The Criterion Problem in Executive Coaching

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McKenna and Davis (2009) draw useful parallels between psychotherapy and executive coaching (EC). The similarities between successful approaches to these two helping relationships may prove to be quite useful for both practitioners and researchers. With the barriers to entry in EC remaining quite low, industrial–organizational (I–O) psychologists need to demonstrate that superior services can be provided from ECs with evidence-based practices. However, if I–O psychologists do not base their EC practices on empirical evidence and do the necessary work to accumulate this evidence, then there is no reason to believe that we have

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an advantage to offer over ECs from other backgrounds.

We agree with McKenna and Davis' perspective that the four active ingredients of psychotherapy can be useful in understanding the EC process. Within an organizational intervention framework, these four active ingredients reflect independent variables that determine how effective EC can be. However, their discussion of this model neglects a full consideration of the outcomes of EC. These outcomes can be called the focal-dependent variables, criteria, or goals for EC. We believe this omission is problematic for two reasons. First, the outcomes of psychotherapy and EC are substantively different. Therefore, without considering what constitutes effective EC, extrapolating estimates of variance in client improvement due to various active ingredients is likely to misjudge the importance of some components. Second, across coaching relationships, there are drastically different goals, meaning that EC interventions vary dramatically in their intended dependent variables. In just the examples McKenna and Davis describe, the criteria range from interpersonal sensitivity (Scott) to knowledge of gender dynamics among

senior leadership (Tanley) to developing academic political prowess (Charles). Given this range of criteria, explaining variance in EC effectiveness must compare individuals with similar coaching goals. Thus, although McKenna and Davis build a framework for thinking about the independent variables of EC, the purpose of our commentary is to introduce parallel consideration of the criteria of coaching.

EC, psychotherapy, and behavior modification are all designed to move the client toward a particular goal, standard, or norm, and the techniques and procedures utilized are merely tools for accomplishing that purpose (Strupp & Hadley, 1977). Given the numerous methodologies and approaches used by ECs, it is difficult to determine if a particular technique resulted in client improvement, deterioration, or no change without a set of well-defined criteria. Specifically, how would we build a scientific understanding concerning whether Scott's intervention (a) was effective, (b) was as effective as Tanley's, or (c) could have been more effective if different coaching techniques had been used instead? The lack of common criteria across EC interventions has been a major stumbling block to building an evidence-based research literature necessary to support and refine particular EC practices. Until such a set of criteria is developed and fully explored, we cannot assume that EC operates in the same way as psychotherapy or even if it is effective in creating change in executives. Only with well-defined and measured criteria can we begin to accurately describe the relationship between the active ingredients in the EC process and effective outcomes.

Another Criterion Problem?

Invoking the term *criterion problem* certainly brings to mind nearly a century of research into job performance modeling (Austin & Villanova, 1992). In the EC domain, the criterion problem is not only what performance is but also what performance areas are to be improved. This question must be asked in the design

and evaluation of any training intervention (Campbell & Kuncel, 2002) and has long been identified as one of the most important training principles.

In research evaluating the effectiveness of EC interventions, the most frequent evaluation criteria have been the coaches' or clients' subjective appraisal of the EC experience or some indicator of a change in the client's job performance (e.g., Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker, & Fernandes, 2008). Though this research makes a necessary contribution in documenting that ECs are well accepted by clients and that their services are perceived to add value to organizations, these criteria are deficient when the plethora of coaching goals is considered. Indeed, many EC interventions may be successful without realizing a positive appraisal from the client or a change in job performance. For example, Tanley (the female executive working to be accepted in a male-dominated corporate culture) may show no actual increase in job performance after being coached. Rather, the intervention was effective because it built Tanley's knowledge and skills to fit within the culture. This in turn improved her job satisfaction, reduced her likelihood of turning over, and deterred derailing behaviors. All of these changes are likely valued by the organization but may be only distally related to performance itself. Thus, coaches aiming to establish metrics for their effectiveness should identify specific criteria aligned with specific coaching goals.

Selecting Coaching Goal Criteria in Practice

Foundational knowledge about training interventions suggests three sequential points at which a coach will have to closely consider the dependent variable: (a) determining what the coaching goals are to be, (b) establishing criteria and gauging a client's baseline standing on these goals, and (c) after some interval, weighing a client's improvement toward meeting the goals. These points are hardly unique to EC; rather, they are issues I–O psychologists

address in nearly any organizational intervention. However, the unique one-on-one nature of EC relationships introduces some peculiarities about how coaches address these three issues.

The notion that specific coaching goals should be specified during the first few meetings is widely recommended and accepted among coaches (e.g., McKenna & Davis). Thus, it is apparent that coaching is not a one-technique-fits-all approach, and determining coaching goals with a client is a necessary part of the EC process. In reality, even choosing the coaching goal may be as complicated as choosing EC strategies. The fact that coaching goals can be tailored to an individual can create a disparity between the goals of the client and those of the organization. Disagreements that arise between the parties are likely to stem from disagreements regarding the content or breadth of the coaching goals. For example, the client may articulate a narrow set of goals (e.g., being more accommodating of peers' suggestions) but the external stakeholders are interested in broader behavioral areas (e.g., inspiring subordinates with a vision, improving relationships with coworkers, and increasing department sales). Thus, the coach may fail by communicating only in narrow performance terms while not considering how broader performance areas will be affected. If the coaching goals are narrow, then a narrow intervention targeting that small performance area is warranted. On the other hand, if the goals are broad, then a broad intervention or one targeting multiple narrow areas of performance should be employed.

Once the relevant coaching goals are identified, the logical next step is identifying the client's baseline on these goals. Gaining insight about a client's initial performance is critical, as coaching severely underperforming clients will entail something different than clients who need only minor adjustments. Many activities coaches utilize early in the coaching relationship allow the coach to learn about the client's baseline performance (e.g., discussions about

typical problems, interviewing coworkers, and role plays). The baseline information gathered represents a number of methods of measuring the client's initial standing on coaching goals. Armed with a firm idea of the client's goals and baseline performance, the EC can develop a strategy to improve the executive's performance and set metrics with which to measure this. Although other interventions might shirk training evaluations, neglecting reassessment poses far more dire consequences in EC because of its on going nature. That is, this reassessment process creates a new baseline for a revised set of EC techniques to continue to improve the executive's performance.

Finding Criterion Solutions in Research: Drawing From Previous Models

Much like the criterion problem in the measurement of job performance, we can only be confident in our models of EC if they are evaluated using construct valid measures of coaching outcomes. To work toward this goal, we suggest three complimentary perspectives from other research domains that can be used to help organize and evaluate the EC goals chosen in practice. We discuss the implications of using several outcome-based models for EC that allow for the measurement of behavioral change, attitude change, on-the-job performance, and organizational payoffs.

Tripartite model of EC. Strupp and Hadley's (1977) tripartite model of mental health and therapeutic outcomes can be applied to EC. This model suggests using three vantage points to evaluate client change. The first party interested in change is the organization, which is responsible for payment. Second, the client may use different criteria to determine the effectiveness of the coaching. Finally, the coach will likely evaluate effectiveness from a theory-based perspective. We can use this model to better understand the different viewpoints that effectiveness will be evaluated from

and adapt criteria accordingly, operationalizing outcomes for each viewpoint, such as creating opportunities to use new skills (coaches' viewpoint) or demonstrating leadership during a time of change and turmoil (organizational viewpoint). Though evaluating the client from multiple perspectives may not always be necessary or even possible, such multisource evaluations give a more comprehensive picture of the client's level of change.

Kirkpatrick's taxonomy. Kirkpatrick's (1976) hierarchy of training evaluations can also be applied to EC outcomes. Kirkpatrick's taxonomy is comprised of four types of criteria—reaction, learning, behavioral, and results criteria. These four criteria could be used to provide meaningful estimates of the effectiveness of an EC program. Though positive reactions may reassure many ECs of the organizational value they add, this level of measurement does not address the need for documented client improvement at multiple levels. We can gauge how well the coaching was received and the learning through questionnaires following the EC engagement. We can also determine behavioral change and transfer to the job with multisource assessment, interviews, or traditional performance ratings. Many ECs use such tools for diagnostic purposes, but follow-up assessment can gauge actual behavioral/attitudinal change. We can assess how well the executive is communicating with direct reports, developing new business relationships, or executing new strategies. Finally, we can estimate return on investment through sales figures, cost reduction strategies, turnover, or subjective estimates. With the use of multiple criteria we can better predict which problems will be associated with the best technique.

Kraiger's decision-based model. Kraiger's (2002) model builds on the Kirkpatrick framework by focusing on training effectiveness as well as evaluation. Effectiveness focuses on the extent to which a particular training intervention met the intended goals. Kraiger's approaches focus on three primary objectives: training content and design, changes in learners, and organizational payoffs (we focus specifically on changes in learners). As mentioned above, although individuals may alter behavior, this may not directly impact job performance. The Kraiger model provides several target areas (cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes) from which specific criteria relevant to EC can be developed. Using the Kraiger framework, we have identified several outcomes relevant to EC. The first focuses on cognitive outcomes like acquiring new information or developing a new leadership mental model. Affective outcomes can include increasing one's self-efficacy or perceived fit in a role. Finally, behavioral outcomes are provided, such as new business relationships being built/nurtured or communicating with colleagues in a productive manner. The outcomes described above can be measured through follow-up assessments based on self, subordinate, and manager ratings.

In combination, these models address *who* might determine the criterion (Strupp & Hadley's tripartite model), *when* in the development process the criterion is measured (Kirkpatrick's model of training evaluations), and *what* the actual content of the criterion is (Kraiger's decision-based model of training effectiveness). Although we do not endorse a specific model to categorize the EC outcomes, we do believe it is necessary to consider change at multiple levels and from multiple perspectives in order to know if the intervention was successful. The models proposed above may be useful in designing comprehensive research studies or a future meta-analysis when enough data have been collected.

Developing a more fine-grained taxonomy of specific coaching goals represents a critical challenge facing the field of EC, but a challenge typical of new research fields. I–O psychologists struggled for many years to understand how criteria for effectiveness in one job can be compared with criteria for effectiveness in another (e.g., Austin & Villanova, 1992). Clinical psychologists once

struggled to understand how the psychological afflictions affecting one patient could be compared with those of another. Both fields found solutions to these dilemmas through dedicated research developing criterion taxonomies. In I–O psychology, job performance criteria can be well described within Campbell's eight-dimensional model of job performance (Campbell, McCloy, Oppler, & Sager, 1993). In clinical psychology, particular symptoms/clusters of symptoms can be identified within the DSM framework. Measuring effectiveness across such a taxonomy of specific EC goal criteria will aid researchers in separating clients sharing similar sets of goals from those substantively different. Moreover, such a model will give researchers confidence that they have thoroughly assessed or specifically targeted particular ways in which EC might be effective.

Conclusion

McKenna and Davis note that as I–O psychologists, we have a scientific background that allows us to be better ECs. Although our greater understanding of psychological principles may give us an advantage, our scientific backgrounds are not being fully leveraged in EC. Though such research is unlikely to unveil groundbreaking techniques or to help market EC, it is this close attention to the criterion that builds the strongest science to support EC and ultimately save it from becoming unfashionable folderol. It is essential that as I–O psychologists, we set the standard for EC and actively measure client change, despite the inherent difficulties that such a task entails, if we are to claim an advantage in the marketplace of ECs.

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