

The virtual line manager as coach: Coaching direct reports remotely and across cultures

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Abstract

Global virtual working across cultures and the use of manager-as-coach programmes have been increasing. Although some research on culture in coaching, virtual coaching and the manager-as-coach exists separately, few studies have been undertaken on the line manager as a coach in a virtual and cross-cultural setting. This article identifies relevant findings from existing studies with the aim of increasing understanding of the coaches' skills requirements. Implications and conclusions for organisations using managerial coaching across cultures and geographies are drawn. Further research to deepen the knowledge of this specific coaching context is proposed.

Key words: manager-as-coach, cross-cultural coaching, virtual coaching, distance coaching, coaching skills.

Introduction

According to an annual UK Learning and Talent Survey, the manager-as-coach model is ranked as one of the top three most effective learning and talent interventions and is now widely used in the UK (CIPD, 2012). Simultaneously globalisation, the need to cut costs and to be competitive, concerns for the environment, and the arrival of generation Y in the workforce have made virtual working essential in the business environment (Caulat, 2012; Ebrahim *et al.*, 2009). This has resulted in the growth of geographically dispersed teams, so called virtual teams, who communicate aided by communication and information technology (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2013). In practice this means that managers have direct reports who are based in a different location to themselves. Furthermore, line managers of virtual teams typically have a different cultural background to many of the employees reporting to them.

Global organisations that implement manager-as-coach programmes need to consider the special context these are set in: a challenging triangle consisting of the three dimensions: the manager-as-coach relationship; coaching across cultures and coaching virtually. These dimensions need to be mastered for a successful coaching outcome. The following questions can be asked when considering the requirements of this coaching context: What are the coach's skills requirements for each dimension? Is there a core common skills-set to all three dimensions? How is the coaching best undertaken in terms of technology? Are there any situations where cross-cultural virtual managerial coaching is not appropriate?

Global leadership and managing virtual teams, although fairly new areas, are increasingly explored in the management and business literature (Caulat, 2012; Ebrahim *et al.*, 2009; Panteli and Chiasson, 2008). However, a lack of attention to virtual working and virtual teaming in the coaching literature has been identified (Abbott, 2011). The globalisation of business, emerging economies and the global mobility of

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workforces has resulted in business and executive coaching becoming a necessarily cross-cultural practice (Abbott, 2010). This, combined with the improvements in technology available for virtual coaching and line manager coaching being used increasingly for example by UK organisations (CIPD, 2012), makes it timely to review the body of knowledge relevant to virtual coaching in the cross-cultural virtual manager-as-coach context. Therefore the purpose of this article is to review key literature relevant to this increasingly used coaching setting in order to help identify key issues and best practice. The article will contribute to the debate on implications and potential issues for international organisations using or planning to use managerial coaching.

In the article, I will first review key studies on the manager-as-coach model. This is followed by an exploration of culture in coaching and lastly virtual coaching. Based on these findings further research that could contribute to ‘squaring the triangle’ and the challenges of a cross-cultural virtual manager-as-coach setting will be identified.

Manager-as-Coach

As managerial coaching is increasingly used in organisations, coaching is becoming a core skill for managers (CIPD, 2012). Most studies relating to the manager-as-coach model focus on the relationship, behaviours and competences required (Ferrari, 2006; Boken, 2006; Bailey, 2007; Hamlin *et al.*, 2006; Ladyshevsky, 2010; Towell, 2013; Wheeler, 2007). A couple of these studies acknowledge that their data sample contains both cross-cultural and virtual relationships, but this aspect of the data is not examined further (Bailey, 2007; Towell, 2013). Indeed Beattie *et al.* (2014) identify virtual or e-coaching and cross-cultural coaching as areas requiring considerable further research. Other research suggests that a coaching model that adopts coaching behaviours instead of a directive management style contributes to increased performance, staff development, retention and achievement of organisational goals (Ellinger *et al.*, 2010; Hamlin *et al.*, 2006; Whitmore, 2009; Wheeler, 2011). With the benefits of managerial coaching having been demonstrated, it is interesting to consider what makes an effective manager-coach. In the following section the manager as coach literature is reviewed in light of this.

Coach requirements

Organisations use their managers as coaches with varying degrees of formality. At one end of the spectrum there will be formal coach training and the provision of frameworks, at the other end there is the expectation that ‘coaching team members’ is part of the line manager’s job description without any specific support or set expectations for how this should take place. Improving the employee’s performance through learning is a common objective of the Manager-as-Coach concept (Ellinger *et al.*, 2010). It has been suggested that except for the performance responsibility for the coachee, line manager coaching has much in common with executive coaching (Rogers, 2012). However, the special nature of the manager-as-coach relationship means that the coaching often takes place informally. Indeed, the sign of a mature coaching culture is the use of coaching as a way of doing business rather than an intervention at the individual level (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2005). Therefore it can be argued that managerial coaches need more than the core coaching skills set used by external coaches.

Ladyshevsky (2010) proposes that managerial coaches need to consider the following factors to facilitate employee engagement in the coaching process:

- building trust
- emotional intelligence
- communication skills
- the manager’s conceptions of power and authority
- understanding the role of values
- framing of the performance management process

Ellinger et al. (2010) also distinguish between coaching skills and actual behaviours of the manager which are summarised as ‘giving and receiving performance feedback; communicating and setting clear expectations, and creating a supportive environment conducive to coaching’ (p. 260). The aspect of virtual coaching and working through virtual technology will be discussed in a later section. However at this point it appears relevant to explore the consequences of the practical fact that manager and employee are not co-located. Virtual teams often have routines of formal communication such as telephone or web based conference calls both internally and externally for example with customers, suppliers or partners. But informal time such as having lunch, ‘water-cooler’ conversations, asking quick questions and travelling together to external meetings are lost or less likely as the coaching pair typically spends little time in the same location face-to-face. This means managers have fewer opportunities to observe their employees’ performance and to give feedback as part of informal interactions. The coaching is less likely to be triggered by informal events such as when the employee asks a question. This could mean that a higher pro-activity of both the coach and coachee is required to trigger informal coaching situations.

It has been suggested that a focus only on coaching skills in the manager-as-coach context is not sufficient for a manager’s successful transition from a traditional control model to a learning facilitator model. Managers-as-coaches need to change and sustain their belief about their role and capability, about the learning process and about learners, as these influence how they behave (Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002). This means any coach training needs to include self-awareness aspects to allow managers to analyse their beliefs, as confirmed by the findings of the studies reviewed below.

A study by Heslin et al. (2006) based on implicit person theories (IPT) showed that whether coaches believe human attributes are innate (entity theory) or can be developed (incremental theory), impacts on their motivation to help others and the coachees’ evaluation of the coaching. These beliefs can be influenced incrementally by self-persuasion that Manager-as-Coach training could facilitate. This is relevant in two ways: by increasing managerial coaches’ beliefs about their own development potential as a coach as well as their beliefs about their coachees’ potential (Heslin et al. 2006). A further study reviewed managers’ motivations to coach in the context of sales management based on Vroom’s expectancy theory (Pousa and Mathieu, 2010). It found that short-term organisational goals could result in more directive management behaviours. Organisations with long-term goals and behaviour-based performance measures for sales managers were found to be more conducive to sales managers using coaching behaviours. Ellinger et al. (2008) found that using an autocratic, directive, controlling or dictatorial style, ineffective communication and dissemination of information, and inappropriate behaviours and approaches when working with employees (such as not spending enough time with employees) are key ineffective behaviours.

A key requirement for the coach appears to be the ability to switch between a coaching and a more directive managing mindset (Ellinger et al., 2010). Coachees have reported frustration with being coached when they needed urgent advice. The sign of a mature coaching culture is to respect that employees can decide for themselves whether they need direct advice, but the situation can be used as input for the coaching (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2005). This indicates the need for the coaching pair to focus on their relationship as it evolves; for example by framing how the coaching relationship is embedded into the existing work relationship. Otherwise the coaching could have a negative impact on the day-to-day working relationship, as in the example of being denied fast help through advice in a crisis.

In summary, organisations looking to develop the coaching capability of their line managers could benefit from taking a broad approach. A focus on skills is not sufficient and managerial coach development could also address beliefs, motivations, effective and ineffective behaviours, and values. Besides this, the flexibility to switch between coaching and more directive managerial styles, a general

attention to the relationship of the coaching pair and managing the balance between formal and informal coaching is required.

Further research for the manager-as-coach context

Based on the literature review the following themes for further research emerged:

Theories

The importance in this context of beliefs and motivations, in addition to skills, has been demonstrated. Implicit person theories and Vroom's expectancy theory have been used for studies in the manager-as-coach context (Heslin et al., 2006; Pousa and Mathieu, 2010). Further research could evaluate whether other theories and concepts could increase the understanding of the motivations, beliefs, values and behaviours that influence coaching in the context under discussion.

Diagnostic Tools

A managerial coaching skills instrument that could facilitate a coach's self-awareness measures exists and measures four dimensions: open communication, team approach to tasks, valuing people over the task in and the acceptance of ambiguity of the nature of work (McLean et al., 2005). Reviewing such an instrument is beyond the scope of this article but an evaluation of the suitability for the global virtual manager-as-coach could inform coach development programmes. In addition, Ellinger et al. (2008) propose the ineffective manager-as-coach behaviours mentioned previously as a suitable diagnostic tool for coach training programmes. An overview of further tools and concepts that can be utilised to increase self-awareness would be beneficial for designing manager-as-coach development programmes.

Power distribution and empowerment

Despite the many apparent benefits of the manager-as-coach model, the paradox has also been raised of how it can enable empowerment as it is a coaching relationship with unequal power distribution from the outset (Ferrar, 2006). Maznevski et al. (2006) found that empowerment is one of the characteristics of effective virtual teams and a key role of the virtual team leader is to enable empowerment through the use of coaching. Further research could shed light on these contradictions by investigating the impact of power inequalities and the benefits of empowerment in the virtual cross-cultural manager-as-coach context.

Definition of the manager-as-coach

Many global organisations operate a matrix organisational structure where employees have several reporting lines. Besides the formal line manager who has performance management responsibilities there can be additional so called 'dotted reporting lines'. For example an employee could report to a local manager on one aspect of their role and to a regional manager for another responsibility. Therefore a consideration for future research is whether to expand the manager-as-coach definition to include managers from these additional reporting lines.

Coaching relationship

Similarity (such as shared values and interest alignment) between manager and employee appears to benefit the building of trust in the manager-as-coach scenario (Ladyshevsky, 2010). In the executive coaching context matching of coach and coachee by a variety of factors (including culture) appeared to influence rapport in the early phases of executive coaching relationships, but less so as the relationship develops and trust is built (Wycherley and Cox, 2008). A review of the mentoring literature on cultural diversity concluded that pairing cross-culturally could be beneficial to organisations (Wycherley and Cox, 2008). In the manager-as-coach model the match of coach and coachee is pre-set as the line manager is coaching the employee. Further research could shed light on how the inability to select a coach in the virtual cross-cultural manager-as-coach scenario impacts the coaching relationship and outcome.

Coaching across cultures

For organisations using external coaches, cross-cultural coaching has emerged as a distinct practice in situations where cultural influences are identified as particularly relevant to a client's personal and professional development (Abbott, 2010). As the differences in cultures is inherent to cross-cultural manager-as-coach relationships, learning from the established practice of cross-cultural coaching with external coaches is deemed relevant to this context.

The evolution of cross-cultural coaching

Research and literature on the influence of culture in coaching is still emerging. Although plenty of studies on culture in the business environment have taken place, organizational culture has received more attention than national cultures (Abbott *et al.*, 2013). A further issue is that cross-cultural research and coaching has been dominated by western thinking and bias with western being treated as synonymous to international (Abbott, 2010; Plaister-Ten, 2009; Szkudlarek, 2009). The dominating cultural models in the business and management literature are based on comparing national culture (Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, 2012). Passmore and Law (2009) identify that little empirical research has been done to test the validity of cultural models and the organisational culture in global companies could dominate over the national culture of employees. Although it is acknowledged that the dimensions these models are built on provide a common vocabulary and common language that benefits cross-cultural coaching, many authors point out the danger of stereotyping individuals based on generalisations derived from their national culture (Abbott *et al.*, 2013; Baron and Azizollah, 2008; Passmore and Law, 2009; Plaister-Ten 2009; St Claire-Ostwald, 2007). This is due to the positivistic and dimensional approach of the models that depict culture 'as a rigid and static force that must be worked around to avoid problems' (Abbott *et al.*, 2013, p. 487). Rosinski's (2003) contribution to the field has been evaluated as a move away from this dimensional approach to a social constructivist position through a focus on culture as a positive element in coaching. His framework is based on cultural orientations that are 'fluid and subject to self-determined change' (Abbott *et al.*, 2013, p. 488). Using culture as a dimension in executive coaching has been proposed to increase the coaching effectiveness (Rosinski, 2003). However, there are multiple paradoxes that have to be considered and managed in the coaching engagement. Abbott (2010) argues that individuals are influenced by their cultural background, therefore any coaching will need to cover the aspect of culture; but it doesn't make sense to focus just on culture as there are always multiple influences on the coaching engagement. A focus just on culture would assume that culture can be treated in isolation when developing strategies for change and development. A holistic approach to integrating culture into mainstream coaching is emerging where a global dimension is 'built-in rather than added-on' (Abbott, 2007, p. 59).

Skills required of the cross-cultural coach

A review of the cross-cultural coaching literature identified the following key skills required by the cross-cultural coach. It is understood that many of these skills are best practice for many coaching genres and settings, but they have been mentioned as being particularly relevant for effective cross-cultural coaching assignments and their utility for the virtual cross-cultural manager-as-coach context is discussed:

- *Creating rapport, trust and a safe space* (Plaister-Ten, 2009; Merrifield, 2010): For the context in discussion this means that reframing the existing relationship of the coaching pair is important so a coaching relationship that is conducive to coaching can develop. For example in a culture with a focus on respecting hierarchies it could feel uncomfortable for both the coachee and coach to reflect on their performance and talk about issues of a more personal or emotional nature that might arise through the coaching with their manager.

- *Language skills*: Insufficient fluency is a barrier for both coach and coachee to articulate themselves subtly and more time for thinking, processing and clarifying understanding needs to be built into cross-cultural coaching (Peterson, 2007, Merrifield, 2010). It can be assumed that this would be an issue for overall work performance of anybody working globally, so addressing this issue with language support needs to be considered.
- *Flexibility in applying diverse communication styles and coaching approaches* (Baron and Azizollah, 2008; Keane, 2012; Merrifield, 2010): Cross-cultural coaches should consider verbal and non-verbal communication differences and adapt their style accordingly e.g. when it is not suitable to use eye-contact or the formality of how to address somebody with their name. For the cross-cultural manager-as-coach this means they need to be comfortable with applying varying styles for different team members. The question arises whether adaptability is only the responsibility of the manager or also of the employee. This will depend on the communication skills and level of cultural awareness of the employee and will be explored in more depth subsequently. A certain level of cross-cultural knowledge is for instance required to tolerate something that would be considered offensive in the native culture and to explain it as cultural difference. On the other hand it might lead to confusion if both coach and coachee adapt to the other culture and mirror each other's culture without being authentic to their own culture anymore.
- *Ability to work with uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity and change* (Abbott, 2010; Plaister-Ten, 2009): The trend of global companies to outsource services to economically developing and emerging countries means cross-cultural line managers are likely to coach employees based in rapidly changing environments which bring complexity and uncertainty with them. The complex nature of culture generally means there is a high requirement on the coach to work with uncertainty and ambiguity which could be challenging for coaches from a culture with a tendency to avoid uncertainty (Hofstede, 2001).
- *Knowledge of client culture and cultural theories* (Abbott, 2010; Baron and Azizollah 2008; Merrifield, 2010; Peterson, 2007): How relevant this is depends on the coaching model and client context. For example, the value of positive and negative feedback could vary between cultures and some cultures could be more used to reflection. Cultures with 'high power distance' could expect the coach to be directive and the question has been raised whether in this instance mentoring would be a more suitable intervention (Abbott *et al.*, 2013; Hofstede 2001). Several authors make the point that it is unrealistic to fully know or learn a culture but coaches need to understand the role of culture within their work (Egan, 2010; Passmore and Law, 2009, Peterson, 2007). Naturally there is a danger for a coach with high cultural knowledge to see everything through the cultural lens. While acknowledging that an awareness of culture is useful, some authors question the special relevance, on the basis that culture is a group phenomenon and coaching is concerned with the individual (Peterson, 2007; Egan, 2010). Keane (2012) supports the focus on the individual but proposes that it is not possible to separate cultural components of an individual's identity. Having knowledge of national cultural characteristics can help to unpack what is at play in a specific situation, however the larger context also needs also be considered. A systems approach can help to navigate complex situations through accommodating 'the multiple external influences and cultural norms that the coach needs to be aware of' (Plaister-Ten, 2009, p. 78). In practical terms this could, for example, mean examining the economic, political and social structures of a country and the education system (Plaister-Ten, 2009). In summary, cultural knowledge is beneficial for coaches but needs to be balanced with a focus on the individual. Coaches need to be aware if something is a universal human experience, culture specific or personality related, which supports the holistic global coaching approach that integrates culture amongst other things (Abbott, 2010; Egan, 2010; Keane, 2012).
- *Awareness of own culture and challenging assumptions, values and biases* (Baron and Azizollah 2008; Egan, 2010; Keane, 2012; Merrifield, 2010; Plaister-Ten, 2009; St Claire-Ostwald, 2007). Various tools exist that can increase cultural awareness for coaching purposes. For example the Cultural Orientation Framework (Rosinski 2003), the Cultural Kaleidoscope (Plaister-Ten, 2010) and parts of the Expatriate Coaching Framework (Abbott and Stening, 2011). These tools and frameworks could be valuable for both the managers and coachees in order to raise their self-awareness prior to coaching. In

particular they can help ‘global nomads’ (who have moved between countries all their lives and subsequently don’t have an innate cultural reference) understand which different cultural contexts they draw on in their behaviour and decision making (Burrus, 2011). Keane (2012) points out that the skills developed in cross-cultural coaching, such as being aware of difference and suspending one’s agenda, can be useful for working in coaching relationships with other aspects of difference such as gender and religious belief. This means developing line managers’ cross-cultural coaching skills helps mature the diversity of organisations generally.

- *Self-development* (Abbott, 2010, Hawkins and Smith, 2006; Passmore and Law, 2009). As cultures are dynamic and cross-cultural coaching is an emerging complex field, staying up-to-date with research and best practice will aid the development of any coach working across cultures. Best practices for coach development such as supervision and reflective practice could form part of any global virtual Manager-as-Coach programme.

Future Research on the cross-cultural coaching dimension

The nature of global coaching means that it is work-in-progress and more research, including large scale studies that consider the uniqueness of individual situations and narratives, have been called for (Abbott, 2007). Further research could identify whether the use of psychometrics and personality traits would benefit the evolution to a holistic global coaching approach, in particular as most of these tools originated in the US and therefore may not be globally applicable (Abbott, 2013). A study by Wilson (2011) on global mindedness concluded that while a predisposition in individuals and personality traits influence the development of a global mindset the nature and extent of experiences that determine this development also play a role. Further research could look at the complex interrelationship of these aspects (Wilson, 2011).

Coaching virtually

In this section I first review the definitions of virtual coaching. This is followed by a literature review with the purpose of establishing the skills requirements for virtual coaching.

Definitions

A review of the academic and practitioner literature on virtual coaching results in the following list of terms that are used to describe coaching that takes place across a geographical distance. The list falls into two categories, firstly terms that focus on the geographical dispersion of coaching: virtual coaching, remote coaching, distance coaching, scalable coaching (Berry, 2005; Feldman, 2002; Ghods, 2009; Hakim, 2000; Rankin, 2010; Van Dam, 2008; Williams and Kaye, 2011); secondly terms that describe the communication channel used: online coaching, internet coaching, e-coaching, e-mail coaching, Skype coaching, video coaching, telephone coaching, telecoaching and phone coaching (Ahrend *et al.*, 2010; Clutterbuck and Hussain, 2010; Lewandowski, 2000). For the purpose of this article the term ‘virtual coaching’ is adopted to include all of the above definitions. Time is another dimension that varies for different forms of virtual coaching. Virtual coaching takes place both synchronously and asynchronously. Examples of the former are telephone, video and Skype coaching where the coaching takes place at an agreed time. E-mail coaching is an asynchronous coaching example where coach and coachee are writing and responding to emails at different times. Lastly, the term ‘blended coaching’ is used by coaching providers to describe a mix of both face-to-face and virtual coaching.

Virtual Coaching research

Few studies on coaching at a distance have been undertaken, and the participant samples were based on executive coaching, not manager-as-coach relationships (e.g. Berry, 2005; Charbonneau, 2002; Dixon, 2012; Ghods, 2009; McLaughlin, 2013). A review of the virtual coaching literature by Ghods and Boyce (2013) found the ‘primary advantages are that it is practical, accessible and cost effective. Disadvantages include its level of complexity, such as the need for coaches to develop a trusting relationship, provide

critical feedback and manage other interpersonal issues from a distance' (p. 516). As sceptics of virtual coaching will ask for the evidence of the effectiveness of virtual coaching, key studies are reviewed in the following section.

A study comparing virtual with face-to face coaching (Berry, 2005) researched the impact of the working alliance of the coach and coachee on the achieved outcome (change) from the coach's perspective. For virtual coaching the working alliance was predictive of the degree of change achieved through the coaching. This was not the case for face-to-face coaching. Coach experience and number of coaching meetings were not predictive of the change achieved. This would suggest the importance of building the relationship for virtual coaching which mirrors the finding that virtual teams who focus on relationship building as well as the task perform higher (Caulat, 2012). However, the study used the 'working alliance' instrument, a self-measurement tool designed not for coaching, but counselling relationships, and Ghods (2009) points out the limitation of it being based on the coach's perspective only. Further research could confirm the findings by using a tool designed for coaching, that considers the manager-as-coach relationship and includes the coachee's perspective.

The largest empirical study on virtual coaching is a PhD thesis on distance coaching by telephone that included coachees (Ghods, 2009). It concluded that it is possible through coaching solely at a distance to develop and maintain a strong coach-client relationship that results in positive coaching outcomes. The majority of clients were satisfied with being coached at a distance and observed positive coaching outcomes that were confirmed by co-workers. The client-coach relationship in this virtual coaching programme had an impact on client satisfaction and coaching outcome, which is in line with findings in psychotherapeutic literature. Therefore coaches should focus on relationship building in distance coaching (Ghods, 2009).

Many managers and their employees working in a global context will be skilled in virtual working to varying degrees, as they are constantly building virtual relationships in their personal and professional lives. The virtual maturity of the organisation, the degree of the so-called 'virtual organisation development', will have an impact on virtual working skills of their employees and consequently on in-house coaching programmes (Reyes, 2009). The more virtually mature the organisation the higher the quality of the technical resources available for the coaching and the higher the virtual working skills of the employees and managers. Furthermore the *virtualness* of an individual's work and their *individual virtual competency* will have an impact on virtual coaching (Wang and Haggerty, 2011). As the cross-cultural virtual manager-as-coach coaching pair not only has a virtual coaching relationship but also work virtually together in their day jobs, the coaching experience provides an opportunity for mutual feedback on individual virtual competencies and to develop them.

The technology available for virtual teams and virtual coaching has expanded with the widespread use of webcam coaching and the arrival of High Definition Video (HD Video). An annual international executive coaching survey found that in 2012 for the first time in-person coaching had fallen, HD video accounted for 4% of all coaching and webcam coaching for 15%. With high quality video becoming more available and the experience being described as like being in the same room as the client, it is expected to overtake other coaching delivery methods (Sherpa Coaching, 2013). A recent study on telephone coaching also focused on the experience of the coach. All coaches found the experience comparable to face-to-face coaching with three coaches judging it to be more powerful, which is mirroring findings in the mental health literature (McLaughlin, 2013).

A study researching virtual executive coaching found that considering media preferences and the people fit of the coaching pair (the so called 'coach-client-media fit') impact on client satisfaction (Charbonneau, 2002). The coach-client-media fit comprises of:

- 1) the fit between coach and their preferred medium
- 2) the fit between the coachee and their preferred medium
- 3) the fit between coach and client as people

This is in line with findings that virtual teams that consider personality and media preferences perform higher (Jonsen *et al.*, 2012). While the coach-client-media fit model is useful in terms of understanding what influences coaching outcomes, several issues should be explored further about how to manage coaching situations that don't allow for the coach-client-media fit. Interestingly a study on executive telephone coaching found that there is no correlation between the personal preference and the satisfaction with the medium (McLaughlin, 2012). Further, the relationship of coach and coachee in managerial coaching is fixed. There is no choice to facilitate a people fit as the coaching pair is defined by their job roles of manager and direct report. Lastly, knowing about the preferred media for the coaching pair does not necessarily mean it is possible to use it. There are still many locations in the world where high-speed broadband is not available and not all organisations make the latest high quality video conferencing systems available to their employees. In the executive coaching context it has been argued that coaches need to be adaptable in their technology use to stay relevant for and meet the needs of clients who might be more technologically minded (Dixon, 2012; Reyes, 2009). This points to the responsibility of virtual managers-as-coaches who have their coachees as internal clients to stay up to date as new technology for virtual coaching is emerging. This is particularly prevalent as the younger generation entering the work force is likely to have more experience than their managers of using these new tools.

Although virtual working mediated by communication technology has been used by organisations for the last 20 years, it is still considered second class (Caulat, 2012). Panteli and Chiasson (2008) propose that all contemporary organisations work virtually as well as face-to-face. Virtual communication takes place also between people who reside in the same location, for instance by email and telephone. Therefore a comparison of the traditional and virtual way of working is not necessary as the purely traditional way of working in-person exclusively doesn't exist any more. This argument can also be applied to the cross-cultural managerial coaching context, as it can be assumed that the luxury of only face-to-face coaching is unlikely for cost reasons. Conversely, it is fair to assume that coaching pairs with a reporting line will rarely work virtually only and probably have face-to-face meetings at some point. So instead of a focus on comparing virtual coaching to face-to-face coaching (which probably is rarely exclusively one or the other in the context examined) a focus on understanding the characteristics of virtual coaching and the skills required by coach and coachee for successful virtual cross-cultural relationships would be more beneficial to the reality of modern working and coaching practices. This will help cross-cultural managers who coach their direct reports virtually to master their task. Very likely this new knowledge can also give new insights for the traditional face-to-face way of working, for example the effects of empowerment on the coaching relationship as discussed in the previous section.

As the virtual coaching literature is limited, this evolving field can learn from the established literature on virtual teams and virtual leadership. Caulat (2012) proposes that learning to become a virtual leader involves learning, re-learning and unlearning skills: learning to tune in and to work with silence, re-learning the basics of communication and unlearning bad habits such as not giving virtual meetings the same focus and status as face-to-face meetings. Starting virtual teams with a face-to-face meeting has been shown to benefit trust building and has become best practice for virtual teams (Hakim, 2000; LaBrosse, 2007; Reyes, 2009). In virtual-only coaching programmes, although client satisfaction with being coached solely at a distance was reported, the first session required most adjustment to the virtual setting (Ghods, 2009). Therefore a focus on establishing the relationship is an important part of virtual coaching. A study researching executive coaching using video by Dixon (2012) confirmed this and recommends allowing time and strategies to support and accelerate the building of rapport and trust.

In summary, the selection of the coaching media needs to consider the preferences of both the coach and coachee. Special requirements for the coach include relationship and trust building skills, further adaptability when working with current technologies and keeping abreast with emerging technologies. Some studies on virtual coaching have been undertaken, but they are set in the executive coaching environment and mostly collected data from the coach's perspective (Berry, 2005; Charbonneau, 2002; Dixon, 2012; Ghods, 2009; McLaughlin, 2013). Future studies could increase the understanding of the coachee's experience of being virtually coached by their line managers across cultures.

Conclusion

Line managers are increasingly used as managerial coaches who work across cultures by virtual media. The requirements of the coach for the three dimensions of coaching across cultures, virtual coaching and the manager-as-coach relationship have been established. Many of these requirements, such as communication skills, are core skills for any type of coaching while others are specific to the context of each dimension. The question this article seeks to explore is what requirements matter in the combination of the three dimensions of the cross-cultural virtual manager-as coach triangle.

Core themes in the cross cultural virtual manager-as-coach coaching context

The following common principles have emerged that should be considered for coach development programmes in this setting and related issues are discussed:

Focus on the relationship

A general theme that emerged from all three dimensions was a focus on establishing the coaching relationship. This is generally considered a core coaching skill, but it could require more time in the virtual and cross-cultural context than in culturally homogenous face-to-face coaching. A particular characteristic of the managerial coaching context across cultures and by virtual means is that manager and coach already have an established relationship, that of line manager and direct report. Therefore creating trust and a safe space for the coaching within this relationship appears to be an even more important aspect, for example to set boundaries for confidentiality and to set expectations with the coachee that transitions between coaching and other management styles can occur. If the existing relationship has tensions it can be challenging to achieve a situation that is conducive to coaching, but on the other hand the focus on coaching could be an opportunity to overcome difficulties.

Focus on skills not sufficient

The initial approach of this article was to review the specific skills that the manager as coach context requires of the coach. It has become apparent that it is not only skills that need to be considered but also mental models, beliefs, behaviours and values both for the manager-as-coach and the cross-cultural dimension and this could inform development initiatives. Moreover, the review of the virtual and cultural dimensions identified two dimension-specific skills that may require a minimum ability level of the coachee: virtual working and foreign language skills. The focus of this article is on the coach and this point therefore will not be further evaluated beyond the recommendation for organisations to consider a certain level of these skills as a pre-requisite for both coach and coachee when setting up programmes that require coaching virtually across cultures.

Self-assessment, self-awareness and self-development

The sources used in the literature review in the cross-cultural and virtual coaching sections were based on relationships with external, mainly executive coaches. In the scenario under discussion, the coach has many other interactions besides coaching with team members. This has the advantage that many of the skills such as language skills, working with other cultures and communicating by virtual technology are acquired and practiced during their day job. What is specific to this coaching context is that these skills need to be assessed against the context, developed, refined for the context and consciously put to practice.

A manager's virtual working skills might be fit for purpose for general work-based communication, but not for coaching situations. Similarly foreign language skills might be sufficient for managing projects but not for unpacking the subtleties of an experience. The good news for organisations is that any developments and investments in coach development should benefit the manager's day job; for example the increased ability to coach not just culturally but generally diverse employees. Therefore self-assessment should form an important part of 'cross-cultural virtual managers as coaches' training, so they can understand their level of understanding of their own and their coachee's culture, their virtual maturity and generally their coaching skills. This allows managerial coaches to set development opportunities and gives prompts for reflection. Proven support mechanisms from other coaching contexts such as supervision could be employed to facilitate this process.

Future research

This article has reviewed evidence, best practice and recommendations from coaching and related fields relevant to the virtual cross-cultural manager-as-coach context. The lack of research specific to this increasingly used coaching context warrants further research to be undertaken in this area. Recommendations are summarised subsequently for each of the three dimensions discussed in this article.

Manager-as-coach dimension:

- Identifying theories that increase the depth of understanding of managerial coaches' beliefs, values, motivations and behaviours.
- The contradiction of the unequal power distribution of the coaching relationship and the value of empowerment.
- Expanding the scope of defining the Manager-as-Coach beyond direct reporting lines.
- The impact of the coach being assigned through their role, rather than a coach selection process, on the coaching relationship and coaching outcome.

Coaching across cultures dimension:

- Large scale studies that consider individual situations and narratives
- The benefits of working with psychometrics and personality traits

Virtual coaching dimension:

- Studies that are set in the Manager-as-Coach setting
- Explorations of the coachee's experience of virtual coaching

A common further research theme that emerges from the combination of all three dimensions is the limited availability of evaluations of the tools that assess and increase coaches' self-awareness of their cultural knowledge, virtual working and line manager coaching skills, as well as beliefs, motivations and values. For the cultural tools some evaluations exist (e.g. Gilbert and Rosinski, 2008) but an evaluation that considers all three dimensions of the cross-cultural virtual coach could bring context specific insights. Further, in the process of reviewing coach requirements it became apparent that there are more pre-requisites for the coachee to be 'coachable' than in traditional culturally homogenous and face-to-face coaching settings: language skills and virtual working skills are key requirements for the coachee as well as for the coach. In addition the question arose whether cultural awareness for the coachee benefits the coaching experience and outcome. Generally more research is needed for all three dimensions to match the knowledge of the coach perspective with insights on the coachee's experience.

In terms of research approaches it has been proposed that qualitative methods tend to allow for more cultural sensitivity and consideration of the individual experience but this is more challenging to achieve in questionnaire based studies (Emmerling and Boyatzis, 2012; Abbott et al., 2013). Also, it has been put forward that the key cultural theories and studies have been influenced by Western thinking. Hence future research should ensure that it is truly global by incorporating Eastern perspectives. The fact that the

coaching pair has already an established relationship could make it challenging to isolate and attribute findings to the coaching versus other aspect of the line manager and employee relationship. This complexity would also call for qualitative research approaches.

Issues related to these core themes that require further debate and research have been identified. Increasing the body of knowledge that considers the combination of the three dimensions examined can help organisations, managers and coachees to master the challenging triangle of coaching across cultures, by virtual channels and in a manager-as-coach relationship. Organisations who expect managers of virtual teams to coach their direct reports could benefit from building their coach development on the core themes of best practice that have been discussed: the coaching relationship and a broad focus on developing the coach capability for which self-assessment and self-awareness building can be instrumental.

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