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The Nine Critical Success Factors in Individual Coaching

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Introduction

Worldwide, empirical research from the perspective of the client is still in its infancy, internationally only a few studies exist. However, understanding the factors that create a positive result in the eyes of a client is essential for the future development of the coaching profession and the establishment of quality criteria and standards.

In this article we seek to address this gap by bringing to the attention of a wider international audience the findings from an empirical study in Germany, Switzerland and Austria that set out to identify success factors in individual executive coaching. The study by Tanja Schmidt at the Technical University in Berlin in 2003 is unique as it provides insights from the perspective of the client and provides quantitative results.

Following the description of each success factor Tanja identified we complement the results of her study with our own insights from our international executive coaching practice. Our commentary provides concrete action steps both for executive coaches who want to strengthen their existing coaching performance and for those in organisations who are responsible for buying coaching services.

Context of Tanja Schmidt's Study

In the international coaching literature there is, at present, a multidimensional understanding of quality and success (e.g. Rauen, 2001):

- **Structural quality:** the input factors i.e. everything that is needed from a personal, material and physical point of view for individual coaching

- **Process quality:** activities and specific behaviours that help the achievement of specific goals
- **Result quality:** the success of professional behaviour where success is defined as the achievement of a predefined positive outcome. In a coaching setting this can be success in terms of personal satisfaction, learning, transfer of knowledge and business parameters

To deepen the more theoretical understanding of success Tanja identified 150 coaches in Germany, Austria and Switzerland through highly regarded databases (<http://www.coaching-portal-de/>, <http://www.coach-datenbank.de/> and <http://www.coach-profile.de/>). Each coach received four questionnaires which they were asked to forward to clients. A total of 600 questionnaires were sent out. The response rate was approximately 15%.

Schmidt performed a statistical analysis on the returned questionnaires to identify the key success factors for coaching. The technique used to analyse the data was factor analysis. The success factors are listed in order of their importance. In our description of each success factor we have included the results of the analysis which indicate the contribution to overall success of the individual factor. Schmidt defined success factors as those factors that are prerequisites for achieving defined objectives for a coaching programme and/or provide the client with a concrete experience of success.

Success Factors

Success factor No. 1 – Qualification of the coach (factor .67)

The focus of the first factor is on the coach. The data from the study revealed that the most important factors within this dimension were personal credibility of the coach, education, professional background, experience and expertise as well as overall regard.

Action steps for coaches

The finding highlights, in our opinion, the importance of being a credible provider of coaching services. The coach needs to be aware that everything he/she does (or does not do) contributes to the client's experience of the service. To strengthen the professionalism of the service coaches should ensure that all material (business cards, letterhead, flyers, brochures, WebPages) send a strong consistent message to their potential and current clients. This uniformity of message should also extend to the dress code of the coach and the way in which calls, emails etc from the client are handled. Once in a coaching relationship the professional approach needs to be maintained by the coach – consistently delivering on promises, following up sessions with records of the meeting, and being available for follow-ups between sessions.

Action steps for organisations

For organisations the study findings highlight, in our experience, the importance of establishing stringent quality criteria for the selection process of their coaches. In building the quality criteria list the organisational buyers of coaching services need to ensure that they have a shared understanding of what credibility means in the eyes of the users of the coaching services they procure i.e. the executives within the company. In our own practice we have experienced many times that there are distinct differences between the perception of a coach in the top management's perspective and that of HR professionals. HR may select coaches on the basis of coach training and continuing professional development whereas top executives may place greater importance on the previous employment experience of the coach – for example, have held a similar senior position. The establishment of quality criteria thus needs to take account of all perspectives of users as well as buyers to ensure a genuinely good fit between the coach and the organisation.

Success factor No. 2 – Involvement of the coach (factor .65)

Here Schmidt subsumed factors related to motivation and involvement of the coach with the coaching assignment. This factor also includes the ability of the coach to develop an atmosphere of trust in the coaching sessions.

Action steps for coaches

In our view coaches need to ensure that they have an intrinsic strong motivation for their coaching work. The finding demonstrates that a genuine interest in the client and their stories is fundamental to building a good coaching relationship. If, as a coach, you find yourself thinking 'here we are again not again the same old story . I can't hear it anymore' then may be it is time to seek a new profession. Coaches also need to develop a genuine belief in their clients and their ability to change. If a coach has any doubt about the ability of the client to change then he/she may be better off declining the assignment.

Action steps for organisations

Our experience indicates that in many large organisations it is now a standard procedure that coaches attend an interview process prior to beginning coaching assignments for leaders of an organisation. As with any interview this is an opportunity for both sides to learn about each other and decide whether a working relationship can be developed. Buyers of coaching services are well advised to develop a standard procedure for the interview process of coaches. Within this process special emphasis should be placed on identifying the motivation of coach for his/her work.

Success factor No. 3 – Clarity & goals (factor .55)

This factor refers to the process and conduct of a coaching programme. In her research Schmidt defines this as clarity in terms of roles, methods and actions during the course of coaching.

Action steps for coaches

This finding demonstrates to us the importance for coaches to invest time at the beginning of an assignment to establish a solid working relationship with the client, be transparent about the coaching process, roles and responsibilities and the 'psychological contract' between coach and client. In this way the risk of misunderstandings and failure can be minimised and a sound foundation for ensuring a successful coaching assignment can be developed.

Action steps for organisations

This finding demonstrates to us the value in investing in information and awareness campaigns for coaching. At present there is much 'hype' about coaching in the media and amongst business leaders. HR professionals all too often feel inclined to jump on the bandwagon to make the service available rather than taking the time to invest in establishing sound procedures and information and awareness campaigns. Organisations who would like to ensure the success of their coaching programmes are well advised to establish sound 'coaching guidelines' and provide briefings to potential coachees about what coaching is, what it can and cannot do, emphasise the role of the coachee, and provide insights about methods and activities that are likely to be used during the course of a coaching programme.

Success factor No. 4 – Coach-setting (factor .40)

Under this heading Schmidt included a group of factors that all relate to the behaviour of the client her/himself. For example, willingness to invest for coaching, motivation and willingness to reveal emotion, the 'psychological contract' and the appropriateness and demands made on the coach.

Action steps for coaches

In our opinion this factor reinforces yet again for coaches that they should be discriminating about who they accept as a client – not just any client is a good client. If a coach wishes to build a strong reputation for being able to add

value to clients and organisations they need to be selective about with whom they work. This may not be an easy decision when starting out in coaching and facing financial challenges in economically challenging times however it is likely to pay off in the long run. Coaches need to be particularly wary of coachees who arrive at their initial session saying that they have been 'sent' by their organisation.

Action steps for organisations

Organisations need to be aware of this success factor and display these criteria in the above mentioned 'awareness campaign' for coaching within the organisation. In addition, they should not force executives and employees to participate in coaching against their will. Coaching should be seen as a tool for the development of high potentials rather than a 'quick fix' or 'last resort' for under performing employees.

Success factor No. 5 – Autonomy of the coachee (factor .40)

In this category Schmidt included all the factors which assisted the coachee to develop a self-reflective approach and to accept personal responsibility for progress during the coaching programme.

Action steps for coaches

For coaches the key takeaway here in our view is to emphasise the importance of developing good questioning skills which will enable to client to reflect about their own behaviour and develop new behavioural options. These techniques are at the opposite end of the spectrum from directive methods of telling and giving advice.

Action steps for organisations

Again it is important for organisations to emphasise to the client that much of the success of the relationship will depend upon how much they are willing to contribute and accept responsibility for their own development. It is also important for organisations to hire coaches who are well trained and

experienced in non directive techniques rather than using a familiar trainer or consultant who is doing a little coaching as an 'add-on' to his/her existing portfolio of services.

Success factor No. 6 – Cooperation (factor .37)

The factors grouped under this heading all relate to the relationship between coach and client. This factor relates to the development of rapport, a sense of sharing between coach and client, an equality of experience, the roles and responsibilities of each and the willingness of the coach to allow the client to be instrumental in directing the course of the sessions.

Action steps for coaches

The finding indicates that in order to ensure successful outcomes of a coaching assignment coaches need to think very carefully about their target organisations. Questions to consider include: Where should I offer my services, to what type of organisation, at what level within the organisation, where do they have specific expertise gained in the course of my career that can be utilised. To be able to develop sound and sustainable relationships coaches need client relationships where they are perceived as credible and on an 'equal footing' as those they seek to coach. Again this highlights the need for executive coaches to focus their business activities on those industries, organisations and hierarchical levels, where they have relevant experience. It also indicates the importance of supervision and personal development for the coach. Coaches who have not sufficiently dealt with their 'personal stuff' and are not sufficiently 'centred' may find it difficult to develop and sustain these types of relationships.

Action steps for organisations

This finding provides important indications for an organisation about what to look for when assessing and scanning the market for suitable coaches. It also highlights again the importance of investing in developing sound procedures for the selection and evaluation of coaches. As it is critical that coach and

coachee are able to see 'eye to eye' and to talk the same language, the assessment of the background career of the coach before entering the coaching profession is a critical factor.

Success factor No. 7 – Trust and quality of the coaching relationship (factor .48)

The factor here stresses the importance of developing trust in the coaching relationship. Here respondents described the need to feel supported by their coach throughout the coaching process. They also described the importance of an open, honest and accepting relationship with his/her coach. The key item they described is the view that coaching is able to provide 'just in time' learning rather than 'just in case' learning as it happens in so many executive education programmes.

Action steps for coaches

Coaches can contribute to a successful outcome of a coaching assignment by developing their skill set. To take part in good executive education programmes is of paramount importance. This specific finding indicates the importance of the development of sensory acuity and being able to be highly sensitive to discovering exactly where the client is and how the world looks from his/her perspective. For coaches this factor also underlines the need for personal development to ensure that the coach's agenda does not interfere with the relationship and the efficacy of the coaching interventions.

Action steps for organisations

Again this empirical finding emphasises the importance of an in-depth, systematic and thorough selection interview for coaches. By discussing previous experience and gaining a sound understanding of the coach's philosophy, methods and techniques, buyers of services can ensure that they are receiving a highly professional service.

Success factor No. 8 – Methodological variety (factor .33)

This factor groups together all statements relating to the importance of a coach having a large 'tool box' and being able to apply a great variety of techniques tailored to the client and his/her situation.

Action steps for coaches

The finding highlights that it may not be sufficient to have skills that have developed out of life experiences. Coaches need to invest in sound executive coach training and continuous professional development. A coach who achieves consistently successful outcomes will apply a wide range of methods and techniques and have assembled these systematically over a period of time from different programmes.

Action steps for organisations

For organisations this highlights the importance for stringent quality and entry criteria for their coaches. While some formal coach training is important it is also important that potential coaches can demonstrate a wide variety of training and experience and a commitment to continuous professional development.

Success factor No. 9 – Diagnosis (factor .28)

The low correlation of this factor relates to the tools and techniques used by the coach to understand the issues the client is facing. It encompasses psychometric testing, direct observation of the coachee in a real work setting, and feedback from organisation performance management assessments.

Actions for coaches

Many coaches offer some form of assessment testing at the beginning of a coaching relationship e.g. MBTI, FIRO B. While they do add to the coach's understanding of the client, Schmidt's study demonstrates that other factors also need to be in place and an over reliance on analytical tools is by no means justified.

Actions for organisations

While some coaches may be able to use or provide access to complex psychometric tests it is important for the organisations hiring coaches to satisfy themselves about the overall skill of the coach rather than placing too much weighting on diagnosis, assessments and testing.

Conclusion

Schmidt's study provides valuable insights into clients' perspectives of the factors contributing to a successful coaching relationship. The findings of the study have implications both for executive coaches and buyers of coaching services. In this article we have highlighted the action steps for both parties to ensure successful outcomes of coaching assignments. The results of the study and the action steps for coaches and buyers of coaching services provides further building blocks for developing standards and criteria for coaching in Europe. It also provides a foundation for further research as the study was conducted in Germany, Austria and Switzerland and the differences between the countries were not central to this study. It would be very valuable to conduct a study like this across different countries in Europe to identify what, if any, are the critical differences in client expectations and success factors.

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