

Academic Paper

How does coaching support organisational leaders in today's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment?

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Abstract

The world of work is becoming more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, increasing the pressure on organisational leaders. The literature endorses the positive effects of coaching in general but appears limited regarding how coaching could better help leaders in these turbulent times; this study aims to address the gap. Adopting an IPA approach, the study investigates the lived experience of coaching for four senior leaders from different organisations. The results demonstrate their shared and individual feelings about the specific benefits of coaching. Further research is suggested on how coaching could support leaders more effectively, especially regarding mental health and encouraging a systems perspective.

Keywords

VUCA, leadership, coaching, organisations, teams

Article history

Accepted for publication: 20 May 2025

Published online: 02 June 2025



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Published by Oxford Brookes University

Introduction

The Research Problem in the Wider World

Given the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) global context, organisational leaders are expected to find new ways to evolve and adapt in their efforts to solve increasingly complicated problems (Coopersmith, 2022). In addition, the recent Covid-19 Pandemic was a universal and unimaginable disaster which will 'permanently change organizations and organising practices' (Stephens, Jahn, Fox, Charoensap-Kelly, Mitra, Sutton, Waters, Xie and Meisenbach, 2020, pp.451-452).

However, Jones, Woods and Guillaume (2015) and Lawrence (2021) confirm that while leaders are expected to use coaching skills to help their teams cope with these myriad challenges, research into the costs and benefits of leadership coaching has not kept pace with these changes. Emerging

trends such as digitalisation, diversity and inclusion, hybrid working and Generation Z entering the workforce compound the issues facing leaders already struggling to respond to such challenges (Zaccaro, Marks and DeChurch, 2012). As Wageman, Gardner and Mortensen (2012) confirm, further research is needed to better understand how coaching can support leaders deal with the complex, networked problems of VUCA environments. This study aims to begin to address this gap.

Research Aims and Methodology

This study investigated the lived experience of four organisational leaders as they reflected on how the coaching they received helped them to cope with professional challenges during a period of ambiguity and uncertainty. The research followed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, via semi-structured interviews with the participants focused on how they made sense of their coaching experience. IPA is a valuable research method for coaching research (Rajasinghe, 2020). Within this methodology, Larkin and Thompson (2012) underline the importance of researchers reflecting on their own experience, which, when combined with the interpretation of the participants' experience, can then be used to begin a tentative dialogue with appropriate existing theories. In this case, the research aims were to explore leaders' experience of coaching in VUCA environments and to consider if these combined experiences may be transferable to others in similar situations.

In the next section I outline the review of the literature which helped to inform the study. This is followed by an explanation of the methodology chosen to answer the research question, a summary of the main findings from the study and a discussion of these findings in the context of existing literature. I end the article with a conclusion and suggestion of possible future research areas.

Literature Review

Introduction

Whilst there exists a significant body of work focused on leadership and teams within VUCA environments (Busche and Chu, 2011; Ancona, 2012; Hrynychak and Motuzka, 2023), the literature appears underdeveloped regarding how coaching could more effectively support leaders in these unpredictable conditions (Wilson and Lawton-Smith, 2016). This lack of exploration is concerning, as many of today's leaders are struggling to adopt the new skills needed in these dynamic, fluid conditions (Kornelsen, 2019).

VUCA

Williams (2017) explains that the term VUCA was first used by the US military to describe the unpredictable nature of warfare following the end of the Cold War. The acronym was then adopted by the business world, especially after the global crisis of 2008 which obsoleted many business and leadership models. Moss Breen (2017) investigates leadership resilience in VUCA situations and Cordreanu (2017) considers the challenges facing leaders in these environments. Kornelsen (2017) suggests that a new approach is needed to lead a younger workforce in today's VUCA world, proposing that leaders find a balance between building relationships and getting work done. Williams (2017) describes the challenges of introducing internal coaching within a VUCA environment but does not focus on leaders in her study. Fjäder (2021, p.27) describes how leaders are facing an operating environment of 'extreme uncertainty' but does not consider the benefits of coaching to help leaders navigate these turbulent waters. While these studies may be helpful in

their specific contexts, there remains limited research on how coaching could support leaders more generally in VUCA environments (de Bruin and Graupner, 2024).

Leadership

In terms of leadership skills needed to succeed in rapidly evolving settings, Senge (1993) was an early pioneer in suggesting a new role for leader – that of designer, studying the organisation as a system to design learning processes for teams to understand forces for change. Kirkman and Mathieu (2005) built on this by suggesting that managers structure their teams so that they could become more coach-like, for example monitoring the needs of the team and helping provide timely support to enable complex task completion. More recently, Tannenbaum and Salas (2021) have gone further by proposing that leaders encourage empowerment across their team. However, as Traylor, Stahr and Salas (2020) highlight, there is limited research into how coaching could help leaders develop these essential skills in turbulent environments.

Leadership Coaching

Kilpatrick (2022) investigates how coaching can help leaders during transition periods, while Nadeem and Garvey (2020) consider how coaching can support leadership learning. In their influential study, Hackman and Wageman (2005) propose a coaching model with three features: (i) the functions that coaching serves for a team, (ii) the specific times when coaching interventions are most likely to have the intended effect and (iii) the conditions under which team coaching is/is not likely to facilitate performance. However, their model was based on fully-fledged teams working together in social systems and does not consider today's fluid, dispersed teams working in complex distributed environments.

Of greater relevance to this study's focus on VUCA environments is Lawrence's (2021) review of the team coaching literature. Acknowledging the rise of systemic team coaching as a new focus in coaching, Lawrence (2021) suggests that the term 'systemic' may itself be limiting, as in volatile environments leaders need to consider multiple boundaries and connections across teams when thinking about what constitutes their team. Widdowson (2020) also urges leaders to see a wider picture and view their team as part of a network of inter-connected relationships.

Diversity

An additional consideration for leaders when assembling teams in today's dynamic contexts is that of diversity (Page, 2017). In their meta-analysis of the effects of different types of diversity, Milliken and Martins (1996) define diversity across two distinct categories – observable attributes such as race, ethnic background, age and gender, and less visible attributes such as education, technical ability, tenure, personality and values. Leveraging these differences to find the right balance between diversity and similarity is an essential role for leaders (Dimitrova and Wellman, 2015).

Page (2017, p.2) suggests that 'diversity can produce bonuses [...] when people with diverse cognitive repertoires work inclusively on complex tasks' and advises that leaders play a pivotal role in carefully curating their teams to benefit from this bonus. However, Rico, Molleman, Sanchez-Manzanares and Van der Vegt (2007) confirm that incorporating diversity into teams can be difficult and that current research shows mixed results on the benefits of such heterogeneity.

Leader as Architect

Linked to the focus on curating diversity, leaders have a pivotal role in continually re-assessing the structuring of their teams and the communication flows between the component parts (Surowiecki, 2004; Davison and Hollenbeck, 2012). Regarding how coaching could help leaders build these

skills in rapidly changing circumstances, Shuffler and Carter (2018) propose that leaders shift their thinking from teamwork within a team to teamwork across a system. This inter-team leadership and boundary spanning communication can help to overcome some of the challenges highlighted above and encourage the development of a shared identity to maximise collaboration in complex circumstances.

Methodology

Research Aims

There were two aims of this research. Firstly, I wanted to understand how coaching supported certain organisational leaders in VUCA environments. Secondly, the IPA approach can sometimes be used to engage with potential theories for the topic being investigated (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). Therefore, I wanted to examine if, in some cases, any themes surfacing from the analysis of the participants' personal experiences could help to inform future coaching approaches to support leaders in today's rapidly changing contexts.

Research Paradigm

Ontology is the study of the nature of reality (Thomas, 2017). Bryman and Bell (2015) propose two distinct perspectives: objectivism, which posits a stable reality 'out there' where social phenomena and their meanings have an existence independent of social actors. Conversely, constructivism suggests multiple emerging realities where phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. The second element of the research paradigm is epistemology, the theory of knowledge (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Similarly to ontology, there are two differing positions. A positivist stance suggests that knowledge reflects reality and that it can be studied following scientific methods. Alternatively, an interpretivist viewpoint holds that knowledge is everywhere and meaning exists via our individual interpretation of the world (Thomas, 2017).

In this research study the researcher's own beliefs and values are incorporated into the process together with an analysis of the participants' personal thoughts, feelings and interpretations.

My views align with the constructivist and interpretivist stance, as I believe each of us constructs reality in different ways and that knowledge is 'situated in relations between people' (Thomas, 2017, p.152). This is reflected in the research aims, focused on a qualitative study investigating the subjective experience of the participants.

Methodological Approach

IPA fits both the research aims and my epistemological position as it is a method for exploring experience in its own terms (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). By focusing on individuals' experience of coaching, the meanings they bring to the experience and the role of the researcher in co-constructing meaning, the study aligns with Rajasinghe (2020, p.176) who suggests that IPA is a valuable coaching research tool for the 'analysis of sense-making of experience as a valid way of knowing.'

Data Collection

As this was my first IPA study, I wanted to follow an established process and, given their impact in this area I chose the process proposed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022). The first step of the data collection process was to create a list of potential questions (the interview guide) and review these with my Supervisor. This feedback allowed me to revise my interview guide and prepare for

the next step – a pilot interview with a member of my study cohort, where I could ‘test’ my questions and refine my interview technique.

In line with Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022), the next step was to select 4-6 participants who met the criteria relating to the research question. I sent them the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form so that, once the pilot was completed, I could confirm interview dates and locations with all participants.

Choosing participants for an IPA study is more concerned with representing a perspective, rather than a specific population (Smith et al., 2022). I therefore followed a purposive approach (Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011) for selecting participants from the business world, reflecting my professional experience from the last 30 years. Thus, participants were chosen specifically because their background was relevant for this study, the research question was meaningful to them, and all of them had experience of coaching their team or being coached.

Table 1: Study Participants

Name (not real name)	Position	Company Description
Dan	Commercial Director	FMCG brand incubator
Julia	B2B Director	International consumer insights
Maggie	Senior HR Leader	Global premium car manufacturer
Steve	Managing Director	Renowned data services provider

As a third step, I prepared the final interview structure. Smith, et al. (2022) and Rajasinghe (2020) propose that semi-structured interviews are used within an IPA study. This approach acts as a ‘guide’ but remains flexible to allow the interviewee to develop their ideas and speak more widely on the issues that are important for them. For this study, the interviews were conducted face to face, at locations chosen by the participants. One interview of 45-75 minutes was conducted with each person. In addition to my notetaking, all granted permission for the interviews to be audio-recorded and transcribed later using software. This provided the in-depth interaction with the transcripts necessary to interpret participant experiences; this is explored further in the following section.

Data Analysis

Thorough evaluation and interpretation of the transcripts is a crucial part of the IPA study (Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011), and to facilitate this I followed the iterative seven-step process suggested by Smith et al. (2022). As a first step I immersed myself in the original data, noting my early thoughts. Next, I captured things of interest to produce detailed comments. Thirdly I created ‘experiential statements’ linked to participants’ experiences before the fourth step of mapping connections across these statements. In Step 5, I gave a name to each of the ensuing clusters, as Personal Experiential Statements (PETs) for each participant. Step 6 was then to repeat the process for the next transcript. Once all transcripts were analysed, for Step 7 I reviewed all the PETs to create the Group Experiential Theme (GET) to capture their shared experience. For the final additional step, I re-read all the transcripts to see if I had missed any PETs and added these to my overall analysis (PETs v.2).

Quality, credibility and transferability

A criticism of IPA research is that the results are not generalisable (Thomas, 2017; Flick, 2023), but this is not the aim of qualitative research. In line with the philosophical stance of IPA, Yardley (2000) underlines that the purpose of qualitative research is to investigate the possible transferability of findings, rather than provide overall generalisations. To support this, I purposively selected group of participants to see if my interpretation of their experience (the double hermeneutic at the heart of IPA) could be relevant for some readers in certain cases.

A further goal of the research was to make any claims to knowledge valid and reliable. Flick (2023) suggests qualitative researchers can improve both areas by focusing on the quality of processes conducted and the documentation of all subsequent data. For example, re-checking the interview guide after the pilot and before each interview, and making informal transcript reviews shortly after each interview while the process is still fresh in the mind in order to capture the ebb and flow as accurately as possible.

Ethical considerations

An IPA study is a dynamic process (Smith et al., 2022) and like any research project it is essential to follow the correct ethical method throughout the course of the review. For this study I focused on three broad areas. Firstly, I ensured the relevant Oxford Brookes University procedures governing research projects (such as the Code of Conduct and Ethics) were adopted and cross-checked during the nine months journey of the Master's degree. Secondly, I incorporated the learnings from the Literature Review to follow the guidance suggested in some of the main works on business research, such as Bryman and Bell (2015), Flick (2023) and Thomas (2017). Thirdly, I reflected on the nuances of this particular study and any appropriate extra steps needed, such as ensuring the participants understood and approved that their interviews would be anonymised and quoted in the research findings (as standard practice in IPA studies). Also, that they would take part as individuals, not as representatives of their companies. Finally, I confirmed with each participant where and how the data would be stored, along with what happens to the data after the study is completed.

Researcher Reflexivity

As this was my first IPA study, reflexivity throughout the research was critical, especially on two key themes. Firstly, as the researcher I was aware of my active position within the social world of the study, bringing my own thoughts and preconceptions to the process. The research question focused on the experience and sense-making of the participants, so I was curious to 'take part' in the study and see how I could play an active role whilst leaving space for the participants. The other main area of reflection centred on the second aim of the study – namely would it be possible to transfer any insights uncovered from the participants' experiences of coaching and mentoring to start engaging with early theories about how these interventions could support leaders in volatile environments. I was therefore intrigued to see how the study evolved.

Findings and Discussion

Overview

The clear theme to emerge from my analysis was the participants' shared positivity about the overall benefits of the coaching they received. This Group Experiential Theme (GET) was refined further, detailing favourable aspects of their experience across five sub-categories: specific actions by the coach; coaching creating a safe space; perception of self-improvement; awareness of stress from uncertainty; finding positivity in complexity. Overall, these themes provided the participants an opportunity to step back from the day-to-day pressures and think more broadly about their role as business leaders and the wider system in which they operated. In this multi team system, the coaching they received prompted the participants to re-consider the actual boundaries of 'their' team – highlighting a topic for potential future research.

Matching the experience of the participants, the existing literature details many examples of the overall benefits for leaders of coaching. Passmore (2010) describes increasing evidence of the positive effects of leadership coaching, including helping leaders transfer learning to others,

supporting increased self-awareness and providing a safe space for leaders to take time and reflect. Ladegard and Gjerde (2014) propose that coaching is a promising leadership development tool and more effective than 'training' as it reflects the different starting points of coachees.

This study therefore adds to the literature on the benefits of coaching during VUCA conditions. In this section I present the research findings, contextualising each discovery where appropriate within the existing literature.

Specific Actions by the Coach

Both Julia and Steve commented on their coach's ability to sit in silence during their encounters, allowing space for reflection. In the daily rush of large organisations, this felt strange at first, but both eventually appreciated the potency of this simple technique. When not leading his organisation, Dan participates in elite triathlons and he described how his sports coaches provided reassurance and prompted him to look at things in different ways – a skill which he was then able to leverage in his professional life. Jones, Woods and Guillaume (2015) underline the importance of establishing this affirmative connection at the outset of the relationship. Grant (2010, p.62) also agrees that good verbal communication skills are 'at the heart of a coaching conversation' as coaches need to build rapport to engage in collaborative goal setting and motivation for change. These particular actions by the coach helped the participants feel comfortable, supported and safe – aspects discussed further in the next section.

Coaching Creating a Safe Space

The safe, non-judgemental space opened in coaching was greatly valued by three of the participants. Dan acknowledged the 'safe place to talk about stuff or self-doubts' as he described the physical and mental challenges of leading a business during these uncertain periods. Julia also appreciated the space away from the daily job which the coaching sessions provided. This time and space away from daily work which the coaching sessions provided was invaluable to the participants. It allowed them time to decompress, to recharge and to think through difficult issues, helping them to feel more confident about their leadership. Building on the foundations of this trusting relationship, participants felt the 'space' created by the coach during the sessions was a significant factor in enabling them to make progress. Cox (2006) and Clutterbuck (2010) underline the importance of creating this safe space in coaching. Brand and Coetzee (2013) suggest this non-judgemental space helps the coachee discover previously unseen blind spots.

Perception of Self-Improvement

The third sub-category shared by the participants as part of their positive experiences of coaching in VUCA conditions was the perception of the personal benefits from the interventions and how these percolated to others in the organisation. Both Dan and Maggie talked passionately about the broader impact coaching had on themselves and others. Maggie was clear about what she saw as the biggest benefit of coaching – 'the empowerment lens that it brings.' Similarly, whilst struggling with the pace of change and volume of her leadership duties, Julia acknowledged that coaching can sometimes help remind leaders to adopt a more inclusive approach with their teams. Overall, the participants' experience highlighted how they felt the positive effects of the coaching they received could sometimes radiate to a broader group within their organisations.

The literature broadly supports these experiences. In their meta-analysis of coaching research, Aboalshamat, Hou and Strodl (2014, p.139) found that coaching can help 'improve and develop individuals multidimensionally'. O'Connor and Cavanagh (2013) found that coaching helped improve well-being for the coach and also those linked closely to them, a feature Fontannaz (2018) describes as the 'ripple effect', where the positive impact of individual coaching can spread to

others throughout the organisation (experienced by all participants). This consideration for others is also reflected in the next sub-category to be explored below.

Awareness of Stress from Uncertainty

The fourth positive experience shared by the participants was the opportunity for reflection that the coaching sessions provided, particularly around the impact of stress during volatile times. Julia cited uncertainty as a challenging element for her leadership, perhaps related to the size of her team and the predominance of Gen Z colleagues who had not previously experienced this kind of turbulence. Dan also reflected on the additional pressures that the continuing ambiguity exerted on his teams, his business and himself. With a background in engineering and a meticulously arranged office complete with a well-stocked library of business books, Steve was similarly methodical in his reflection on the challenges faced by his business which he was able to consider in the sessions with his coach: 'So, you want examples of volatility and uncertainty? Yeah? Let's start there...there isn't an aspect of this business that looks the same, really.'

Whilst not solely attributable to the coaching sessions, it is clear from participant feedback that the sessions provided an opportunity to step back from the focus on daily activities and consider the wider impact of stress caused by the volatility – for themselves and their team.

The effect of uncertainty on leaders and their teams is well served in the literature, although as Wilson and Lawton-Smith (2016) observe, there is limited academic research focused on how coaching can help in these conditions. Highlighting this knowledge gap Shet (2024) emphasises how the pandemic and global conflicts impact the capabilities needed by organisations if they are to survive in this VUCA landscape. Hrynychak and Motuzka (2023) go further in suggesting that to be successful in these difficult environments, leaders need to cultivate new skills such as creativity, emotional and cultural intelligence, reflexivity and the ability to co-operate in virtual environments.

Finding Positivity in Complexity

Finally, despite the challenges highlighted above, three participants talked energetically about how coaching helped them to find positive elements in the difficult environment. Maggie shared that she found the fluid, rapidly changing conditions suited her inventiveness. She also felt strongly that the pandemic had helped to highlight the importance of mental health issues. For Dan, the focus on self-care during the coaching for his sporting activities was a key learning, reinforcing how important exercise was to him both physically and mentally. Away from sport, this realisation impacted positively how he showed up as a leader within the business. Similarly to Maggie, Steve found a certain freedom in the chaos as it supported his direct leadership style and energy to get things done.

Despite the adversity faced by leaders during these turbulent times, the final sub-category shared by participants was the opportunity coaching provided to help find positivity in the complexity. In the literature, the closest connection I could find to the participants' experience was how coaching helps to increase confidence and resilience during uncertain times. For example, Wilson and Lawton-Smith (2016) found coaching improved self-assurance, but their study did not focus on leaders, nor did it measure how long the improvements lasted. Williams (2017) suggested positive benefits from introducing internal coaching in the VUCA environment of a call centre, but this too did not focus on how coaching could help leaders during these difficult times.

The participants also acknowledged the difficulties sometimes associated with leaders adopting a coaching approach with their teams. Both Dan and Maggie agreed that occasionally in difficult, rapidly changing times, a more directive, hands-on approach is needed from leaders to take quick decisions. Steve also described how he occasionally needed to switch from a coaching approach to being 'direct and loud' to accelerate changes across his team.

Conclusion

The focus of the research was to explore how coaching supported organisational leaders in the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environments in which they operate. This chapter will therefore summarise the findings of the research, propose the potential contribution the study makes to the coaching and mentoring community, suggest limitations of the study and highlight potential areas for future research, before providing a short conclusion.

The collective theme to emerge from the analysis was the participants' appreciation of the overall benefits of the coaching they received during periods of volatility and uncertainty. Detailed analysis of the transcripts resulted in this main theme being further refined into five shared sub-categories: the specific actions by the coach; the safe space created during the sessions; the perceived self-improvement resulting from the interactions; attentiveness to the stress caused by volatility and the ability to find positivity in the complexity.

My interpretation of these findings was that the participants found that these specific elements helped them to address individual challenges, such as thinking about self-care, considering the welfare of their team and finding the right balance to remain authentic whilst fulfilling the rapidly changing goals of their organisation.

Contribution to the Coaching Community

Whilst this study investigated the shared and personal experiences of a small number of organisational leaders, I hope that the findings are nonetheless helpful for a broad range of stakeholders including professional coaching bodies, coaches and buyers of coaching services. The findings pinpoint two main implications for this community where further research could help to investigate how coaching and mentoring could provide more specific interventions for leaders in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous situations.

Firstly, the participants' attempts at making sense of their experience suggest that further research is needed into how coaching can support leaders generally in VUCA environments. Given the added stress of leading teams in volatile environments, there is an emerging need for further research into how coaching may help leaders manage their own, and their team's, mental health. More specifically, additional research into supporting leaders' mental health and enhancing leaders' ability to find positivity in the complexity could be warranted.

The second implication is to encourage leaders and those developing coaching interventions to think more broadly about what constitutes a team in today's rapidly evolving landscape. The leaders in this study described the complex networked challenges they faced across their organisations. All the participants commented on the changing nature of work, the rise of hybrid, distributed teams, and the evolving matrix structures of their organisations. Additional research could therefore help leaders think more broadly about the networks in which they operate.

For example, as the world becomes progressively more complex, people work on multiple tasks and teams simultaneously, so leaders need new skills to manage these fluid, emerging teams (Lawrence, 2021). To support future leaders to develop these new networked competencies, additional research into how the emerging area of systemic team coaching could help leaders adopt a more systemic approach where appropriate to build and develop teams in VUCA environments.

Study Limitations

Regarding limitations, the 9-month period to complete a rigorous dissertation whilst working full-time was challenging. Also, the 15,000 word-limit helped to maintain focus, but may have

constrained deeper interrogation with the literature. In line with the IPA approach, I selected a small group of individuals for the study: however, after initially targeting six participants (allowing for one to dropout, leaving me with a cohort of five), in the end two participants could not take part due to travel commitments. All four participants shared a similar demographic background, so a more diverse group may have added different perspectives to the analysis.

Closing Thoughts

This research presented findings which I hope will prompt further investigation within the coaching community. As the world becomes increasingly volatile and uncertain, and the organisation of work becomes more complex, I believe that we owe it to the next generation of leaders to continue exploring how coaching could help them to navigate this ambiguous, changing landscape.

I selected the IPA approach as it was an appropriate method to answer the research question and because it focused on areas of personal and professional interest for me – searching for meaning and examining what human experiences we may share. I am therefore exceptionally grateful to the participants for their trust, openness and honesty in sharing their personal experiences during the interviews. It was a gift to be allowed into their worlds.

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About the author

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