

The Coaching Scorecard: a holistic approach to evaluating the benefits of business coaching

Mel Leedham

Melville@mlcoaching.plus.com

Abstract

The use of external business coaches to improve the performance and competence of employees is increasing dramatically. However, there is still little empirical research attesting to its effectiveness in achieving business goals, and there is no universally accepted way of evaluating its added value to the individual or the organisation. This study takes a multi-dimensional approach to reviewing the published literature on the tangible benefits of business coaching combined with the more established processes of training evaluation and business results measurement. The study goes on to identify, via a case study, how a group of corporate purchasers select and measure the effectiveness of external business coaches. Data is also obtained from a large-scale national survey of people receiving coaching in a variety of business contexts. A grounded theory methodology is applied to the data to identify what factors the key stakeholders perceive to be important in deciding if a business coaching relationship is successful. These factors are then used to develop a generic and holistic framework and associated benefits model that is proposed as relevant to both corporate purchasers and external suppliers of business coaching.

Key Words: Business Coaching, Evaluation, Business Benefits

Introduction

“Organisations using coaching are hoping to improve individual and company performance and support personal development. These are credible objectives. But if there is no evaluation structure in place for your coaching initiative, how do you know if it is generating success, stagnation or even problems?” (Webster, 2002).

Businesses are becoming more and more conscious of competitive pressures, and seeking to maximise returns on all investment made in employee development. What is surprising therefore, is that there appears to be little empirical research on the efficacy of business coaching. This is particularly so for the practice of coaching by external coaches (Horner, 2002).

The increasing popularity of business coaching means it is absorbing a substantial proportion of company budgets. Business coaching, although relatively new in this competitive arena, needs to rise to the challenge and prove its worth. Taking this theme as my focus I investigate the most important benefits of business coaching from the perspective of the coachees and the purchasers of external coaching.

The data for the study came from two main sources:

1. A small case study involving six purchasers of external coaching from Royal Mail Group plc, a large UK corporation.
2. Questionnaire returns from the coachees of 224 coach-mentors on professional development courses with the Oxford School of Coaching & Mentoring (OSC&M). The data contained more than 1100 individual comments written by the coachees over approximately two years.

Methodology

I applied the principles of both a positivist and a phenomenological paradigm in approaching this research. This is because the research was basically in two parts. Firstly, I used a positivistic approach to study the literature and published concepts and models, in order to develop a tentative hypothesis. Also the questionnaire was originally designed for another purpose and I had no involvement with the creation of the questions or gathering of the returns. For this part of my research the cross-section study was the appropriate methodology. Secondly, I did a phenomenological study, using a case study approach for part of this research, taking the subjective evidence from a small number of people with no preconceived theory or model and attempting to identify new patterns or themes in the data.

I chose a grounded theory approach for the overall methodology because its inductive/deductive approach and the principle of revisiting of the data needed to build and test hypotheses in order to fully 'ground' a theory fitted perfectly with my approach to the study (Turner, 1981). I believe the combination of these approaches has produced a refined, reliable and valid view of the benefits from a coaching relationship that can tentatively be applied to other similar situations.

Summary of literature findings

Recent surveys in America and the UK found that only a small proportion of organisations are formally evaluating the impact of coaching, less than 10% in America and only 19% in the UK (Hay 2002, Bolch, 2001). However, some specific themes relevant to my study have emerged from a review of published literature:

1. The need to involve the customers of the coachees in any evaluation, not just the coachees themselves.
2. There appears to be no universal methodology for evaluating coaching benefits.
3. Some of the coaching evaluation methods are based purely on the perception of the recipient, which may be unreliable for a variety of reasons.
4. There appears to be a link between an individual's confidence and their performance and coaching seems to improve confidence.
5. There appears to be an inter-relationship or dependency between the elements of a coaching relationship.

6. The approach of companies to measuring other key performance indicators has a resonance with measuring business coaching in terms of language and relevance.

Results of the case study

The six purchasers interviewed were learning, development and purchasing professionals from Royal Mail's central training division. Their interest was the suitability of the external coaches for the needs of the internal customers across the whole corporation.

Factors in selecting external coaches

(1= no importance 10= vitally important)

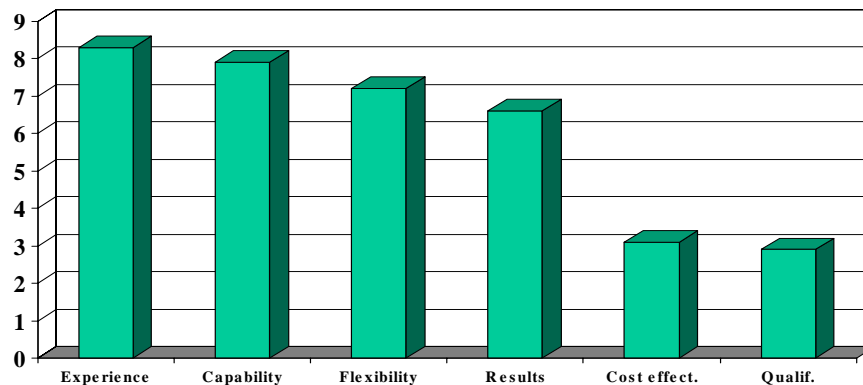


Figure 1: Factors in Selecting External Coaches – Purchasers view

Figure 1 shows selection criteria in order of perceived importance to the purchasers. Six main themes or factors that influenced the initial selection of external coaches emerged, in order of significance:

- ***Evidence of having done similar coaching work previously***
- ***Personal capability and relevant organisational experience*** of the coach, as perceived by the user.
- ***Flexibility of the coach and their organisation.*** The use of a range of models, tools and techniques, willingness to work alongside other coaching organisations and with a variety of individuals in a wide variety of situations.
- ***Focus on delivering or improving business results***
- ***Cost effectiveness.*** Interestingly this did not mean the cheapest, in fact suppliers who were 'too cheap' i.e. well below market rate would be looked on with a suspicion of being low quality.
- ***Qualifications and professionalism.*** Membership of professional bodies, CPD and supervision arrangements.

Success Criteria for External coaching

Five main themes or factors were identified for how purchasers determined the success of an external coaching contract (see Figure 2).

Factors in evaluating coaching success (1 = no importance 10 = vitally important)

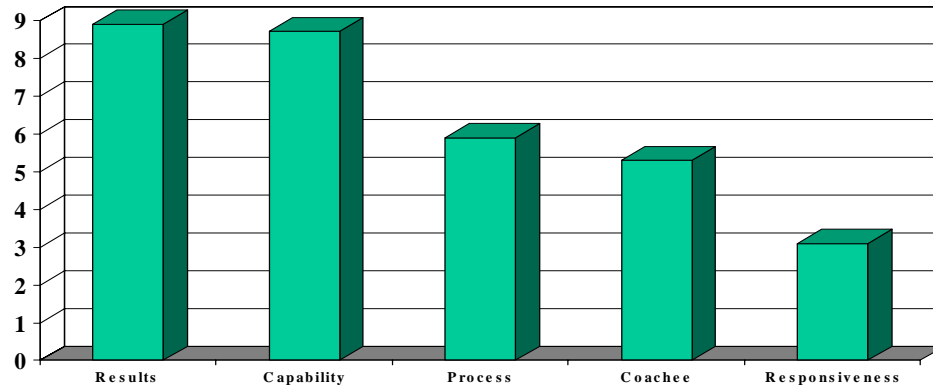


Figure 2: Factors in Evaluating Coaching Success – Purchasers view

The factors in order of perceived importance were:

- **Contribution to the business results** or objectives agreed at the start of the programme
- **Personal capability** of the individual being coached.
- **Adherence to process:** Did the coach deliver what they said they would, within agreed timescales and to the promised standards?
- **Satisfaction of the coachees with the relationship:** Did they like, get-on well with and have a good rapport with the coach.
- **Responsiveness to change:** This covered the coach's ability to alter dates, times, locations etc. with minimum cost impact.

Results of OSC&M questionnaires

All the OSC&M qualification programmes have a common factor of requiring the developing coaches to work with three volunteers for a series of five or six coaching sessions at approximately monthly intervals. After at least four of these coaching sessions each of the three volunteers is required to complete a standard questionnaire known as a 180-degree feedback. This collection of completed questionnaires provided a rich source of empirical data from a large number of people who had experienced being coached by what many people would consider to be competent, professional coaches. Their comments were categorised and are summarised in Table 1.

| Cat. | No. | % | Summary of category |
|-------------|-------------|----------|---|
| L | 154 | 9.9 | Confidence, feel good, believe in myself, morale, grow |
| E | 129 | 8.3 | Support, guidance, encouragement, valued |
| W | 121 | 7.8 | Career, promotion, future |
| H | 113 | 7.2 | Techniques and skills development |
| B | 98 | 6.3 | Clarity of purpose, logical, clear goals, focus |
| I | 92 | 5.9 | Awareness and insights, self-analysis, strengths and weaknesses |
| F | 86 | 5.5 | Reflect to see the big picture, time for myself, time to concentrate |
| Q | 72 | 4.6 | Motivated to improve, own the process, personal responsibility |
| O | 69 | 4.4 | More productive, more effective, results, quality of life |
| Z | 67 | 4.3 | Personal relationships |
| C | 62 | 4.0 | Willing to listen, questioning, objective view, sounding board |
| A | 51 | 3.3 | Feel good, more energy, positive feelings, fun, recharged |
| U | 47 | 3.0 | Life long learning, personal development |
| G | 45 | 2.9 | Safe environment to discuss confidential and sensitive issues |
| M | 45 | 2.9 | Professional, role model, inspirational, rapport, at ease |
| X | 44 | 2.8 | Not beneficial, cancelled appointments, more assertive |
| AA | 40 | 2.6 | Driven to move things, encouraged to progress, follow through. Inspired |
| S | 40 | 2.6 | Change behaviour |
| D | 33 | 2.1 | Share experiences |
| R | 26 | 1.7 | Attitude, values, beliefs, life balance |
| AC | 20 | 1.3 | Structure and discipline |
| T | 19 | 1.2 | Job satisfaction, commitment |
| Y | 19 | 1.2 | Reduced stress, share frustrations, cope with pressure, reduce burnout |
| V | 17 | 1.1 | Challenging and stretching |
| J | 15 | 1.0 | Think outside the box |
| N | 13 | 0.8 | Relaxed, less driven |
| P | 10 | 0.6 | Valued by the organisation |
| AB | 6 | 0.4 | Answer to problems and issues |
| | 1553 | | TOTAL |

Table 1: 180-degree Analysis of Categories

I believe the frequency of comments across the two hundred and twenty four coaches is easier to show graphically, as depicted in Fig. 3 below.

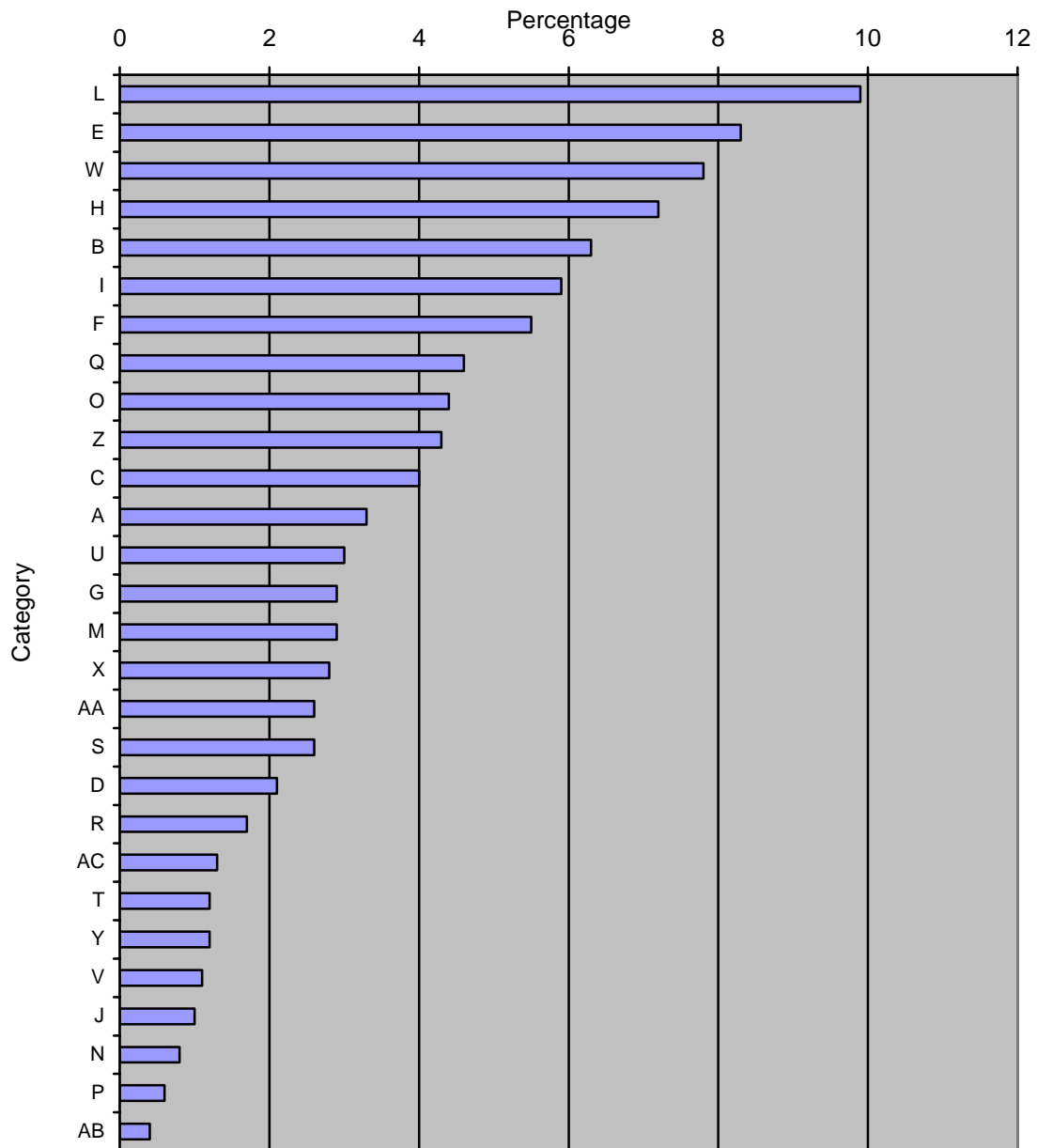


Figure 3: Percentage frequency of comments

Analysis of Stakeholder Benefits

The data from the OSC&M returns forms a relatively smooth curve with no clear distinctions in the percentages for each category. However, I selected those categories over 5% as representing the most commonly occurring benefits and grouped them as follows:

Internal Feelings:

- Increased confidence, feeling good, believe in myself, higher morale, growth (9.9%)
- Received support, guidance, and encouragement, feel valued (8.3%).

More tangible and visible behaviours:

- Enhanced career, and promotion prospects, helped with my future (7.8%).
- Techniques and skills development (7.2%).

Clarity and focus, inward and outward:

- Clarity of purpose, logical, clear goals, provided focus (6.3%).
- Awareness and insights, self-analysis, strengths and weaknesses (5.9%).

Time and space for thinking and reflecting:

- Helped me reflect to see the big picture, time for myself, time to concentrate (5.5%).

One significant discrepancy was that purchasers thought improvement in business results was more important than coachees who only listed it ninth most common (4.4%). Recognising this I re-analysed the comments to see which other benefits were combined with business results. Interestingly the most common benefits associated with business results were:

- Confidence 23%
- Techniques and skills 15%
- Improved relationships 10%
- Clarity of purpose 9%

The importance of improved relationships with manager, colleagues, teams and customers also came through in the literature (Hay, 2002). Improving relationships came tenth most common in the coachee data.

Much of the literature found that the coachee's satisfaction with the coaching relationship was an important factor in evaluating the process. (Goldwasser, 2001; Kirkpatrick, 1996; Stone & Watson, 1999; Hargrove, 1995; Kilburg, 2000; O'Neill, 2000). However, other publications suggested these reaction measures only provide feedback on the quality of the coaching delivery and are not direct measures of individual learning (Kraiger, 1993).

The purchasers believed it was important to select the 'right' coach in the first place. Right in this context means their fit with the organisation, their knowledge, experience, style and professionalism (CIPD, 2004; Sparrow & Arnott, 2004).

Several of the OSC&M coachee questionnaire categories describe what they believe to be valuable attributes of the coach. These would be:

- Support, guidance, encouragement, valued (8.3%).
- Willing to listen, questioning, objective view, sounding board (4.0%).
- Professional, role model, inspirational, rapport, at ease (2.9%).
- Share experiences (2.1%).
- Challenging and stretching (1.1%).

The Importance of Confidence

From my study I believe there is a critically important factor missing from the current approaches to evaluating the effectiveness of a business coaching relationship: the importance of the motivational and attitudinal outcomes. In the field of sports coaching these factors are more clearly recognised. Some sports psychologists believe self-efficacy to be an important determinant of athletic success and recommend various coaching strategies targeted at directly improving self-efficacy (Feltz & Doyle, 1981; Feltz & Weiss, 1982; Weinberg et al, 1979).

Researchers have gone on to suggest that a positive perception of a person's self-efficacy may be an important factor in determining whether or not they apply the skills they have learned to the job and may be a good predictor of how well these skills will be maintained over time (Bandura, 1983; Kraiger, Ford & Salas, 1993; Marx, 1982).

Evidence suggests that if the coaching process has been conducted effectively, competently and professionally there is a reasonable expectation that the performance of the employee will improve (Jarvis, 2004). If the performance of the employee has improved, there should be a tangible and measurable improvement in the performance of the organisation in areas directly impacted upon by the employee. (Cheese & Thomas, 2003; Gary, 2003; Jarvis, 2004; Odiorne, 1991; Watson Wyatt, 2003). The anticipated improvement in specific areas of organisational performance will in turn produce improvements in related business results.

A Holistic Evaluation model

I further believe there is a dependant dimension in how the various aspects of an effective coaching relationship relate to each other (Cheese & Thomas, 2003; Cross & Lynch, 1988; Jarvis, 2004; Phillips, 1997).

For any holistic evaluation model to be valid however, this additional inter-relationship between the various benefits needs to be accommodated.

The current drive, in business coaching contracts, is for proof of a tangible return on investment (Conner, 2002; Cross, 2000; Shepherd, 1999; Worthen, 2001). If the above hypothesis is true one practical way of effectively evaluating business coaching would be to concentrate on the measurable factors of the coaching process, the qualities of the coach, the feelings and behaviours of the coachee and their improved performance and capability. By doing this it would not be necessary to try to measure the impact of the coaching directly on the business results because it would be an inevitable consequence.

Perhaps other authors are correct to suggest that coaching has an impact on the bottom line without spending time, money and effort trying to prove the link in directly measurable terms? (Cheese & Thomas, 2003; Cross, 2000; Goldwasser, 2001; Koch, 2002; Sparrow & Arnott, 2004; Stone & Watson, 1999; Watson Wyatt, 2003).

Cross and Lynch put forward a pyramid of measures ‘The Smart Performance Pyramid’ which integrated performance through the hierarchy of the organisation (Cross & Lynch, 1988). Both the hierarchical aspect and the image of a pyramid building performance on a solid base resonated well with my analysis of the data. For example confidence is the most often combined benefit with results (23%) and skills development (19%).

Figure 4 below shows my adaptation of their model to fit my interpretation of the data. I believe this model answers all the questions I posed at the start of my study by combining and reconciling the requirements of the coachees with those of the purchasers.

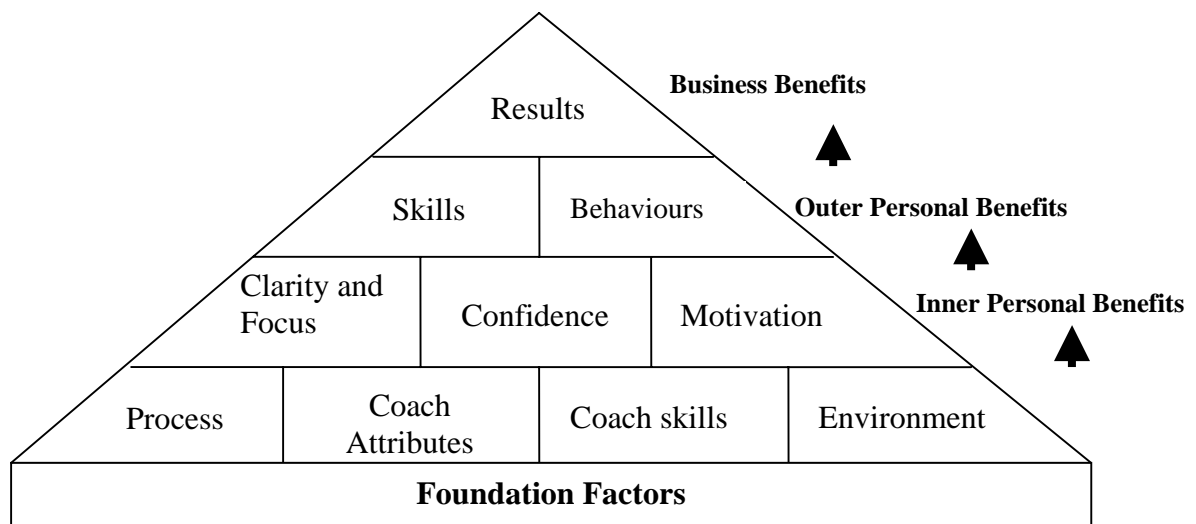


Figure 4: Coaching Benefits Pyramid Model (Adapted from Cross, and Lynch 1988).

The model is based on the principle that to be fully effective a business coaching relationship needs to be built on the firm foundation of four key factors:

1. **The skills of the coach** such as: listening, questioning, giving clear feedback, establishing rapport, providing support.
2. **The personal attributes of the coach** such as: knowledge, experience, qualifications, being inspirational, having belief in the coachee’s potential.
3. **The coaching process** including: clear structure and discipline, being mentally challenging and stretching.

4. **The coaching environment** providing: a safe, supportive place to discuss confidential and sensitive issues, providing time and space to think and reflect.

The next stage of the model suggests that, when those four foundation factors are in place, the coachee is enabled to realise the level of inner personal benefits:

1. **Clarity and focus** providing personal insights and exploration of themselves, their values and beliefs, providing a clear purpose and sense of direction.
2. **Confidence** to believe in themselves, to feel more relaxed and less stressed, to raise their morale.
3. **Motivated** to achieve, to improve both themselves and their organisation, inspired to drive things through.

An often quoted principle in the world of business coaching seems to me to be very apt in relation to these internal benefits:

Performance = Potential – Interference

(Gallwey, 1974; Whitmore, 1996).

I suggest that the ‘Interference’ these authors refer to can be said to be due to either lack of confidence, lack of motivation or lack of clarity and focus or perhaps a combination of all three.

The CIPD publication *Coaching and buying coaching services - a guide* (Jarvis, 2004) suggests that if the coachee is able to realise internal benefits they are in a much better position to be able to achieve more visible output benefits of enhanced skills, knowledge and understanding and improved behaviours associated with relationships with their boss, team, peers or customers.

Thus, having realised the inner benefits for themselves the coachee is mentally ready to produce the outer personal benefits, which will be easily seen by others:

- **Enhanced skills, knowledge and understanding** in both job related skills and the ability to learn and develop themselves.
- **Improved behaviours** with individuals and teams in all forms of relationship.

and with these enhanced skills and/or improved behaviours the coachee will be equipped and empowered to achieve the pinnacle of the pyramid:

- **Business Results** such as: improvements in performance, being more productive, enhanced career progression, resolution of specific problems or issues.

As I have chosen a case-study within one organisation to provide part of my data I am wary of suggesting the findings would be the same in other organisations. I realise that participants in the OSC&M questionnaire were a special case, which might not be typical of the other clients of a professional coach. The fact that they were volunteers in a free coaching programme may have influenced how they valued the coaching they received. They also knew that their responses were in some way contributing to a qualification for their coach, which may have influenced how they reported on the experience.

Despite that, I believe the Coaching Benefits Pyramid model provides the means to build a valid and holistic picture of the effectiveness of a business coaching relationship from the perspective of, and for the benefit of, all the stakeholders.

Discussion

In order to contribute to the growing debate on the value of coaching and particularly its evaluation in the business context, this study has identified and discussed a number of important issues that, I believe, have not been fully appreciated before. The tendency to focus exclusively on Return on Investment as the only valid evaluation measure has, I suggest, lost sight of the importance of an effective process, the attributes of the coach and the inner feelings of the coachee. Consequently, the emphasis in this study has been on finding out what is important to the coachees, rather than how to measure the organisational benefits. Moreover, the inner benefits to the coachees are considered to be fundamental to achieving business benefits and, therefore, cannot be ignored.

The most important findings, in my opinion, are those that come from the empirical study. They highlight the importance to the coachee of the coaching process and the environment in which the coaching takes place. The comfort and re-assurance of a robust and consistent process for the coaching sessions and programme was valued by both coachees and purchasers. They described the importance of process to them in terms of whether they deliver what they said they would, when they said they would, to the standard they agreed they would. This applied to the actual sessions as well as the overall relationship with the client organisation.

The environment in which the coaching takes place is seen to be very important and this does not mean just the physical environment. More important was the ability of the coach to create an environment in which coachees felt free to discuss confidential and sensitive issues and to provide a mental space in which the coachee could reflect on their situation and creating the time to verbalise their feelings in this safe environment.

The coaches themselves have a significant influence on the effectiveness of the coaching programme, with two separate but related facets, personal attributes and coaching skills being mentioned as important.

This study suggests that not enough emphasis is placed on these four foundation factors, and, without these being strong, the coaching programme may not be fully effective. The presence of these four foundation factors and their effective use by the coach will enable the first level of benefits (clarity and focus, confidence and motivation) for the individual to be developed and achieved (see Fig. 4). Highly motivated employees will take on extra tasks in order to improve their part of the business. They will also want to excel in their work as well as seeking career progression (Neely et al, 2003).

This paper sought to establish links between the human capital drivers (motivation, confidence, clarity and focus), human capital capabilities (skills and behaviours), intermediate key performance indicators (productivity, customer satisfaction), and ultimately, financial performance measures such as profit or revenue growth. It acknowledges that proving such linkages requires proof of causation. Much of the study confirms the difficulty of effectively measuring the business impact directly attributable to a programme of business coaching (Koch, 2002).

Trying to isolate the impact of employee development from other dynamics that influence business success is beyond the scope of this study. In fact according to some of the literature this task is difficult or impossible (Olney, 1999). A six-month study by the CIPD found *“there was no ‘holy grail’ in the evaluation of human capital – no single measure that was independent of context and that could accurately represent the impact of employee competencies and commitment on business performance.”* (Scarborough & Elias, 2002 p.4).

However, the coaching relationship itself has been identified as being of particular importance in achieving benefits (Hargrove, 1995; Kilburg, 2000; O’Neill, 2000). I believe that by following the concepts behind the coaching benefits pyramid model, explained in Figure 4, organisations may be able to predict, with some confidence, that if the other categories in the model were evaluated effectively and found to be successful, relevant business results would also be seen to improve (Gary, 2003). The model could be valuable to both the external business coach and to the organisation seeking to either employ a suitable coach or to measure the effectiveness of an existing contract. By selecting the categories and questions that are most appropriate any user should be able to produce a practical tool that would fit their specific requirements.

I would suggest that effective evaluation is not a one off exercise to be only done at the end of a coaching relationship or contract, but should be a continual process designed to help organisations have better understanding of the relationship, how it has impacted on the participants, their colleagues, peers and customers as well as the business results and how it has been affected by other internal and external factors. The ‘Coaching Benefits Pyramid’ can be used throughout the life of the coaching contract: to assess the suitability of the external business coach prior to the start of the relationship, to check the process at an early stage, to quantify the personal benefits before the business benefits could be realised.

I believe that the 'Coaching Benefits Pyramid' should not be used simply to prove that a coaching contract has delivered benefits, but also to improve future coaching contracts. Therefore, I recommend that it is not used just to indicate the results of a coaching contract but is seen as a management and learning tool for the benefit of all organisations and the practitioners in the field of business coaching.

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