Phenomenological research: How methodology supports effective research into middle managers perceptions of engagement in coaching

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Abstract

This article gives an insight into the research methods and findings of a study of the perceptions of middle managers in relation to engagement in coaching. The article aims to give an understanding of the importance of the chosen methodology and how this can be the key to successful research. It will conclude with an insight into the conclusions from the study which focused on taking coaching forward to middle manager level.

Key words: Perceptions, engagement, coaching, middle managers, Interviews, participants.

Introduction

Until recently, I was employed in the public sector in Policing. I retired after 30 years as a police officer and attaining the rank of Chief Inspector. I had experience and the desire to improve my coaching qualifications and completed an MA in Coaching and Mentoring Practice with Oxford Brookes University in September 2009. My dissertation focused on middle managers perceptions of coaching. I was involved in the setting up of a coaching programme in my home police force and was the force champion of coaching, however engagement was slow. I conducted a qualitative research into middle managers' engagement in coaching using a social constructivist view of how their own perceptions and their view of others affected their engagement in coaching. The aim was to provide an opportunity for organisations to develop coaching programmes for the future.

Significance of the methodology

Choosing a methodology as a novice can be a daunting and confusing process. I found that Creswell (2007) offered some useful advice in determining the most appropriate approach. He encourages and informs the actual 'doing' of the research. He links the ontological approach and the importance of the question to be answered with the mechanical aspects of actually 'doing' the study. As a novice this is one of the most important aspects of research. When looking at literature on the research subject and the various research methodologies it is possible to make most qualitative research methods fit your study, so it is vital to make sure that you are focused on what you want to achieve. By doing so one methodology does tend to stand out, I chose a phenomenological method of research after long and careful consideration. I wanted to understand what the perceptions were of middle managers to coaching and therefore it appeared to fit a phenomenological approach best. I used Moustakas (1994) as a guide in this respect he suggests that to understand perceptions of the participants on a specific issue and not to analyse their complete story fits the phenomenological approach. This view exactly matched the study aim, which was to

ascertain if perceptions of individuals affected their engagement in coaching. I soon identified many other important considerations.

Available time and the length of the written research requirements are very important for the researcher to keep in mind as he/she meanders through the wealth of journals, books and other information relevant to the work. Reality checks are vital at regular stages of research or there is the risk of loss of focus with the subsequent greater risk that the study may become irrelevant and lack evidenced findings.

Once I had chosen my methodology I found that it was still important to ensure focus on how the methodology would work. So many scholars have a differing view on how each methodology fits into research that whilst it is important to maintain a balanced approach it can also be beneficial to concentrate on one view of the chosen methodology. The strong affiliation between Moustakas' work and my study led me to believe that once a researcher has found a valid theory that supports the research it can be advantageous to stick with it. More than one theory could be used but again a reality check is needed to make sure the study does not become too complex. By and large I found that once I had found my 'bible' (Moustakas) I could stick to it and ensure balance in my choices and I could also argue my point for doing so.

Once I had secured my methodology I moved to the mechanics of actually obtaining the data. I found that Seidman (1998) and his guide to in-depth interviewing became a second bible with which to ensure the content and value of my interviews with participants was worthwhile.

Choosing participants to achieve the objective

My participants views and perceptions were the lynch pin to achieving success. To achieve this they needed to be open and honest in their responses and without fear or favour. It was important that participants did not give an organisational view. The study relied on their personal views and therefore it was important to give confidence in the security and anonymity of the process. I believed that the participants held the key and therefore were to be treated in alignment with their importance.

My ability to influence the study was high due to my closeness to the issue. This again indicated the importance of ensuring that the participants were carefully selected in order to ensure that the objective was achieved appropriately. I engaged a recent group of promotion candidates who could potentially provide a suitable number for the study. I invited all involved in the process to participate. By canvassing a specific group this allowed sufficient variation of participants whilst also leading to some validity, due to the knowledge and understanding they would have of the issue to be considered, thereby negating my influence.

It was impossible to negate all of my influence and my position within the organisation at the time of interviewing participants could have affected responses. However by understanding this and continuing with reality checks, using the literature and personal reflection, I kept my influence to a minimum and I was unable to detect any obvious issues or responses that were influenced by me as the researcher. All participants had the opportunity

to review my transcripts of their interview and to check accuracy, understanding, and meaning.

I found that of those who agreed to participate none had engaged with coaching. This was initially a concern however it soon became clear that this was actually an advantage. My question was to explore whether perceptions were affecting engagement and so the lack of engagement by the participants allowed them to give answers that were their true thoughts in a way that was more valuable to the study than if they had been engaged in a coaching process. Had there been a mix of those engaged in coaching and those not, it may have been difficult to obtain clear findings. However time permitting a similar study on those engaged in coaching may also be of benefit.

Another benefit was that because it was a deliberately small study some validation was possible purely by the selection process. All participants were at a similar point in their careers having reached that point by using a similar journey i.e. 2 national examinations and at least one year in their current rank.

It was interesting that some declined to participate due to failure to be accepted for the second part of the promotion process. One suggested that due to their failure their participation would not be worthwhile. This could have been another study area; however, to retain focus, I did not explore this issue further. My participants were representative of the organisation. One participant was female and had attained the rank of Chief Inspector, whereas most people were at the midpoint of officer careers. There were no visible minority groups represented and I did not check for any other minority groups being represented as I did not consider that this would contribute to the study. It may be interesting research for the future to consider if minority groups differ from the outcome of this research.

Using interviews to obtain data for research

In depth, semi-structured interviews were the chosen method of collecting data for the study and these were also the best way of negating my influence in the responses. No information or sight of the questions was given prior to the interviews: I realised that this study needed to represent just a snap shot in time and therefore I was more likely to obtain more gut feelings from an immediate response. Obtaining researched answers may or may not have represented their true views. However, Seidman (1998) suggests that participants should be given as much information as possible before an interview, but his reasons for suggesting this were not wholly relevant to this study. I was content that all participants knew the overall study subject and were totally happy to be interviewed under such circumstances. I obtained their written consent on this prior to the interviews. It is important that the researcher knows and understands best practice alongside knowing the participants and keeping a focus on the research question. As long as all are considered then previous guidance may not always be the right course of action.

Laver (1976) described only one source of certainty: 'What I think, what I feel and what I perceive'. This became a good base on which to formulate questions. Seidman (1998) suggests that there should be three separate interviews in order to obtain the best quality and quantity of information from participants. I did not have the opportunity or time to conduct three separate interviews. I completed one interview with each participant that was

segmented to effectively separate subject areas during the interview. I informed participants at the commencement of the interview on the separate subject areas and also reminded them as I moved from one section to another allowing them time to refocus on each subject area before answering.

I opened the interview with general personal information which did not intrude on their personal lives but enabled them to relax and tell me about who they were, this ensured they were treated with respect, interest and attention. Seidman gives good guidance on the boundaries to be considered when asking for personal information and in my study it was enough to give me an understanding of the interviewee without intruding on their privacy.

I then questioned their understanding of what the terms coaching and mentoring meant. This allowed insight into actually what their perception of coaching was. This was important to the study as my review of literature showed a wide variety of definitions to coaching - and engagement in the process often relies on a clear understanding of it. The next section questioned what coaching meant to them and their view of it based on their current knowledge and understanding and also on how they perceived the organisation viewed coaching. This section featured more direct questions but again allowed for their perceptions to be paramount without fear of getting the answer wrong. Finally I questioned participants on what would need to happen for them to consider becoming involved in a coaching programme.

This structure to the questions assisted the participants with being open with their answers and also showed them how anonymity could be achieved as everyone was asked the same questions. Whilst coded references were used as required by the research study I actually removed this when sending a copy to the organisation so that no similar view points could be accredited to one participant or perhaps a known view, or style, recognised.

Each participant was given the opportunity to choose the location for the interviews and all chose to conduct the interviews in the work place. Again Seidman would suggest that this is not ideal however all participants were giving time that could otherwise have been spent on work issues and by doing so they could return to their work quicker. This shows the importance of giving participants options to suit them and not try to conform to perceived best practice.

It was important to ensure that I had time to deal with issues that occurred during the interview process. Kram (1988) suggests that interviews for research can be interventions in themselves so it is vital that this is considered and time is allowed to deal with these issues as and when they arise. My experience with one participant showed the value of this as in answering the questions during interview they found themselves to have a negative view of the workplace that had been suppressed and had only surfaced when answering questions honestly about gut feelings.

Consideration of how to record interviews is vital. Permission should be sought for whichever method is chosen. I recorded all interviews audibly. All participants were very happy with this method as it was a familiar part of their working day however not all participants may be the same. I would always encourage interviews to be recorded verbatim as it is easier to ensure all information is accurately recorded, it allows for flow in the

interview with the researcher being able to concentrate on what is being said and understanding context as well as content.

The down side to audio interviewing is the transcribing. This is a time consuming part of the process however it can be achieved this less painfully with professional transcribers or even computer software that will help with the task of analysis. I found that to do transcription myself gave me much greater understanding of the interviews, the feelings of participants and how they emphasised various issues. This process should not be underestimated in relation to the time it takes to achieve suitable evidence for the research.

Analysing the data

Seidman (1998) again gives helpful information regarding how to create an understanding of the information and, for a small study; I believe his guidance in considering themes or profiles is of great value. He suggests that few interviews contain sufficient information for profiles to be considered and therefore I chose to develop themes in the interviews. This was done initially in sections; however I then found that the themes had similarity throughout the whole interview. This was helpful in validating my findings as they were very consistent throughout. Using other research conducted with senior managers and interestingly junior supervisors I was able to confirm my findings as valid as far as such a small study would allow.

Finding an Answer

My Findings were divided into three clear sections:-

Playing the game

It was interesting to find that my participants were all keen to consider coaching in order to develop themselves and yet none had been coached; only one had tried to seek coaching and when no response was forthcoming took it no further.

Senior management support was of great importance to the group. This issue did not appear in a national study 'Leading from the front line' (HMIC, 2006) which sought views of junior supervisors, however the daily contact of middle managers with senior managers suggested that it was important that senior managers supported engagement. This follows the view of Peel (2008) who suggested that if senior managers were not actively supporting a coaching scheme then the likelihood of success was low due to the close proximity they had with their workers.

Middle managers were unsure of where priorities were, was it the strategic requirements of their jobs that was most important or the tactical support needed for front line performance. Osterman (2008) refers to the 'empowerment squeeze' for staff undertaking middle managerial roles. The demand from both directions was such that middle managers perceived they had no time to devote to self development. They considered that to engage in coaching would be seen as weak, or as a result of underperformance. In the police this raises the fear of misconduct or performance related procedures being implemented. Similar concerns may be relevant in other organisations. This view is often consolidated when coaching appears to be encouraged at a time when such remedial procedures are already in

place. The view of the participants can be likened to asking them to play a new game without telling them the size and shape of the ball or the rules under which it is played.

Where is it on the agenda?

Participants wanted to know what the organisation thought of the coaching programme. Where did it fit within the priorities of the organisation and the performance indicators? The lack of direct reference to self development made them reluctant to devote their time to something that was not considered a priority. There were no success stories. Yet middle managers were keen to see how coaching would benefit them and they expressed a desire to promote coaching if they could see that it was beneficial. They would sell it to others. This was an interesting finding bearing in mind the lack of knowledge they had of senior management support and involvement in coaching.

Thus, there is a clear marketing issue for organisations around the understanding of what coaching is, and the benefits it may offer. An organisations' definition of the coaching process needs to be clearly understood before increased engagement is likely.

All in all participants considered that since coaching was not on the radar they did not hear about it and were not encouraged to participate by anyone with any authority.

There is a will

Participants considered that they did feel coaching may be of benefit and would seriously consider participating in a coaching programme. However, it must be promoted by the right people and in the right places.

To overcome the negative connotations participants suggested that coaching could be almost forced at certain periods of their careers. They suggested that, at the point of promotion, if everyone was required to participate in coaching then it would reduce the negativity of the process.

The final obstacle to engagement was the credibility of coaches. Internal coaching programmes can work. However, making sure the right people are selected is of great importance. It is vital that a robust selection process is undertaken when dealing with both internal and external coaches, but organisations should be aware that internal coaches are likely to be known and any lack of credibility will be hugely detrimental to engagement.

Conclusion

I found that this research although small has provided some clear issues for organisations to consider. Cavanagh (2006, p.317) states that 'an organisation that is unable to hear its customers may be said to have dangerously closed boundaries'. Middle managers are the life blood of an organisation and the leaders of the future, why are we waiting until they get to the top before we support them using this valuable self development tool?

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