



Building successful leadership coaching relationships

Examining impact of matching criteria in a leadership coaching program

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to employ a conceptual model to examine the relationship processes and mediating role of client-coach relationship between client-coach match criteria and coaching outcomes to advance the understanding of client-coach relationship's impact on leadership coaching.

Design/methodology/approach – Data collected from 74 client-coach pairs participating in a voluntary leadership coaching program at a military service academy during pre-partnering and post-transition phases were analyzed to examine the impact of match criteria and client-coach relationship processes on coaching outcomes.

Findings – Consistent with the conceptual framework, relationship processes of rapport, trust, and commitment positively predicted coaching program outcomes, including client and coach reactions, behavioral change, and coaching program results. The client-coach relationship fully mediated two match criteria (compatibility and credibility) with coaching outcomes, suggesting that complementary managerial and learning styles and relevant job-related credibility support the development of client-coach relationships and therefore positively impact leadership coaching programs.

Research limitations/implications – The generalizability of findings may be limited due to the population studied. Future research needs to examine relationship processes in the larger context of the coaching practice as well as formative and results-level outcomes.

Practical implications – The research findings provide support and understanding of the impact of the client-coach relationship on coaching and the understanding of factors influencing the relationship, which allows the development of selection tools to better match clients with coaches, increasing the quality of the relationship and ultimately the coaching outcomes.

Originality/value – The study represents one of the first attempts to symmetrically examine client-coach relationships and highlights the value of the conceptual framework for conducting client-coach relationship research.

Keywords Management development, Coaching, Leadership, Interpersonal relations

Paper type Research paper



Leadership coaching is an integral component of most organisations' leadership development strategy[1] (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006; Underhill *et al.*, 2007). In the last year, the United Kingdom witnessed a nearly 10 percent increase in the number of organizations employing coaches (63 percent to 71 percent (Day *et al.*, 2008) and 95 percent of US organizations previously using coaches increased the practice (Auerbach, 2005). Unfortunately, despite this popularity, coaching research has not kept pace with practices (Latham, 2007; Linley, 2006). While there is little debate that "coaching works" (Kombarakaran *et al.*, 2008; p. 78; Peterson and Kraiger, 2003, p. 263), practitioner articles and personal testimonies far outnumber empirical investigations.

Research is needed to understand why coaching works, including how to identify and build successful coach client relationships (Feldman and Lankau, 2005; O'Broin and Palmer, 2006).

A quality coaching relationship is perhaps the single most important factor for successful outcomes (for example, Asay and Lambert, 1999; Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001; O'Broin and Palmer, 2006). A recent American Management Association study (Thompson *et al.*, 2008) reported that 65 percent of terminated coaching assignments were due to ineffective client-coach relationships. Thus a need exists to understand and improve client-coach relationships.

While not one of the 49 studies included in Ely *et al.*'s (2010) quantitative examination of leadership coaching research that specifically investigated the coaching relationship, several dissertations and articles discussed the components perceived as critical to the relationship, including rapport (Bush, 2004), mutual trust (Becker, 2007; Bush, 2004; Hall *et al.*, 1999; Luebbe, 2004), and coach credibility (Bush, 2004; Sue-Chan and Latham, 2004). The importance of effective client-coach relationships were also discussed (Seamons, 2004; Thach, 2002; Wasylshyn, 2003) and the need for a "good match or fit between coach and client" has been strongly emphasized (Hall *et al.*, 1999; p. 45). However, no insights were provided regarding factors that might predict a good match, as there is a shortage of published scientific research on the topic.

This paper provides a conceptual framework for examining the impact of client-coach relationships on coaching outcomes and the influence of client-coach matches in building and maintaining the relationships. Further, by employing the framework, we provide support and understanding of the influences of relationship processes on coaching outcomes and practical insights on factors that contribute to effective relationships.

Modeling the coaching relationship

In order to frame coaching issues, an input, process, output (I-P-O) format was employed to identify key factors that drive successful coaching experiences (Boyce and Hernez-Broome, 2010). The resulting framework organizes the factors and issues into matching input, relationship processes, and outcomes. The match consists of three characteristics: commonality in personal characteristics or experiences, compatibility in behavioral preferences, and credibility with coaching abilities meeting client needs. The coaching relationship consists of four key processes: rapport, trust, commitment, and collaboration. These components will be discussed in terms of their relationship with leadership coaching outcomes. While conceptual articles provide insight on match characteristics and coaching relationships, most have no basis in research to support their notions. Therefore, we often turn to the therapy and mentor literature to supplement the experienced practitioners' ideas.

Client-coach match characteristics

Matching is described as the attempt to identify a coach tailored to meet the needs of a client (Wycherley and Cox, 2008) and occurs in organizations using a list or "pool" of acceptable coaches pre-selected based on certain criteria, such as competence factors, referrals, or previous work with the organization. Coaches are also matched using

external coaching companies or with clients attending coaching programs or workshops but are often made by the coaching provider.

(A good match or fit between a client and coach is critical to the development of a quality coaching relationship.) While Joo (2005, p. 480) provides an emphatic argument that matching coaches to clients “is critical in coaching effectiveness,” neither he nor the previously cited literature provides guidance towards what factors should enter the pairing decision. However, practitioners suggest possible factors to consider when aligning coaches with clients, including commonality, compatibility, and credibility.

Commonality

Commonality refers to the client and coach sharing common characteristics or experiences, which can be positioned into three categories: demographics, professional, and personal. By demographics, we refer to the surface level attributes often collected in surveys, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and age. Professional background encompasses past work experiences as well as education and professional training. Personal background can be quite broad subsuming interests – hobbies, volunteer activities, and even religious and sexual orientation.

If commonality is high, the belief is that rapport and trust will develop quicker. The similarity-attraction hypothesis maintains that similarity is a major source of attraction between individuals and that a variety of physical, social, and status traits can be used as the basis for inferring similarity in attitudes and beliefs (Byrne, 1971; Harrison *et al.*, 1998). Findings from mentoring research suggest that homogeneity is preferable and perhaps a prerequisite for mutual understanding and acceptance (Armstrong *et al.*, 2002; Ragins and Cotton, 1999). Wycherley and Cox (2008, p. 43) argue that coaches from different backgrounds than their clients “cannot understand the social and psychological conflicts of the client and therefore deep levels of trust, sharing, and cooperation will not be achieved.”

Compatibility

Compatibility refers to the appropriate combination of client and coach behavioral preferences or the characteristics the client and coach possess that influence their cognitions and behaviors in various situations. These can include personality traits as well as managerial, leadership, and learning styles.

Coaches matched to clients based on compatible personality and behavioral styles are expected to have a better working relationship, particularly with securing commitment and supporting collaboration. However, the factor is more complex as matching on similarity may achieve rapid rapport and goal attainment but perhaps at the expense of personal development opportunities and long-term learning. So while personality mismatches or personality conflict result in the relationship prematurely ending (Gerstein, 1985; Hunt and Michael, 1983), should the relationship survive, Scoular and Linley (2006, p. 11) offer limited evidence that learning is better when temperaments differ. They suggest that in dyads differing on temperament, “the coach may instinctively come from a different perspective and perhaps challenge client assumptions more,” with the result of this more complex interaction leading to higher performance outcomes.

Credibility

Credibility refers to a coach possessing the necessary credentials to meet client needs and include coaching competence and experience. Matching a credible coach to a client in terms of their coaching needs establishes trust, confidence, and openness in the relationship. The client's perception of the coach's qualifications and experiences will influence the degree to which trust is enhanced. One could argue that any coach who possesses knowledge and experience will be effective (Stern, 2004). The appeal to match coach's expertise with client problems has been consistent and vigorous (for example, Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001; Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006; Gregory *et al.*, 2008). Sue-Chan and Latham (2004) provide evidence that the lack of sufficient professional credibility negatively impacted client performance and lowered satisfaction ratings. In addition to coaching competence, business, management, leadership, and political expertise were identified as important credibility considerations and particularly important to the establishment of trusting and effective relationships (Alvey and Barclay, 2007; Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001).

Coaching relationships

The leadership coaching relationship is a one-on-one helping relationship between a client and coach which is entered into with mutual agreement to improve the client's professional performance and personal satisfaction. The relationship between the client and coach is one of the most essential processes of coaching, with numerous authors suggesting that an effective client-coach relationship results in successful coaching outcomes (Baron and Morin, 2009; Gyllensten and Palmer, 2007; Hall *et al.*, 1999; Thach, 2002; Wasylshyn, 2003). While dynamic, establishing the relationship is generally the first step in a coaching engagement (Feldman and Lankau, 2005).

The key processes associated with the client-coach relationship are building and maintaining rapport, establishing and maintaining trust, and encouraging commitment (Boyce and Hernez-Broome, 2010; Ely *et al.*, 2010; Ting and Hart, 2004; Ting and Riddle, 2006). These social constructs involve a mutual responsibility between a coach and client and as a result may be difficult to develop as the coach cannot accomplish the process alone. Relationships with these elements provide a context that in conjunction with other aspects of the coaching process (i.e. mechanics, program content, coaching tools and techniques) support effective coaching outcomes.

Rapport

Rapport is about reducing the differences between the coach and client and building on similarities. Rapport includes the mutual understanding, agreement, and liking between the client and coach that allows each to appreciate, recognize, and respect on another as individuals. The applied and scientific communities discuss rapport in terms of the ease, warmth, genuine interest (Ting and Riddle, 2006) and coordination, mutual attentiveness, and positivity (Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal, 1990) experienced between individuals.

A coaching relationship with strong rapport between the client and coach is expected to increase satisfaction with the coach and the program. Rapport behaviors, particularly as demonstrated in clinical and mentoring literature, are associated with retention, higher levels of self-disclosure, compliance, satisfaction, and effective

treatment outcomes (Duggan and Parrott, 2006; Heintzman *et al.*, 1993; Joe *et al.*, 2001; Leach, 2005). Qualitative research offers support for the impact of rapport in executive coaching relationships and is described as essential to achieving coaching outcomes (Gyllensten and Palmer, 2007).

Trust

Trust in a coaching context refers to the mutual confidence that supports the client's willingness to be open, honest, and vulnerable, and allows the coach to be supportive, non-judgmental, and challenging. Trust and confidentiality provide the mutual security needed to manage expectations, establish boundaries, and develop an open and honest dialogue.

Mutual trust in a coaching relationship provides a safe environment that supports personal growth, while the absence of trust reduces satisfaction with the program. Establishing and maintaining trust is "critical to the success of a particular intervention" (Lowman, 2005, p. 94). When trust is present clients are more likely to share sensitive information and coaches have greater influence over their clients (Gyllensten and Palmer, 2007; Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001). Both are also more likely to engage in risk taking behaviors (Colquitt *et al.*, 2007). Violations of trust, on the other hand, are associated with resistance to change and lower satisfaction (Ford *et al.*, 2008).

Commitment

Commitment reflects the dedication of both the client and coach to perform the work associated with the coaching experience. Commitment includes the mutual assurance to fulfill responsibilities in the relationship, which includes both task (e.g., attending scheduled appointments, preparing for meetings, being accessible) and social-emotional behaviors (for example, acknowledging limitations, persevering through setbacks or progress pauses, identifying and creating motivators).

A strong personal commitment from coach and client translates directly into behavioral performance. Encouraging and sustaining individual commitment is considered essential to coaching effectiveness ensuring the difficult tasks and necessary discussions are completed (Kilburg, 2001; Gregory *et al.*, 2008; Peterson and Miller, 2005). Mentoring literature supports that commitment relates positively to relationship quality (Allen and Eby, 2008) as well as program effectiveness (Allen *et al.*, 2006).

Coaching outcomes

A highly accepted framework for categorizing training outcomes is Kirkpatrick's (1994) taxonomy, which includes reactions, behavior, and results. Reactions refer to the subjective evaluations, including both satisfaction and value aspects, individuals make about their experiences and include both affective perceptions (e.g., satisfaction) and utility judgments about the value of the program. Behavior refers to the influence of the intervention on leadership or job related behaviors. Results refer to the achievement of organizational objectives. We direct you to Ely *et al.* (2010) for a comprehensive discussion of these as well as summative and formative leadership coaching outcomes. These criteria provide a framework for assessing the effectiveness of the coaching relationship and the coaching program and ideally each would be examined.

Hypotheses

Based on our conceptual model and the supporting literature, we hypothesized the following:

- H1.* Individuals in client-coach pairs systematically matched on commonality, compatibility, and credibility will evaluate coaching outcomes more positively than individuals randomly assigned by indicating (a) a higher degree of coaching satisfaction and utility, (b) higher perceived leadership performance effectiveness, and (c) more favorable perceptions of the coaching program.
- H2.* Relationship processes will predict coaching outcomes, such that positive rapport, trust, and commitment will result in higher (a) coaching satisfaction, (b) leadership performance, and (c) program outcomes for clients and coaches
- H3.* Relationship processes mediate client-coach match commonality.
- H4.* Relationship processes mediate client-coach match compatibility.
- H5.* Relationship processes mediate coach credibility impact on client coaching outcomes, including (a) coaching satisfaction and utility, (b) leadership performance, and (c) coaching program outcomes.

Method

Participants

Volunteers included 145 cadet clients and 85 senior leader coaches participating in a leadership development coaching program at a US military academy. Pre-and post-data were available for 74 clients. While 76 coaches also had complete data sets, only 48 of the coaches overlapped with the clients' data set. Both clients and coaches voluntarily participated in the coaching program using their own personal time.

The clients were undergraduates between the ages of 17 and 24, 65 percent male; distributed across academic disciplines, leadership positions, and class years; and 87 percent White, 7 percent Hispanic, and 4 percent other (African-American, Asian, etc.).

The senior leaders were faculty members or commanders responsible for academic instruction or leadership guidance. These military (86 percent) and civilians (14 percent) were between the ages of 26 and 58, 75 percent male; with a range of military, leadership, coaching, and education experiences; and were 81 percent White, 3 percent African-American and 7 percent other (Hispanic, Asian, etc.).

Procedure

The purpose of the leadership coaching program is to support the development of leadership competencies for leadership performance improvement in current and future leadership roles while building life-long learning skills. The data collected for this study were collected over four academic semesters or two program cycles. Coaches and clients met both face-to-face and virtually with an average of eight face-to face meetings lasting between ten and 90 minutes and 77 percent communicating at least once every two weeks.

During the study the number of applicants exceeded the availability of coaches. In total, 47 or 55 percent of the available coaches agreed to support at least two clients.

Therefore, opportunistically, coaches and clients were either randomly or systematically matched on commonality, compatibility, and credibility scores based on application responses. Clients were randomly divided into two groups, such that coaches agreeing to take two clients were randomly assigned to one and systematically matched to the other. Coaches electing to support only one client were randomly selected to either receive a random or systematic matched client. Matches were completed using spreadsheet calculations and potential client-coach pair score comparisons on each match criteria.

End-of-program (EOP) surveys were completed by both clients and coaches, which included perceptions regarding the client-coach relationship and outcome measures. The survey was administered on-line following the termination of the coaching engagement.

Measures

The application and EOP surveys included both historic items for trend analyses as well as items developed to operationalize the relationship issues. Most variables were measured in a straightforward manner (e.g., “What are your extracurricular interests?”); any exceptions are detailed in this section. The measures are divided into three sections: the predictors (commonality, compatibility, and credibility), the relationship process mediators (rapport, trust, and commitment), and the criterion outcomes (reactions, behavior, and program results) and are discussed in turn.

Commonality

A composite commonality score was developed by comparing coach and client across 18 responses (gender, ethnicity, state of record, academic major and 14 hobbies/interests) for a possible score between 0 and 18. Nine percent of the client-coach pairs had no common demographic or interests, while most (62 percent) pairs had at least two or more commonalities with a maximum of five (6 percent).

Compatibility

Coaches completed Clark’s (1998) 18-item Leadership Questionnaire based on Blake and Mouton’s (1985) Managerial Grid with results identifying managerial preference style on two axes, concern for people or for tasks. Clients completed Soloman and Felder’s (2005) 44-item Index of Learning Style Questionnaire, which is based on Kolb’s (1984) Learning Style Inventory with results identifying learning preference style on two axes, tasks and emotional processes. The similarity between these two dimensional models provided the compatibility score, such that client-coach pairs scoring similarly on the task dimension (high or low) and process dimension (high or low) received a higher compatibility score than client-coach pairs in opposite quadrants. Scores ranged from 0 to 4 based on the overlap of each dimension score, such that greater overlap received a higher compatibility score.

Credibility

Credibility had two foci. The first focus, coaching capabilities, examined whether the coach had the requisite ability to meet the client’s developmental need. Clients and coaches identified from a list of 20 leadership competencies their perceived coaching needs or perceived ability to coach, respectively. A score was created by comparing the

overlap in the competencies clients identified as a developmental need and the competencies coaches identified as a coaching strength, with resulting scores ranging from 0 (no overlap) to 10.

The second focus, military experience, similar to business acumen or sector knowledge in the public domain, employed two items from the coach's application. A military experience score was created by comparing the assignment history (e.g., operational assignments) and status (i.e. civilian, non-commissioned officer, officer), such that scores could range from 0 to 2 with higher score indicating greater military experience.

Rapport

Rapport was assessed with two client-centered and two coach-centered items from the EOP survey, e.g. "I felt a strong connection with my coach/client". The five-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The scale reliabilities for client and coach ratings were 0.86 and 0.87, respectively.

Trust

The client and coach each responded to one trust item, "I trusted my coach and the coaching process," or "My client was honest and candid" on the five-point Likert scale.

Commitment

Clients rated coach commitment on three items, e.g. "My coach was committed to my personal leadership development." Similarly, coaches rated client commitment on two items using the five-point Likert scale. Internal reliabilities for the client and coach commitment scales were 0.95 and 0.86, respectively.

Outcomes

The evaluation items were generally based on Kirkpatrick's (1994) criteria using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). Reaction combined satisfaction with the leadership coaching experience ("I am satisfied with my coaching experience") and utility ("I feel the time and effort I've invested was worthwhile") items, with internal reliabilities for each client and coach, with a scale of 0.92 and 0.81, respectively. Two leadership performance items ("As a result of my coaching experience I am more effective [performing my leadership activities]," and "As a result of my coaching experience I learned how to keep learning and improving in the future") were completed only by clients. The resulting scale's internal reliability was 0.87. Finally, organizational outcomes focused on the coaching program and were measured using three client items (e.g., "Overall, this is a high quality program") and three parallel coach items. Internal reliabilities for client and coach scales were 0.88 and 0.85, respectively.

Manipulation check

Three items (e.g., "My coach's personal background and interests were well matched with my background and interests) were included in the EOP survey to assess if the systematic matching produced perceptions of commonality, compatibility, and credibility.

Results

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities for key variables are available from the first author. Based on Cohen's (1988) guidelines for large effect size, seven correlations coefficients were identified as greater than 0.80. Of particular note were the large correlations between rapport, trust, and commitment as rated by the client ($r = 0.81, 0.86, \text{ and } 0.90$). Similarly high correlations were not noted between coach ratings of rapport, trust, and commitment ($r = 0.81, 0.49, \text{ and } 0.55$), such that rapport and commitment ($z = 3.97, p < 0.01$) and trust and commitment ($z = 4.48, p < 0.01$) correlations are significantly higher in client versus coach responses.

Prior to analyses, violations for assumptions associated with the planned analyses were tested. As might be expected, the relationship and outcome variables were negatively skewed but the appropriate transformations performed provided acceptable improvement in the data distribution. The transformed variables are used in the remaining analyses.

Analyses were also performed to ensure that subject characteristics were similar between program cycles, respondents and non-respondents, and clients randomly and systematically matched. No differences in measured demographic and dispositional data were found between these comparison groups.

Manipulation checks were also examined and significant differences were found between random and systematic matches commonality scores ($t(121) = 4.14, p < 0.01$), compatibility scores ($t(121) = 2.54, p < 0.05$), and credibility scores ($t(121) = 5.02, p < 0.01$) at the time of the matches. However, when the three scores were compared using the 74 client-coach pairs with outcome data, there was no longer a significant difference between client-coach pairs randomly and systematically matched on compatibility ($t(66) = 0.57, \text{ n.s.}$) and a smaller effect with commonality ($t(66) = 2.40, p < 0.05$; Cohen's d 0.75 to 0.59). Also, when compared with the manipulation check items, there were no correlations with matched and random pairs and their perceptions of commonality, compatibility, and credibility ($r = 0.17, 0.09, 0.02$; n.s. , respectively).

H1 was not supported as no significant differences between systematically matched and randomly assigned client-coach pairs were found in coaching outcomes as rated by clients (reaction $t(70) = 0.95, \text{ n.s.}$; leadership performance $t(70) = 0.04, \text{ n.s.}$; program $t(70) = 0.80, \text{ n.s.}$) and coaches (reaction $t(746) = 0.29, \text{ n.s.}$; program $t(46) = 0.32, \text{ n.s.}$)

H2 was supported in that relationship processes predicted coaching outcomes (Table I). Specifically, regression results revealed the overall models were significant (reaction $F(3, 66) = 34.51, p < 0.01$; leadership performance $F(3, 66) = 19.16, p < 0.01$; program $F(3, 66) = 20.40, p < 0.01$) with a good fit and 61 percent, 47 percent and 48 percent of the variance explained in the clients satisfaction/utility, leadership development, and coaching program outcomes, respectively. Overall models were also significant (reaction $F(3, 44) = 35.56, p < 0.01$; program $F(3, 44) = 11.51, p < 0.01$) with a good fit and 69 percent and 20 percent of the variance explained in the coaches' satisfaction/utility and program outcomes, respectively. As an exploratory analysis, we also examined how well coaches' relationship process ratings predicted coaching outcomes as perceived by clients. Again, regression results revealed overall models were significant (reaction $F(3, 44) = 17.32, p < 0.01$; leadership performance $F(3, 44) = 13.21, p < 0.01$; program $F(3, 44) = 11.45, p < 0.01$) with a good fit and 27 percent, 22 percent, and 20 percent of the variance explained in the clients'

| Relationship processes | Coaching outcomes | | | Coach ratings | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|---------|---------------|---------|
| | Reaction | Leadership performance | Program | Reaction | Program |
| <i>Client rating</i> (R^2) | 0.61** | 0.47** | 0.48** | | |
| Rapport | 0.42** | 0.10 | 0.24 | | |
| Trust | 0.38** | 0.21 | 0.35** | | |
| Commitment | 0.06 | 0.42* | 0.17 | | |
| <i>Coach rating</i> (R^2) | | | | 0.69** | 0.20** |
| Rapport | | | | 0.62** | 0.16 |
| Trust | | | | 0.27* | 0.45** |
| Commitment | | | | 0.01 | 0.18 |
| <i>Coach rating</i> (R^2) | 0.27** | 0.22** | 0.20** | | |
| Rapport | 0.52** | 0.47** | 0.22 | | |
| Trust | 0.26 | 0.18 | 0.45** | | |
| Commitment | 0.25 | 0.10 | 0.07 | | |

Notes: * $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed); ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Table I.
Regression results: standardized regression coefficients (β) between predictors and leadership coaching outcomes

satisfaction/utility, leadership development, and coaching program outcomes, respectively.

In terms of the best predictors (rapport, trust, or commitment), the regression analyses suggest that client-coach rapport ($t(66) = 3.47, p < 0.01$) and trust ($t(66) = 2.80, p < 0.01$) and not commitment ($t(66) = 0.35, n.s.$) predict client reactions, while commitment ($t(66) = 1.97, p < 0.05$) and not rapport ($t(66) = 0.74, n.s.$) nor trust ($t(66) = 1.08, n.s.$) predict leadership performance. Further, trust ($t(66) = 2.22, p < 0.05$), not rapport ($t(66) = 1.71, n.s.$) nor commitment ($t(66) = 0.91, n.s.$) predicted program outcomes for clients. Similarly, only rapport ($t(44) = 4.78, p < 0.01$) and trust ($t(44) = 2.05, p < 0.05$) predicted reactions, while only trust ($t(44) = 3.39, p < 0.01$) predicted coaching program outcomes for coaches.

H3-H5 suggested that relationship processes mediate the influence of client-coach match conditions (commonality, compatibility, credibility) on coaching outcomes (satisfaction/utility, leadership performance, coaching program; Table II). When client-coach compatibility and relationship processes were regressed on reaction, the relationship ($\beta = 0.58, t(65) = 7.44, p < 0.01$) was significantly related to coaching satisfaction and the compatibility score became non significant ($\beta = 0.03, t(65) = 1.83, n.s.$). The result of Sobel's test showed that the parameter estimate for the relationship between compatibility and satisfaction was significantly lower in the mediated condition than in the nonmediated condition $z = 2.01, p < 0.05$ (Preacher and Leonardelli, 2001), indicating that relationship processes fully mediated the relationship between client-coach compatibility scores and coaching satisfaction, providing support for *H4a*.

Similar results were found when credibility (experience) and relationship process were regressed on reactions, leadership performance, and program outcomes. The relationship was significantly related to coaching satisfaction/utility ($\beta = 0.61, t(63) = 7.47, p < 0.01$, leadership performance ($\beta = 0.44, t(63) = 4.79, p < 0.01$, and program outcomes ($\beta = 0.58, t(63) = 7.33, p < 0.01$) while credibility became

Table II.
Mediated regression
results with standardized
regression coefficients (β)

| Predictor (IV) | Mediator | | Coaching outcome (DV) | | Predictor (IV) | | Mediator | | Coaching outcomes (DV) | |
|-------------------|--------------|---|--------------------------|---|-------------------|---|--------------|---|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Relationship | Satisfaction/utility (client rating) | Relationship | Satisfaction/utility (client rating) | Relationship | Satisfaction/utility (client rating) | Relationship | Satisfaction/utility (client rating) | Leadership performance | Program (client ratings) |
| <i>Step 1</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Compatibility | | -0.06** | | | Credibility | | | | 0.23** | 0.21** |
| R^2 | | 0.11 | | | R^2 | | | | 0.18 | 0.14 |
| <i>Step 2</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Compatibility | 0.05* | | | | Credibility | 0.25** | | | | |
| R^2 | 0.06 | | | | R^2 | 0.15** | | | | |
| <i>Step 3</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Compatibility | | -0.03 | | | Credibility | | | | 0.13* | 0.11 |
| Relationship | | 0.58** | | | Relationship | | | | 0.44** | 0.68** |
| R^2 | | 0.52** | | | R^2 | | | | 0.40** | 0.54** |
| F | | 34.82** | | | F | | | | 20.61** | 36.33** |
| df | | 2, 65 | | | df | | | | 2,63 | 2,63 |
| Sobel test | | 2.01* | | | Sobel test | | | | 2.72** | 3.00** |

Notes: * $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed); ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

non-significant ($\beta = 0.07$, $t(63) = 1.23$, n.s.), ($\beta = 0.13$, $t(63) = 2.13$, n.s.), ($\beta = 0.06$, $t(63) = 1.22$, n.s.), respectively. The Sobel test results ($z = 3.02$, $p < 0.01$; $z = 2.72$, $p < 0.01$; $z = 3.00$, $p < 0.01$) provide statistical support for the fully mediated relationship. Therefore, *H5a*, *H5b*, and *H5c* are supported. However, as commonality was not correlated with reactions, and neither commonality nor compatibility was correlated with leadership performance or program outcomes (step 1 of mediated regression analysis did not demonstrate that there is an effect that can be mediated), *H3a*, *H3b*, *H3c*, *H4b*, and *H4c* were not supported.

Discussion

In this article, we make four contributions to the leadership coaching literature by providing and evaluating a framework for examining client-coach match criteria in terms of understanding their impact on client-coach relationship processes and coaching outcomes. As elaborated in the introduction, despite the suggested importance of the client-coach relationship and the potential impact of building the client-coach relationship, no systematic examination has been performed to examine these issues. Therefore, our framework provides a conceptual examination of critical match, relationship, and outcome variables. The resulting process model not only provides a common foundation for future discussions and research, but can also be used by practitioners to guide their thinking in building relationships and examining their effectiveness.

Our second contribution regards the practical limitations of systematic matching. We felt it important to share the practicalities, or perhaps more appropriately the impracticalities, of systematically matching clients and coaches. Currently without the support of technology, which requires an understanding of which and to what extent different match criteria are important, the process is tenuous. The Center of Creative Leadership, a recognized leader in providing quality executive coaching, estimates that when systematic matching is attempted, only 60 percent are “real matches”, the remaining matches are “best fit” with the remaining coaches with the final matches being random (Hernez-Broome *et al.*, 2009, p. 12). This difficulty is exacerbated in organizations with a limited or homogeneous coaching pool, particularly when the process is performed by hand with no technology support. Future research not only needs to examine match criteria but identify, develop, and assess tools to support practice.

Our third contribution is the empirical support presented for the impact of the client-coach relationship on coaching outcomes. Specifically, the client-coach relationships played a mediating role in the impact of coaches’ military credibility and all three outcome measures, supporting a common belief that coach’s ability to understand client’s business environment and issues was crucial in building a relationship and achieving outcomes.

Our fourth contribution addresses a key gap in the coaching literature regarding the specific factors that clients, coaches, or coordinators should consider in selecting a coach. Rapport and trust were significant predictors of satisfaction and utility as perceived by both client and coach with trust also predicting program outcomes. Finally, commitment predicted leadership performance improvement. Our results provide evidence that the client-coach relationship is indeed critical to successful coaching and further suggest that different aspects of the relationship uniquely impact

outcomes, such that high rapport leads to positive reactions to the experience, while greater commitment translates into behavioral outcomes. Trust, on the other hand, appears more foundational and is critical to both reactions to the experience and program outcomes. The latter being often overlooked but particularly insightful as those indicators are often used to gain organizational support for integrating coaching into the leadership development strategy as well as maintaining and growing the coaching program itself.

In addition, we provide support towards the value of complementary managerial and learning styles in building compatible relationships. While further evidence is needed to understand the importance of matching similar or complementary personality or other individual differences characteristics for building relationships, our research provides initial evidence that clients with learning styles which were complementary or not similar to their coaches' managerial style developed more effective relationships, ultimately resulting in more positive reactions to their coaching experience.

The practical implications of these results are important as they suggest that it is through the effect on the client-coach relationship that the match or fit between the client and coach influences the coaching program success. A successful client-coach relationship is critical to coaching effectiveness and practitioners should consider the fit between the client and coach personal characteristics when pairing a client with a coach. Coaching coordinators might also consider training to support development of rapport, trust, and commitment, particularly when matching clients to limited coaching pools.

Limitations and future research

Although the results of this study are insightful, our conclusions are tempered by shortcomings that are worth addressing in future work. First, military cadets may not represent the traditional clients (e.g., age, experience, personality, behavioral preferences). Thus the generalizability of these findings is limited and replication is needed with other client populations. Further our coaches, while trained, were volunteers performing leadership coaching as an additional responsibility. Therefore our results may be also less generalizable to professional coaches, who coach as their primary job. In addition, limitations with external validity associated with our coaching program existing in an academic setting also apply. Future research should investigate the impact of relationships for developing leaders in business situations unrelated to traditional leadership development courses.

Another limitation involves common method bias. To some degree, item characteristic effects of social desirability and common scale formats and anchors may have influenced participants' responses. While every effort was made to emphasize participant confidentiality and the importance of honest responses, many of the items were written in such a way as to reflect socially desirable attitudes, particularly for the client. Method effects, however, were hopefully minimized by collecting mediator and criterion measures using different scale formats (five-point versus seven-point Likert scale). Future research needs to also incorporate alternative outcome data, such as learning (i.e. declarative and procedural knowledge, self-awareness, cognitive and leader flexibility, self-efficacy and job attitudes relevant to coaching), peer or supervisor ratings of change in leadership

performance, organizational performance, and future coaching involvement is also needed. In addition, formative or relationship process data needs to be collected throughout the coaching engagement to capture the predictive and dynamic nature of the coaching relationship.

We acknowledge that building and maintaining rapport, trust, and commitment does not happen in a vacuum. Other relationship processes (e.g., collaboration), as well as other coaching processes (e.g., mechanics, tools, and techniques) likely influence coaching outcomes and need to be investigated systematically. For example, collaboration is the cooperation that occurs between the client and coach that permits and requires both to contribute in identifying the coaching needs and directing developmental experiences. Collaboration includes not only sharing responsibility but also valuing each other's contributions. Collaborative relationships have been related to goal achievement (Allen *et al.*, 1996; Luborsky *et al.*, 1980) and are distinguishable from trust and commitment (Colson *et al.*, 1988, p. 260).

Obviously, more research examining predictors of effective client-coach relationships is warranted. We also encourage future research to consider factors that might negatively affect the relationship, factors and issues that may impact the client-coach relationship built or maintained within a virtual or e-environment, and as eluded to earlier the factors that may impact different stages of an evolving dynamic client-coach relationship. Finally, we suggest that technology be examined as a tool for identifying and creating optimal and minimal client-coach matches.

Conclusion

This study represents one of the first attempts to systematically examine client-coach relationships. We hope that this effort aids in highlighting the value of the conceptual framework for conducting client-coach relationship research. The results provide support and understanding of the coach-client relationship's impact on coaching outcomes. Further, our findings support the understanding of factors influencing client-coach relationships, which allows us to develop selection tools to better match clients with coaches thus increasing the quality of the relationship and ultimately the outcomes. As organizations continue to adapt and grow leadership coaching programs, it is imperative that research continues towards closing the scientist-practitioner gap in leadership coaching.

Note

1. In 2004, 56 percent of US and 51 percent of UK organizations used external executive coaches (Executive Development Associates Trends in Executive Development and University of Central England Coaching Study, respectively).

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Further reading

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