
“The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions . . .”

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Can we really capitalize on “decades of psychotherapy outcome research to become extraordinary coaches for our executive clients”? I don’t think so. Although I am a great believer in broad band searches for useful ideas, if you use psychotherapy research to transform your executive coaching practice you will not only come up short, you may well find yourself going in the wrong direction. In writing this comment, I will omit the qualifiers (I believe, I think, etc.), even though I am considerably less certain than I will appear, and for clarity I will use “clients” for executive coaching and “patients” for psychotherapy. The gist of my comments is that the differences between coaching and therapy outweigh the similarities. The outcome research in psychotherapy only applies to coaching in the most general sense.

Executive coaching is not psychotherapy, although there may be some functional similarity between them. McKenna and Davis (2009) did not define *executive coaching* or *psychotherapy*, so it is a little hard to argue with their definitions. A thumbnail difference I find useful is, “executive coaching is about changing performance; psychotherapy is about changing people.” Whatever the definition, McKenna and Davis overemphasize the similarities and minimize the differences.

The extent of that difference is reflected in who pays the bill; typically organizations pay the coach, patients pay the therapist. Third-party providers may pay for much of therapy today, but the point is the same. Executive coaches, in fact, have two clients, the executive and the organization, and managing that dual-client commitment can be tricky in itself. As the ones who pay the bills, organizations seek change in the executives’ performance and in turn organizational performance. Executives may experience personal growth and change, but for organizations today that is not the main purpose of the engagement.

McKenna and Davis point out that executives are typically high functioning with a strong sense of agency looking for growth versus remediation, whereas patients are low functioning and dealing with serious adjustment problems. Even though the processes of coaching and therapy may have similarities and use some of the same specific techniques, the processes with clients as opposed to those with patients are poles apart; the similarities and differences are defined by far more than the similarity of both involving a collaborative relationship or the differences of the frequency or number of meetings, or whether e-mail, text, or telephone is the media.

To generalize from psychotherapy to coaching requires that the four active ingredients be expressed at a level that loses its punch. Who can argue that the results a client gets do not depend on her make-up and the context? Who can argue that a

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good teaching/therapy/coaching/consulting relationship is not essential for a successful engagement? What good consultant/therapist/coach does not know that the client had better believe things will improve?

I would argue, however, with the fourth factor, that any theory or technique will do, if by *theory and technique* we mean the knowledge required for effective executive coaching. Therapeutic personality change may be based on the therapeutic relationship, but the necessary and sufficient conditions for executive performance improvement include knowledge and skills on the part of the coach that are surprisingly specific. McKenna and Davis are far more optimistic than I that industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology has specific training and skills or the rich perspective on executive jobs and organizational context. *Some* I–O psychologists have this knowledge, but it is not institutionalized in the field or taught in many of our I–O programs. After a talk at a SIOP conference, an enthusiastic student came up to tell me: "I am getting my PhD in June and moving to your area. I love what you said about coaching and I want to be a coach. Will you help me get some clients?" As it turns out, the soon-to-be PhD had never held a job outside of graduate school and knew precious little other than what she had read about the world of work, but she thought her PhD would be enough. Much to her chagrin, my advice was that if she wanted to be a coach, she should

go with something she knew—how to be a graduate student.

Thinking of executive coaching as a process encourages us to believe that executive coaches don't really have to know much except the process; it ignores the wealth of knowledge that master coaches bring to the task. Sure, there may be a few of us who are able to coach anyone, anywhere, anytime, in the same way that there are a few leaders who seem to be able to lead regardless of industries and organizations, business conditions, and environments. But for most of us, the specific knowledge we bring is a key to our success. There may well be bits of that specific knowledge and techniques that we can learn from psychotherapy, but the psychotherapy model encourages us to mistakenly believe that only process, not content, is important.

The research on psychotherapy outcome research is most helpful as a stimulus for our thinking about what works and what doesn't—what are indeed the necessary and sufficient conditions for executive performance improvement, not as a model for practice. We have McKenna and Davis to thank for providing us with this thoughtful piece to encourage that discussion.

Reference

- McKenna, D. D., & Davis, S. L. (2009). Hidden in plain sight: The active ingredients of executive coaching. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 2, 244–260.