

The Influence Of Character: Does Personality Impact Coaching Success?

Lorna J Stewart, Department of Psychology, City University, London, UK

Stephen Palmer, Coaching Psychology Unit, City University, London, UK

Helen Wilkin, Department of Psychology, City University, London, UK

Maire Kerrin, Work Psychology Partnership, Nottingham, UK

Contact email: LJStewart@mail.com

Abstract

Using the Five Factor Model of personality and the construct general self efficacy this study explores the relationship between coaching clients' personality and a self-report measure of the transfer of learning from coaching to the workplace. Positive correlations are found between the application of coaching development and conscientiousness, openness to experience, emotional stability and general self-efficacy. Conscientiousness is also found to be associated with generalisation and maintenance of outcomes. Personality measures may have value as a means for identifying coaching clients who require support in order to make manifest the changes experienced in coaching.

Keywords

Executive coaching, selection, support, personality, coaching success

Introduction

Coaching has become increasingly accepted as a learning and development strategy that is capable of enhancing the job performance of the majority of individuals (CIPD, 2005). The outcome of this is that organisations are witnessing a sizeable volume of employees both requesting and being recommended for coaching. Irrespective of whether coaching is delivered by internal or external providers it is expensive. This raises two key concerns for organisations seeking to maximise their expenditure on coaching: selection of coaching candidates, and support for the implementation of their coaching development plans.

First, organisations may be forced to select amongst coaching candidates. Hence, it may be prudent for them to select those employees whose coaching related development will facilitate the greatest organisational gains. Whilst any conceptualisation of gains will have a content component aligned with the organisation's strategic aims, it will also have a process component associated with the coaching client's capacity to develop via coaching and to translate their development into work performance. Secondly, if organisations are to maximise their coaching investment they may benefit from providing support interventions for coaching clients who are less likely to translate their development into work performance.

Attending to the issues surrounding selection and support relies upon understanding the client's role in coaching success. There is currently no agreement regarding what constitutes a successful coaching outcome. Extrapolating from Schmitt et al's (2003) model of employee performance, coaching success can be viewed as *enhanced individual and organisational (distal) outcomes (e.g. productivity) resulting from enhanced individual performance behaviours (e.g. enhanced self-management) associated with the positive transfer of coaching*

development (e.g. enhanced confidence) by the coaching client to their workplace. Wherein coaching transfer can be defined as *the sustained application of coaching development, specifically the knowledge, skills, attitudes and other qualities acquired during coaching, by the client to their workplace* (Stewart, 2006). The current study focused on coaching transfer.

Within occupational psychology, personality factors are deemed to be predictors of learning and work performance (Herold et al, 2002; Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989). Coaching involves learning; the transfer of which can be viewed as a work performance task of the coaching client. This suggests that it is likely personality factors affect coaching transfer. Electronic searches of the behavioural sciences databases PsycINFO and Dissertation Abstracts International, and of coaching websites and discussion forums, yielded little research exploring the client's personality and coaching. Recently Scoular & Linley (2006) found that differences between clients' and coaches' scores on the MBTI dimension temperament were associated with higher coaching outcome scores. Bywater, Hurst, & Berrisford (2007) found personality influenced the client's intention to build a development plan following a development centre, the extent to which they found the programme motivating, and their satisfaction with the programme. No research was found that specifically explored the role of the client's personality in coaching success. The current paper sought to contribute to coaching research, and also to provide practical guidance to organisations, by exploring the relationships between client personality characteristics and the positive transfer of coaching development to the workplace.

Coaching

Coaching within organisations falls within two main categories: coaching as a day-to-day management activity predominantly conducted by line managers, and executive coaching (Peltier, 2001). This study was concerned with executive coaching. Executive coaching was recognised as "a form of tailored work-related development for senior and professional managers which spans business, functional and personal skills" (Carter, 2001, p x), and as a development activity for less senior high-potential managers (Judge & Cowell, 1997). The term client was adopted to represent individuals participating in coaching.

Personality and Performance

The use of personality assessments to predict workplace performance has a controversial history. Prior to the 1990s findings, such as those of Guion and Gottier (1965) and Schmitt, Gooding, Noe, and Kirsch (1984), suggested that compared with other types of performance tests the predictive validities of personality assessments were too low to be useful (Hough & Oswald, 2005). The low validity of the pre-1990s assessments has since been suggested to be attributable to the lack of a common framework around which to organise the predictor traits thus obscuring the predictive validity of personality (Barrick & Mount, 1991).

In the 1990s confidence in the five-factor model (FFM) of personality grew (Barrick & Mount, 1991) and personality researchers increasingly adopted FFM measures (e.g. Costa & McCrae's (1992) NEO-FFI) in selection research. Their widespread use of the FFM helped overcome the lack of a common framework for organising predictor traits. The findings suggested the FFM had selection utility (Barrick & Mount, 1991); nonetheless, the criterion-related validities were still relatively low (Hough & Oswald, 2005). Recently researchers have hypothesised these low validities may be due, in part, to the overlooking of situational considerations in performance assessments (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Consequently, research is now oriented towards a more thorough understanding of the nature of the relationship between personality and different aspects or types of performance (Hattrup & Jackson, 1996; Schmitt, 2004). Coaching transfer represents a specific type of performance indicator.

Performance

Performance can be thought of as the interaction of cognitive ability and motivation (Hollenbeck et al, 1988). Whilst cognitive ability is seen as a relatively unified, stable construct, motivation is regarded as the direction and quantity of attentional effort directed towards a task and the extent to which this effort is maintained over time (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989). These direction, level and persistence components of motivation have been found to be influenced by the personality traits (as typically defined by FFMs) conscientiousness, openness to experience, and emotional stability (Judge & Ilies, 2002).

Conscientiousness refers to an individual's propensity for planning, organising, carrying out tasks, and for being reliable, purposeful, strong-willed and determined (Costa & McCrae, 2006). Meta-analyses suggest conscientiousness is a consistent predictor of job performance. For example, Barrick & Mount's (1991) meta-analysis found that conscientiousness predicted job and training proficiency across numerous occupational groups, including professionals and managers. Conscientiousness has also been found to be associated with learning. For example, Colquitt & Simmering (1998) found that conscientiousness was positively related to both pre-training motivation and motivation during the training process. Together these work and training related results suggest that conscientiousness is likely to be positively related to coaching transfer.

Openness refers to an individual's curiosity about their inner and outer worlds, their willingness to entertain novel ideas and unconventional values, and the intensity with which they experience their emotions (Costa & McCrae, 2006). Barrick & Mount (1991) found that openness was positively related to performance for managers and negatively related to performance for professionals (e.g. lawyers and accountants), in which performance represented a composite of job and training proficiency and personnel data (e.g. salary level). However, when they pooled their analysis across occupational groups (i.e. professional, police, managers, sales, and semi-skilled) openness exhibited a positive relationship with training and a negative relationship with job proficiency.

Le Pine et al (2000) found that individuals who perform well in a changing task context have higher levels of openness and conscientiousness. Since one of the purposes of executive coaching is to support managers to cope with ever-increasing demands to adapt to change (Judge & Cowell, 1997), it is likely that openness will facilitate their development within coaching. Furthermore, as open individuals are more curious about their inner worlds, more willing to engage in self-monitoring (Blicke, 1996), and more receptive to change (Costa & McCrae, 1992), they are likely to be more willing to explore within coaching, and consequently adopt within their managerial repertoire, new approaches and strategies that emerge via coaching.

Emotional stability refers to an individual's tendency towards being calm, even-tempered and relaxed, and their ability to face stressful situations without upset (Costa & McCrae, 2006). Martocchio (1994) found "trainees' acquisition of declarative knowledge was influenced by their levels of anxiety" (p 824), with higher levels of anxiety related to lower levels of knowledge acquisition. Colquitt et al's (2000) meta-analysis found anxiety was negatively related to motivation to learn, post-training self-efficacy, and declarative knowledge and skill acquisition. Kanfer & Ackerman (1989) suggest that anxiety diverts attentional resources away from learning. The acquisition of declarative knowledge may not be commonly the focus of executive coaching; nonetheless, the above studies suggest that low emotional stability likely affects coaching transfer via undermining both an individual's motivation during coaching and their self-efficacy to transfer coaching's developmental gains.

Performance has also been found to be associated with self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Three levels of self-efficacy are thought to exist: task-specific, domain, and general self-efficacy (GSE) (Woodruff & Cashman, 1993). General self efficacy, which is said to arise from the accumulation of an individual's past experiences with success and failure (Sherer et al, 1982), is conceived of as a relatively stable, individual differences construct (Schwoerer et al, 2005). It is said to influence individuals' expectations of mastery in new situations (Sherer et al, 1982). Since expectations of mastery are likely to influence if coaching clients use the knowledge, skills, attitudes and other qualities that they acquire in coaching within the workplace, it is anticipated that higher levels of GSE will be related to coaching transfer.

Summary

To date research has overlooked the role of the client's personality in coaching success. Links between performance and personality in the work performance and training transfer literature suggest that personality likely influences coaching transfer. The study hypothesised that:

1. Conscientiousness will be positively related to positive coaching transfer.
2. Openness will be positively related to positive coaching transfer.
3. Emotional stability will be positively related to positive coaching transfer.
4. General self-efficacy will be positively related to positive coaching transfer.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 110 participants (60 male and 40 female) was recruited via an email sent to coaches, coaching organisations and web-based coaching interest groups. Each participant had attended an average of seven coaching sessions from a variety of coaching programmes. The average length of coaching engagement was eight months, the minimum of three months, and the maximum of 18 months. The participants included three junior managers, 25 managers, 42 senior managers, 32 partner/directors, and three CEOs. The reasons they had attended coaching were to accelerate their career development (no identified performance concern) (41%), to gain career direction clarity (21.8%), to address personally identified performance concerns (19.1%), on the advice of someone senior (7.3%), and to prepare for an upcoming challenge (5.4%). The majority had volunteered for coaching (63.6%). The modal age category was 36 to 40 years (30.9%), followed by 46 to 55 years (28.2%).

Measures

Three measures were employed: one related to coaching transfer and two related to personality. All scales were self-report and were administered online.

Coaching success was measured by the Coaching Transfer Questionnaire (CTQ) (Stewart, 2006). The CTQ is a self-report measure that explores clients' perceptions of the extent to which they believe that they have implemented the development that they acquired via coaching to the workplace. The CTQ was developed from semi-structured interviews with clients, coaches and organisational that sought their views of (a) what constitutes a SCO and (b) evidence required to indicate that positive coaching transfer has occurred. The results of the client (N=25), coach (N=9) and stakeholder (N=5) content analyses were very similar. The resulting constructs were combined and used to develop an initial pool of 72 items related to successful coaching transfer. Refinement analyses based on a pilot study of 24 participants

resulted in a CTQ consisting of 27 items. Participants indicated their agreement with these items against a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The data collected from the current 110 participant sample was further analysed by principle components analysis (PCA). PCA revealed a two factor solution that comprised a) items related to the application (CTApp); and b) items associated with generalisation and maintenance of coaching development (CTG&M). PCA also showed that three items did not load on either factor. These items were removed and all subsequent analyses were conducted on data from the resulting 24 item CTQ. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities were CTApp .924 and CTG&M .856 (N=110).

The final CTQ consisted of 24 items and comprised two sub-scales: a) 18-item Coaching Transfer Application (CTApp); and b) 6-item Coaching Transfer Generalisation & Maintenance (CTG&M) scale. The CTApp scale sought clients' perceptions of the extent to which they had applied their coaching related development. For example:

*I am better at collaborating with others to achieve departmental objectives
(CTApp question 6)*

*I am better at adapting my management style to fit the situation
(CTApp question 11)*

The CTG&M scale sought clients' perceptions of the extent to which their coaching related development was sustained over time and generalised beyond the work area associated with the initial coaching objective. For example:

*I use (amount) of the development that I gained in coaching in my job?
(amount: significant proportion, quite a bit, some, not much, none)
(CTG&M question 1)*

Conscientiousness, openness to experience and emotional stability were each assessed by a 10-item subscale of the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) (Goldberg, 1999). The IPIP scales measure personality based on the FFM. Participants are presented with statements and are asked to indicate how accurately each one describes them on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (very inaccurate) to 5 (very accurate). The current study used the IPIP scales conscientiousness (IPIP-C, N=10), openness to experience (IPIP-O, N=10), and neuroticism (i.e. emotional stability) (IPIP-N, N=10). Internal reliabilities of the subscales have been found to be IPIP-C .81, IPIP-O .82, and IPIP-N .86 (IPIP, 1999). For this sample, Cronbach's alpha reliabilities were IPIP-C .81, IPIP-O .77, and IPIP-N .88.

General self-efficacy was explored using the General Perceived Self-Efficacy scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1993). To enable items to be interspersed within the 10 item questionnaire a five-point response format ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) was used instead of the scale's usual four-point response scale. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .862.

Procedure

Coaches and coaching organisations were sent an email requesting participation in coaching research and were asked to forward the email to their coaching clients and associates who had participated in executive coaching. The email contained a link to the online questionnaire. The first page of the questionnaire assured participants that their involvement was voluntary, that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and that their answers were confidential and anonymous. The questionnaire sought demographic information (age, gender, management grade, reason for attending coaching, and the mechanism by which clients came to coaching) and contained the scales: CTQ (CTApp relating to application and CTG&M relating to generalisation and maintenance); IPIP-C (conscientiousness); IPIP-O (openness to experience); IPIP-N (emotional stability); and GSE (general perceived self-efficacy). Of the 179 questionnaires that were started 110 were fully completed.

Results

Table 1 (below) presents the means and standard deviations for each scale.

Scale	Min	Max	Mean	SD
CTApp	29.00	88.00	66.93	10.03
CTG&M	14.00	30.00	23.07	3.58
IPIP-C	19.00	50.00	35.99	5.70
IPIP-O	23.00	48.00	37.64	5.21
IPIP-N	10.00	43.00	22.71	6.41
GSE	22.00	49.00	39.66	4.66

N=110

Table 1. Means and standard deviations

The relationship between personality variables and coaching transfer

The relationships between the two coaching success variables (CTApp and CTG&M) and the four personality variables (IPIP-C, IPIP-O, IPIP-N, and GSE) were investigated using Pearson product-moment co-efficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violations of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. The correlations are presented in Table 2 and Table 3.

	CTApp	CTG&M
IPIP-C	.28**	.22*
IPIP-O	.24*	.03
IPIP-N	-.21*	-.13
GSE	.22*	.07

** p<.005, * p<.05 (2-tailed)

Table 2. Correlations between personality and coaching transfer variables

	IPIP-C	IPIP-O	IPIP-N	GSE
IPIP-C		.098	-.370**	.411**
IPIP-O			-.474**	.576**
IPIP-N				-.636**

** $p < .005$, * $p < .05$ (2-tailed)

Table 3. Correlations between independent variables

According to Cohen (1992), an effect size is small if $r = .10$, medium if $r = .30$ and large if $r = .50$. Small positive correlations were found between conscientiousness (IPIP-C) and: a) the application of coaching-based development (CTApp) [$r = .22$, $p < .005$]; and b) the generalisation and maintenance of coaching development [$r = .28$, $p < .05$]. This suggests that 7.95% of the variance in respondents' scores on CTApp, and 4.97% on CTG&M, is explained by conscientiousness. These findings support the Hypothesis 1 which suggested that conscientiousness would be positively related to coaching transfer.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that openness would be positively related to coaching success. Correlation analysis indicated that openness (IPIP-O) formed a small positive correlation with CTApp [$r = .24$, $p < .05$]. This suggests that 5.76% of the variance in respondents' scores on CTApp is explained by openness. A statistically significant relationship was not found between CTG&M and openness; Hypothesis 2 was therefore partially supported.

A small negative correlation was observed between the CTApp and emotional stability (IPIP-N) [$r = -.21$, $p < .05$]. This suggests that 4.33% of the variance in respondents' scores on CTApp is explained by emotional stability. A statistically significant relationship was not found between coaching-based development CTG&M and emotional stability. These findings offer partial support for hypothesis 3, that emotional stability will be positively related to coaching success.

There was a small positive correlation CTApp and general self-efficacy (GSE) [$r = .22$, $p < .05$]. This suggests that 4.88% of the variance in respondents' scores on CTApp is explained by GSE. A statistically significant relationship was not found between CTG&M and GSE. These findings offer partial support for hypothesis 4, that GSE will be positively related to coaching success.

Multiple regression analyses suggest that together the FFM variables IPIP-C, IPIP-O, and IPIP-N account for 12.5% of the variance in CTApp. Conscientiousness ($\beta = .26$; $p < .05$) and openness ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$) make unique contributions. Similar regression analysis with CTG&M resulted in a non-significant model. Introducing GSE into the regression resulted in a model which accounted for 12.6% of the variance in CTApp, and in which only conscientiousness ($\beta = .26$; $p < .05$) made a statistically unique contribution.

Discussion

This study sought to explore if personality traits are associated with coaching transfer. Our results were generally consistent with trends observed in previous training and work performance studies. First, in finding a positive relationship between conscientiousness and both components of coaching transfer our study corroborates previous research that suggests individuals who exhibit higher levels of conscientiousness on FFM measures are more likely to transfer their learning (Nguyen, Allen & Fraccastoro, 2005).

Our finding of a positive relationship between openness and the application component of coaching transfer concurs with Barrick and Mount's (1991) result which indicated openness was positively related to manager performance. Application can also be interpreted as willingness to implement novelty and, in doing so, to alter the work performance context. From this perspective, the association between openness and coaching application shares similarities with Le Pine et al's (2000) finding that individuals with higher levels of openness perform well in a changing task context. Unlike Le Pine et al's (2000) participants who responded within a changed task context the participants in the current study, via transferring their development, contributed to the change. Future research is needed to determine if open individuals are likelier than their counterparts to respond positively to an identified need for adaptation irrespective of whether they authored or co-authored the change. In a coaching context this could involve examining positive transfer in conjunction with: a) whether the participants volunteered for or were recommended for coaching; and b) if their objectives were individually and/or organisationally defined.

Our finding that emotional stability was positively correlated with the application component of coaching transfer has similarities with Colquitt, LePine & Noe's (2000) finding that anxiety is negatively related to post-training self-efficacy, and skill and declarative knowledge acquisition. However, since emotional stability did not make a statistically unique contribution its influence may be tenuous. The observed weak associations between emotional stability and coaching transfer may be due to a restricted sample range within the current study. There is also evidence that lower levels of emotional stability are linked to greater performance for professional groups (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Future research could explore this.

The finding of significant relationships between openness, emotional stability and general self-efficacy (GSE) with the application component of coaching transfer and not with the generalisation and maintenance component supports the division of transfer into two structurally different components. It also offers opportunities for future research. First, the finding that emotional stability was significantly correlated with application and not with generalisation and maintenance may suggest that the two components exert differing demands on attentional resources (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989). Second, the lack of a statistically significant link between openness and generalisation and maintenance may suggest that maintenance and generalisation situations do not provide the level of novelty sufficient to motivate open individuals. General self efficacy is said to influence performance via expectations of mastery in new situations (Sherer et al, 1982). Hence, insufficient novelty may also be associated with the lack of an observed relationship between GSE and generalisation and maintenance. Alternatively, it may be due to mastery expectations being verified during application. Future research could explore the validity of these suggestions.

General self efficacy's moderate positive correlations with conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness, along with the finding that GSE did not make a unique contribution to coaching transfer, may suggest that mastery expectations are, in part, a product of these FFM characteristics traits. Future research could explore the possibility of using GSE as a proxy for the FFM constructs conscientiousness, openness and emotional stability. This would have advantages for coaching research as the GSE scale comprises only ten items.

Implications

Despite being significant, the magnitude of the observed correlations between personality and coaching success were relatively low. This likely suggests that other factors play a greater role than personality in coaching transfer. Stewart (2006) proposed that client, coaching, and work environment factors are all associated with coaching success. Personality may impact on coaching success via moderating the influence of these variables. However, until the

nature of these relationships has been clarified, selecting individuals for coaching based on personality would be unwise.

The relationships between the application component of coaching success and the studied personality variables may suggest that certain individuals could benefit from support interventions to encourage transfer. Specifically, individuals who do not score highly on conscientiousness, openness, emotional stability and GSE, may find interventions to assist them to apply their coaching development useful. Stewart (2006) developed a Coaching Transfer Facilitator Framework to guide such interventions. For example, this framework recommends the formation of a champion-client partnership for developmental action, in which the champion is someone senior to the client with an interest in the client's development. Future research could explore the relative effectiveness of transfer interventions across personality characteristics.

Limitations

This study suffers several drawbacks. First, it was based entirely on self-report. This may have increased the risk of inflated relationships due to method variance. Future research could use varied and more objective sources of evidence to measure coaching transfer (e.g. performance ratings). Second, the Coaching Transfer Questionnaire has yet to be validated against tangible indicators of transfer. Third, the study was based on a convenience sample, and consequently it is more likely than random samples to suffer sampling bias (Loewenthal, 2001). Last, the study specifically surveyed individuals who had participated in executive coaching, and thereby it overlooked relationships between personality and the day-to-day line manager coaching. Future research could seek to explore these deficits.

Conclusion

In sum, this study contributed to coaching research by providing an initial exploration of the relationship between personality traits and coaching transfer. In particular, the results suggested that coaching clients may not be equally likely to transfer their coaching acquired development to the workplace. However, in the absence of validity statistics that indicate the ability of personality to predict coaching success, personality assessment has greater legitimacy as a mechanism for identifying the coaching clients who would benefit from support interventions than it does for selecting amongst potential coaching clients.

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