

# DIE WIRKUNG VON COACHING

Um herauszufinden, wie Coaching beeinflussen kann,  
braucht es die Zusammenarbeit von Theorie und Praxis.  
Ein Gastbeitrag auf Englisch von **Tim Theeboom**

Coaching, which can broadly be defined as a dialogue-based change methodology, has become big business: the global revenue of coaching is estimated to be around \$2 billion worldwide. Today, coaching is no longer seen as a socially accepted form of therapy for dysfunctional managers, but is now seen as an opportunity to invest in one's own professional development. An opportunity that is no longer exclusively available to high-level executives but also for people 'on the floor' such as nurses and teachers. Coaching has often been claimed to be 'the next big thing' in management. Is this claim justified?

### **What research tells us, and what it doesn't**

Research on coaching is still in its infancy. Although the body of research is steadily growing, the number of scientific studies is still relatively small. Nevertheless, the first signs give reason to be optimistic. Meta-analytic studies (studies that quantitatively summarize other studies) show that coaching can help people to attain their goals, to develop their skills, to perform better and to feel better. However, these meta-analytic reviews also point out that the current literature on coaching has some methodological challenges to overcome. For instance, most of the research on coaching is based on self-report studies in which the client him or herself is asked whether the coaching was effective. We know from earlier research that people have a strong tendency to overestimate their own progress. Another shortcoming of the current research is

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that there is virtually no research on the long-term effects of coaching. In most studies, the coachees are asked how effective the coaching was directly after the last coaching session. This way of evaluating the effectiveness of coaching might not be very accurate. Most of us have probably been there: right after a workshop we feel inspired and ready to take on the world as changed men (or women). After a couple of days however, we are back to business as usual. In sum, there is reason to believe that coaching can be effective, but we should also be aware that the current research might provide us with an overly optimistic view on coaching effectiveness.

### **The biggest challenges for coaching research**

Besides the issues mentioned above, there are bigger overarching challenges to address in future research. First of all, I would argue that it is time to shift our attention from the question 'does coaching work' to the question 'how does coaching work'. Research that addresses the first question mainly benefits the marketing efforts of coaching agencies (see, it works!) whereas research that addresses the second question can truly advance coaching practice. It is only by uncovering the processes that un-

derlie effective coaching that coaching practitioners can understand 'which buttons to push' and refine their interventions.

Second, there is a strong need for research that investigates how coaching can be combined with other interventions that are aimed at facilitating professional development (such as training). Currently, coaching is mostly studied as a stand-alone intervention. From an academic perspective, this is understandable. Studying coaching as an isolated intervention allows for clean and 'context-free' research that is much more likely to get published in prestigious academic journals. However, such an approach does not necessarily reflect how coaching is used in practice. In most organizations, developmental interventions (such as coaching, mentoring and training) are embedded in broader strategic human resource management systems (e.g. talent-management programs) that are aligned with the organizations' missions and goals. If we assume that a major aim of coaching research is to inspire evidence-based practice, we should make sure that our research recognizes the systemic nature of human resource management in organizations.

### **Researchers and practitioners unite!**

The challenges outlined above require an active effort from researchers to find a balance between research that is methodologically rigorous (and hence, 'publishable') and practically relevant. However, true progress does not only require researchers to be sensitive to the needs of practitioners, but it also requires practitioners to be sensitive to the needs of researchers.

Over the years, countless practitioners have offered me to help me with data-collection for my research. Unfortunately, many of them lose interest as soon as I explain that my aim as a researcher is not to 'prove' that interventions work and that I will need financial resources, a control group and preferably, a coherent theoretical rationale in order to conduct meaningful research that can truly deepen our understanding of coaching.

In my opinion, a fruitful way to move forward could be to create more opportunities and platforms (e.g. events and conferences) for coaching researchers and practitioners to engage in constructive conversations that can establish a foundation for collaboration. That is, conversations that are open, allow for a multitude of perspectives and help to explore the best ways to move forward. As people with a shared passion for coaching, this shouldn't be too difficult for us. ■

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