants’ descriptions of the ways in which coaching impacted on the way they learned, and operated at times of change, were broken down into categories. Figure 4 shows that many of the themes mentioned were common to both ‘learning’ and ‘operating at times of change’. People spoke about feeling more resilient and setting clear outcomes specifically in the context of how they now operate at times of change. They spoke about dealing with ambiguity and learning with others specifically in the context of how they now learn.

Figure 4: Learning and change



Considering the five themes mentioned most often:

1. **Relationships**

In discussing new ways of learning, people talked about how paying attention to others now features more clearly in the way they learn. For example:

“We worked on understanding the cues others are giving you – taking the time to really understand properly.”

“I’m more open and receptive to information around me. I’m not a rote learner now; I appreciate there’s not always a right answer. You need to find a way to navigate.”

“It’s the interpersonal stuff; being more open to listening.”

In discussing how they now operate at times of change, people also mentioned being more open to others perspectives and listening.

“Being open to others points of view is critical at times of change, and being conscious of the impact of change on others.”

“Yes, I try and communicate more, to touch base with people. I ask more questions. I try to be open and listening rather than closed and directive.”

2. **Self awareness**

The capacity to engage more effectively with others and to learn from others may derive from a heightened sense of self awareness gained through coaching:

“Coaching provided me with the opportunity to reflect and workshop through how I think I learn best, how others learn too.”

“You need to have a good look at yourself and be clear and honest how you do things, and how you tend to get things wrong, and have a package in place to mitigate against those things.”

“Yes, we explored how I process things and stumbling blocks , how I ruminate about things. It helped me with change and to accept what’s done is done, to move on.”

“It helped me realise you can’t automatically change . It helps to consciously manage that change. It’s not as straightforward as I thought; you need to manage the change in yourself. We don’t often think about that.”

“I’m more able to set aside my emotions and my opinions, and to work through from different perspectives.”

3. **Reflection**

Reflection was specifically called out as the means by which people come to attain greater insights about themselves both in learning and operating more effectively at times of change:

“He got me to think about why I do things; he made me reflective. Reflection has become routine now. He always challenged me very positively.”

“It’s subtle – the way you react to things. I stop to think now and tell myself not to be hasty. It was through engaging in reflection involving a third party.”

“Yes, I stand back and reflect more – I have a conversation with myself.”

4. Confidence and resilience

Some people explicitly mentioned how reflection helped them deal with change by helping them to feel more confident:

“I was in an invidious position which was very difficult to deal with. I would have walked otherwise, but the coaching helped me put things into perspective and I’m now more powerful about making a stand for myself.”

“I learned not to worry so much, to be more resilient. I’m no longer so afraid of the negative situation. It helped me see the picture from someone else’s perspective. We worked on peer relationships on coaching which has been useful in my new role where I have some difficult peers.”

5. Seeing the bigger picture

Both in learning differently and in managing change, participants talked about having developed an enhanced capacity to stand back and see the bigger picture:

“Yes, clarity. Now I see things more objectively, for what they are.”

“Stepping back and listening and thinking through things, learning as you go. It taught me to apply the same principles to managing people. I’m a better manager now and focus on setting goals and being clear what I want.”

“I have more foresight in terms of the impact of change. I take a step back and think what will happen long term.”

“I can be more objective and see various things in more distant and non-personal way.”

Discussion

The results of this study are discussed with respect to coaching evaluation and change.

Coaching evaluation

In *Research Bulletin 10* we suggested that a coaching evaluation process confined to making sure objectives are agreed at the beginning of an assignment, and ticked off as complete at the end of an assignment, may yield only a superficial understanding of what happens in that assignment. With reference to Kirkpatrick’s training evaluation methodologies we recommended three additional factors to build into an evaluation process; clarifying purpose, coaching methodology and formative evaluation. The results from this study provide further insight into the value of these three aspects.

1. Clarifying purpose

In the earlier study we concluded that there is a fundamental difference between agreeing the purpose of a coaching assignment and agreeing specific objectives. If the organisation insists that detailed objectives are established too early in the process, then coaching may yield disappointing results. In *Research Bulletin 12* we developed the theme further, demonstrating how goals are continually shifting and changing in response to changes in the environment. In this study we found that language matters. If coachees are asked to talk about objectives and achievements, then they may respond solely in terms of tangible outcomes. They are less likely to talk about the process by which they achieved those outcomes, and what they learned about themselves in that process. Organisations that focus on the broader development agenda instead of overly specific goals are more likely to create the space for long term sustainable change.

2. Coaching methodology

The Standards Australia Handbook for Coaching in Organisations (2011) refers to a taxonomy of coaching that distinguishes between different forms of coaching; skills, performance, transformational and remedial coaching. The idea is that differentiating between coaching in this way may help select the right coach for the right assignment. However, if being a ‘skills coach’, for example, means that the coach is good at facilitating the improvement of “*basic work-related skills*,” but isn’t able to facilitate “*increasingly complex levels of self-awareness*,” then whilst the ‘skills coach’ may deliver good results in the short term, those improvements may be less likely to prove transferable or enduring than the same results facilitated by a ‘transformational coach’. Rather than focus exclusively on observable outcomes, we suggest that the purchaser of coaching services pays more attention to the capacity of the coach to facilitate long term sustainable development.

3. Formative evaluation

Our results highlighted several limitations of a simple before-and-after evaluation methodology focussed squarely on the achievement of specific goals and outcomes. First, whilst 100% of coachees reported having achieved their objectives when filling out the goal and evaluation form, 6% of coachees later reported verbally that they hadn’t in fact achieved anything. This may be attributable to the passage of time, but may also be due to the nature of the enquiry. Asking people about their coaching experience verbally, in a confidential space, may yield significantly more insight than asking them to commit their views to a form.

Second, reporting templates often focus on tangible outcomes. Our results suggest that restricting the conversation to tangible outcomes, and limiting the vocabulary to ‘objectives’ and ‘outcomes’ may limit the organisation’s awareness as to the occurrence and nature of individual’s personal transformations. These personal transformations appear to be both impactful and sustainable, and by enquiring as to the nature of these transformations the organisation will achieve a better understanding of the ongoing development of its leaders. One could of course change the design of a form, but our experience tells us that interviewees often find it challenging to articulate the nature of personal transformation, and may be reluctant to record such insights by means of a formal and impersonal process.

Third, evaluation methodologies that stop at the end of a coaching assignment may fail to record longer term sustainable change. One of the people we interviewed reported no impact of coaching until several months had elapsed. Almost everyone spoke of long term impacts that shaped their behaviour after the end of coaching.

Change

Most texts on change management emphasise the importance of communication (Lewis et al, 2006). Most emphasise the dissemination of information; pushing the message down and out. Few make explicit reference to creating space for two-way dialogue. Where participation is mentioned, often this is more about creating a place for people to ‘feel’ more involved, and in which they are pressed to commit to the desired change. Rodgers (2007) positions education and training as common components of a top down approach to change in which the objective is to obtain compliance with a pre-determined core message. At such events there is often little tolerance for pushback and little emphasis on listening and reflection, so that learning and dialogue may be suppressed. In large-scale change we often see cascading effects, where senior managers are invited to such events, and then asked to stage similar events for their own staff further down the hierarchy.

Weick et al (2005) define sensemaking as the retrospective rationalizing of events. People tend to engage in sensemaking when the way they see the world appears to be at odds with the way the world is being described by others. So in a change program, in which the message from above doesn't immediately resonate with others' experience of the world, people will seek to make sense of what is proposed by asking questions and engaging in dialogue. Where there is no space created for dialogue this questioning may be experienced by senior management as 'resistance'. Resistance is often met with a reiteration of the original message and a reminder that compliance is expected. It is in such circumstances that we may see passive resistance and a lack of engagement and enthusiasm for the proscribed change.

Reflective dialogue therefore sits at the heart of change (Jabri et al, 2008), and the capacity of the change agent/leader to engage in reflective dialogue is likely to be a key success factor in the achievement of change objectives. In that context we may thoughtfully consider the impact that coaching had on many of our interviewees. People talked about how coaching helped them to become more:

- » Open to others perspectives and to listening
- » Aware of the need to manage changes in self before seeking to change others
- » Reflective
- » Confident and resilient
- » Capable of standing back and seeing the bigger picture

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Coaching then, may be a particularly effective intervention as part of a large scale change program, bringing an entirely different focus not usually provided by training and workshops; that is a focus on sense-making and intrinsic motivation. This provides a new rationale for programs designed to develop internal coaching capability, and for the effective deployment of external coaches in achieving strategic goals, whether it be through individual or team/group coaching.

Further studies

We invited people to participate in this study in retrospect, some by e-mail and others through LinkedIn. 62% of people we invited agreed to participate. We can only speculate why some people agreed to participate and others didn't. We can't rule out the possibility that people who felt they got most out of their coaching experience were more likely to agree to participate in the study. A more robust methodology for future longitudinal studies would include establishing an upfront commitment to being interviewed after the end of a coaching assignment, and staying in touch with participants so that everyone can be initially contacted through the same medium.

Notes on author

Paul Lawrence is a member of WhyteCo's Sydney Guild and a Director of the Centre for Systemic Change (CSC).



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