Maximising female leader development through simultaneous individual and group coaching

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Abstract

Female leadership development has become a key issue in organisation's strategy to ensure equal representation of male and female leaders throughout organisations, including top management. This article investigates the deployment of a combined programme of executive and group coaching to support female leader development in a multinational. Drawing on the experiences of key stakeholders: clients, coaches and the programme team using a case study approach, it offers a rich depiction of this novel use of dual forms of coaching. The findings and discussion identify the personal value of individual executive coaching, the collective value of group coaching and the synergies achieved from the interplay of the simultaneous use of both forms of coaching within the organisation, and beyond. These findings have theoretical and practical implications for our understanding of coaching as a social process, the effect of combining coaching approaches, and female leader development, emphasising the need for further research on coaching as a social process as part of leadership development.

Keywords: coaching, executive coaching, group coaching, social process, female leaders, social capital

Practice Points

- The combination of individual and group coaching is a powerful mechanism for developing female leaders, enabling them to develop social capital

- Participating simultaneously in both modalities of coaching increases the perceived effectiveness of the development

- As a development initiative, combining coaching modes can effectively address organisational level development, in addition to individual development

Introduction

Organisations have been facing increased pressure to increase the balance of female to male leaders at senior management levels. The Hampton-Alexander Report (2016) created the imperative to have not only the Board, but the Executive Committee and the level below, comprise at least 30% of female leaders. This shifted the onus from bringing in external female leaders to meet the target percentages for Executive Boards in the Davies Report (2011), to growing female leaders and promoting from within. Coaching, typically depicted as a one-to-one dyadic developmental relationship with a primary focus on improving personal performance, potential and value (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010), has been widely associated with leadership development (Collings, 2014; Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013). Coaching as a leadership development mechanism specifically for female leaders has received increased attention over recent years, (Kets de Vries, Rook, & Engellau, 2016; Skinner, 2014), albeit with a focus on dyadic coaching. This case study of a simultaneous individual (executive) and group coaching intervention, part of a multinational's leadership development initiative for female executives, contributes to the empirical evaluation of coaching interventions to further develop evidence-informed practice. This paper proceeds by outlining the rationale for the case study used and the organisational context, followed by an evaluation of the executive and group coaching literature. Subsequently, the chosen methodology is portrayed, with the five key themes of the findings explained before the discussion and conclusions sections are presented.

Executive Coaching

Arguably there is limited value in distinguishing between executive and leadership coaching, in particular where executive coaching takes place in leadership development programmes (Stokes & Jolly, 2018). As such, the terms executive and leadership coaching are used interchangeably in this article. Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018, p. 71) adapted Grant's (2012) definition of executive coaching as 'a *targeted, purposeful intervention* that helps executives develop and maintain positive change in their personal development and leadership behaviour.' Coaching as a specific leadership development intervention has been studied extensively (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018). For example, individual executive coaching has been shown to support personal development in areas such as self-confidence, self-reliance and assertiveness (Leimon, Moscovici, & Goodier, 2011) while Coates' (2013 p. 43) study concluded that deploying 'a combination of 360 feedback, experiential learning, peer feedback, reflection and one to one coaching is the ideal combination' for leadership development. However, individual executive coaching primarily supports the development of human capital with the benefits accruing from an individual's increased ability to attain goals, self-awareness and personal knowledge, skills and abilities. There is more limited evidence of executive coaching consistently providing a common and unifying impact across organisations (Edwards, Snowden, & Halsall, 2016; Ellinger & Kim, 2014).

Group Coaching

Group coaching can be defined as coaching several individuals from a similar population with the aim of growth and development, and who are not working together towards a common goal, differentiating it from team coaching (Mühlberger & Traut-Mattausch, 2015). Britton (2010) further illuminates what differentiates group coaching from other interventions as:

> `a facilitated group process led by a skilled professional coach and created with the intention of maximizing the combined energy, experience, and wisdom of individuals who choose to join in order to achieve organizational objectives or individual goals' (Britton, 2010, p. 6)

These insights highlight that team coaching addresses intact teams which work closely together, sharing responsibilities for goals and outputs (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2017). Research on group and team coaching in the leadership development field is rare, compared to studies focused on dyadic coaching forms (Brown & Grant, 2010; Mühlberger & Traut-Mattausch, 2015). The benefits of group coaching (Brown & Grant, 2010, p. 33) include; the understanding of and self-regulation of acceptable group behaviours, development of trust and support within the group, increased emotional intelligence and the prevention of organisational silo formation (Kets de Vries, 2005; Ward, 2008). Other studies have positioned group coaching as a useful psychological intervention supporting the development of durable social capital and networks leading to improvements in workplace connections and performance (Ellinger, Ellinger, Bachrach, Wang, & Elmadağ Baş, 2011; Stelter & Law, 2010), however, Brown and Grant (2010) bemoan the absence of empirical research on group coaching. From a systemic perspective the argument for group coaching appears compelling as it deals not only with individual goal attainment, but the cognition and affect within the overall organisational system (Kets de Vries, 2005). There are also indications in some coaching contexts that specific forms of group and team coaching, may enrich clients' social capital due to the interplay with other actors (Ellinger et al., 2011; Gray, de Haan, & Bonneywell, 2019; Mühlberger & Traut-Mattausch, 2015).

Simultaneous individual and group coaching

The scarcity of studies on combined coaching interventions is punctuated by key contributions. One set of studies (Florent-Treacy, 2009; Kets de Vries, 2005; Ward, 2008) used a combined group coaching and individual coaching intervention on an educational executive development programme,

and highlighted that incorporating a day of group coaching and one or two follow-up individual coaching sessions was empirically effective (Ward, van de Loo, & ten Have, 2014). Outside of an executive education context, Mühlberger & Traut-Mattausch (2015) used a quantitative approach to investigate individual and group coaching as: the ability of participants to use the knowledge and experience of the other members of the group to jointly develop solutions and to gain feedback. Their findings suggest the addition of a 'group coaching' alongside individual coaching provision contributes peers' feedback, support and challenge, alongside those of the coaches.

With very few studies considering how multiple forms of coaching may strengthen participants' leadership development experiences (de Haan, Gray, & Bonneywell, 2019; Kets de Vries, 2008; Ward et al., 2014) or specifically relating different forms of coaching in organisational leadership development initiatives to female leader development, this case study offers a valuable contribution to understanding coaching as a social process and enabler of social change.

The under-representation of female leaders, beginning at middle levels of organisations and becoming more pronounced at senior and board levels, is not new (Sealy & Vinnicombe, 2013; Vinnicombe, Moore, & Anderson, 2013). Many solutions, including coaching, have been adopted, with varying degrees of success (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013; Leimon et al., 2011; Skinner, 2014). The leadership development literature has identified deficits in social capital and supportive networks as contributory to the variations in women's career progression, and gender differences in senior ranking positions (Evans & Diekman, 2009; Sheerin & Hughes, 2018). However, there has been limited consideration of how different and combined forms of coaching, as leadership development interventions, might support female leaders despite evidence of the value of they may bring to building networks and relational capacity, assisting an organisation's agenda to remedy gender inequality amongst its senior leaders. An opportunity to analyse a combination of individual executive and group coaching is significant, particularly where the leadership development research acknowledges: female executives' experiences of isolation, the value of coaching and personal relationships in female leadership

success, and where organisational and social change agendas seek to address gender diversity across leadership levels (Sealy & Vinnicombe, 2013; Sheerin & Hughes, 2018; Vinnicombe et al., 2013).

This case study advances our understanding of why a focus on the social dimensions of coaching may be valuable. It also explores how coaching with a social dimension may enable organisational change by exploring female executives' experiences of a combined coaching intervention alongside the experiences of the coaches and Programme Team (PT). This study also tackles many of the criticisms of existing coaching research in the leadership development area by moving beyond studies focused on the growth and outcomes. Instead, it offers new interpretations of coaching, engaging with multiple forms of coaching provision, deploying an appealing research methodology with rich and detailed insights and providing further recognition of the role of coaching as a social process and enabler of change.

Methodology

This case study was situated within a large (circa 100,000 employee) multinational pharmaceutical and focused specifically on how combined individual and group coaching was used to address the issue of gender imbalance at senior leadership levels. The company setting was a highly professional, science-based organisation that recruits graduates, MBAs and scientists with PhDs into the organisation in an approximately equal gender ratio. Internal analyses also showed that the number of female leaders diminished significantly at leadership levels above manager level. At first glance the company appeared to have a relatively even gender balance at the very top level of leadership i.e. at Executive Board level, however, at the Divisional President minus one level, the gender split was 18% female and 82% male and at the Divisional President minus two level it was 22% female and 78% male. The organisation was keen to address this gender imbalance as it contradicted the organisation's values, and additionally, the lack of women in senior positions has been found to have a negative impact at both a financial and organisational level of performance (Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, & Meaney, 2008; Vinnicombe, Doldor, Sealy, Pryce, & Turner, 2015).

A targeted internal programme, Accelerating Difference (AD), was introduced to the organisation with the expressed intention of advancing female leaders in order to increase the ratio of female leaders at all levels. AD comprised three streams: coaching (both individual and group), sponsorship and dialogues. This case study focuses on the coaching stream of AD and examines the experience of utilising individual and group coaching simultaneously for female leaders. Multiple perspectives have been included in the research: those of the female leaders who were coached; the coaches who coached the female leaders and the PT members who led and managed the AD programme. The multi-cultural backgrounds and operating context of the participants provide additional opportunities for contributions to the coaching field.

The study adopted a social constructionist ontological stance (Burr, 2015) and an epistemological stance of interpretivism where *people* were studied and as such they were interpreting their world (Saunders, Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2011). A case study research strategy was adopted in accordance with Muir (2014, p. 358; Szymanska, 2010), and followed Stake's (1995) instrumental approach which ensured coherence with the social constructionist research paradigm (Desvaux et al., 2008; Vinnicombe et al., 2015). The coaching element of the programme comprised simultaneously deploying both individual and group coaching with nominated female leaders. The coaching component constituted the boundaries to this case study. Each nominee received a maximum of 12 individual coaching sessions which were conducted either in person or virtually (using video or telephone). The individual executive coaching was tailored specifically to each participant's development needs, with coaching objectives being identified at the commencement of the coaching with the coach, coachee and the coachee's line manager and human resources representative. The individual coaching was carried out by an internally trained coach, who used a non-directive, person centred approach, individually personalized to meet the participant's specific needs.

Each nominee attended six group coaching sessions facilitated by one internal and one external executive coach. The six group sessions, of approximately four hours each, were spread over fourteen

months and between five and seven female leaders were assigned to each group based on their geographical location: London, Philadelphia, Mexico City, and Warsaw. The purpose of each group coaching session was to ensure the individuals in the group – and the group as a whole, received coaching loosely anchored around a particular topic. The topics for the group coaching sessions were based on internal research and a literature review (Doldor, Vinnicombe, Gaughan, & Sealy, 2012; Skinner, 2014; Vinnicombe et al., 2013) and encompassed: 'Introductions & Foundations', 'Self Confidence, Self Esteem & Self Belief', 'Power, Presence & Impact', 'Becoming a Challenger', 'Building your Authentic Leadership Brand', and 'An Ending for a Beginning'. Each group coaching session was anchored in one of the topics and a loose guiding framework comprising: Intention, Stories, Themes, Resources and Actions were deployed by the coaches. However, the coaches were free to coach the group in response to the group's needs. Participants were emailed ahead of the group sessions, reminding them of the topic for the session and encouraging them to reflect on the topic, how it had impacted them, and these reflections formed the basis of group coaching sessions where attendees worked with the coaches, and with each other. The exact format for each session varied according to the topic, what the participants stated they required specifically from the session and from each other, and the interpretation of the coaches of the topic in the prompts, resources and support they chose to bring in to the group. However, many coaches started the sessions by inviting the participants to `check in' on how they were feeling and coming to the session, what had changed since the last group session and what they wanted to gain from the time together. The coaches then introduced the topic under discussion, for example, Power, Presence and Impact offered some definition of the core components and explained why this topic was the subject around which the session was based. The participants then revealed their stories around the topic and received coaching from one of the coaches, who then opened the coaching to the group and invited other participants to join the inquiry. Each participant had a turn in the spotlight, and then the group reflected on common themes that they identified. Resources were elicited from within the group and external sources of support, guidance or learning were brainstormed. For example, in the Power, Presence and Impact

session, different sources of power were discussed using the Raven model (Raven, 1993). Actions, both collective and individual were identified and captured before each person `checked' out of the session.

All female leaders from the first cohort were invited to participate in the study, along with individual and group coaches and PT members. The female leaders had all completed the programme, attending a minimum of four out of the six group coaching sessions and at least ten out of the twelve individual coaching sessions. Two coaches, who each coached individually and in the groups, participated, along with two members of the PT responsible for the design and implementation of the initiative. The use of a semi-structured interviewing approach allowed the questions to be delivered through a conversational and relatively informal approach (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008) appropriate for eliciting information in a manner congruent with the study. A separate interview protocol was developed for the coaches and for the PT members based on the themes emerging from the first interviews with the female leaders and supplemented by questions identified from extant research. The second interviews were then conducted with the female leaders, the PT members (n=2) and Coaches (n=2) – see Table 1. All interviews were recorded digitally and then transcribed.

Table 1. Participants' Details

Code Name	Role	Location	Age
Table 1.	Global Production System Regional Lead for Latina	Mexico	35 - 44
Patricia	Business Unit Director, Mass Market	Poland	35 - 44
Penny	IT Manager	UK	25 - 34
Phoebe	Director, Global Insights	US	45 – 54
Prunella	Strategy and Business Development Director	UK	45 – 54
Patience	SNOP Director, European Supply Chain Hub	UK	45 – 54
Petra	Supply Strategy Director	Singapore	35 – 44
Pam	Category Manager, Wellness	US	35 – 44
Pricilla	Senior Brand Manager	US	25 – 34
Pippa	Therapy Supply Chain Director	UK	25 – 34
Padma	Supply Chain Manager	Pakistan	25 - 34
Paloma	Supply and Logistics Lead	UK	35 - 44
Peta	European Packaging Technology Director	UK	35 - 44
Peggy	Therapy Supply Chain Director	UK	25 - 34

Pauline	GPS Lead	UK	35 - 44
Sarah	OD Business Lead	UK	45 - 54
Sue	Leadership Development Head	UK	55 plus
Cathy	OD Consultant and Coach	UK	45 - 54
Chris	Executive Coach	UK	55 plus

In designing the study various issues of research ethics, including informed consent, protection of participant anonymity, avoiding harm to, or deception of, participants were considered and addressed (Bryman & Bell, 2015). At the pre-stage, ethical approval documentation was submitted and granted by the researchers' university and organizational authority was obtained.

Thematic analysis using the six phases approach (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017) was adopted in relation to data analysis offering structure to the extensive body of data collected (34 hours of interviews). The decision was taken at the initial data familiarisation phase that the analysis process would not make a distinction between the data from the first and the second interviews, as the first interviews allowed for cathartic download, and the second were more focused and targeted on areas identified in the first set of interviews (Gray, 2013).

The six phases approach to thematic analysis advocated Braun and colleagues (Braun, Clarke, Terry, Rohleder, & Lyons, 2014) was adopted in relation to data analysis offering structure to the extensive body of data collected (34 hours of interviews) and carried out predominantly by the main researcher with oversight from the second. The first phase of data familiarisation involved transcription, reading and re-reading as well as additional listening to the digital recordings and reviews of fieldnotes. This phase helped the orientation with the data. The decision was taken at this phase that the analysis process would not make a distinction between the data from the first interviews and the second interviews, as the first interviews allowed for cathartic download, and the second interviews were more focused and targeted on areas identified in the first set of interviews (Gray, 2013). The second phase involved the first attempt to code the data. In line with the constructivist stance there was a

process of meaning making, beyond description and explanation and to provide an interpretation of the data.

The third phase involved continual movement between the data up close and taking a step back to review the data conceptually. In this way, themes were identified and refined as the occurrence and connection between the codes became apparent. In the fourth phase the themes were reviewed, and their internal coherency ascertained alongside further examination of the relationships between the themes. This was necessarily a repetitive activity, moving between the themes, the extract details and the more holistic perspective of what the different participants and interviews were revealing and capturing these revelations. Much of this activity involved drawing and redrawing maps, and the use of colour-coding to capture explanations as data stories. The fifth phase involved each theme being explained in detail, prompted by the question 'what story does this theme tell and how does it fit into the overall story of the data' as advocated by Braun and colleagues (2014). This phase allowed for the combining of themes when the essence of what was being said could be seen to concur with another theme, allowing other themes to emerge and become prominent when reviewed from different angles. Finally, in the sixth phase synthesis was achieved through further articulation of the themes and their connections so an extended narrative could be constructed capturing the experiences of the simultaneous individual and group coaching of the leadership development programme.

In accordance with Guba and Lincoln (1994) credibility was strengthened by making a conscious effort to establish confidence in the accuracy of interpretation. The difference and variety of participant voices, their ethnicity and mother tongues were considered to ensure that the data, as well the interpretation of findings from the data, were as authentic as possible. The research practices were honest, open, empathetic, sensitive, respectful and engaging – all identified as being important to trustworthiness and authenticity (Davies & Dodd, 2002). To enhance data integrity member-checks were used to help improve accuracy, credibility and validity of the findings.

Findings

Five over-arching themes are reported in these findings. The first theme is 'Focus on the Self' arising from respondents' accounts of their experiences of the individual coaching. The second theme Connections and Relationships is based upon insights from the group coaching. The experiences of participating in both modalities of coaching, simultaneously are depicted in the themes Collective identity and Modelling Development. A final theme, Giving Back captures an altruistic aspect arising from the combined coaching forms and holistic coaching experiences, which generated a desire to give back to communities within and beyond their employer.

Focus on the Self

The individual coaching experience was characterised as personal development, 'from inside out ... confidence and self-esteem, presence power and impact then hand over to navigation of system and represent 'ourselves' into networks and systems.' (Chris). Many women talked about how, for the first time, they had focused on themselves, and developed self-knowledge, 'self-awareness, I know myself better than when I started' (Paula) and 'it opened my awareness, it unlocked it, it opened a new frontier for me, I rediscovered myself' (Patience). Increased self-esteem was identified where participants asserted the executive coaching supported them in tackling various elements of self-concepts and growth including, 'I learned how I like to handle things – e.g. conflict and I learned about emotions, I learned to accept that is me.' (Padma). The tailored nature of the individual coaching sessions enabled self-knowledge, self-awareness and self-trust to be generated, as recognised by Cathy: 'They could articulate their ambition and found the courage and confidence to act on their ambition … they found their self-belief.'

Participants also primarily credited the individual coaching with providing precious time for self-reflection, otherwise not available, and how this time helped build the capacity for self-knowledge and self-leadership. The combination of being able to speak freely, to have the space and time to

think and be listened to feature in this theme, offering personal resonance and the ability to revisit their current and future female leadership roles in the firm.

Connections and Relationships

The second theme focused upon the value of the connections made through group coaching highlighting the practical feedback received in the sessions, and the connections, which translated into deeper relationships across the business. The relationships initially built through the group coaching sessions then transferred into relationships beyond the programme, back in their day jobs. For Paula this meant, 'The network that we have now, the relationship is completely different it doesn't mean we will not be tough on one to another … but the discussion is at a different level'. These connections helped participants feel less isolated, more confident about their networks, and ability to connect across the wider organisation.

The diversity that individuals brought to the groups was valued and seen to contribute to building the connections between group members: 'We had three different nationalities, three different locations, different cultures and ways of working and we all learnt from each other.' (Peta). The coaches also reported on the connections that they had witnessed forming between group members, one of the PT members identified: 'The cross-pollination in the group sessions was incredible bringing together the context and reality of what was happening in the organisation.' (Sarah). The group coaching was experienced as offering opportunities for exchanges, which would not have occurred elsewhere in the organisation and several participants recognised the stretch it gave them, captured as 'going to places I wouldn't go on my own'. However, some reservations were expressed too. One participant reflected, 'I was in a dark place, I didn't resonate with them so much – it didn't quite work for me.' (Patience). The relative rarity of having interactions with colleagues where females predominated enabled a sense of trust and connection that was immediate and deeper than the usual company meetings and interactions.

Collective identity

The six group coaching topics helped create a collective identity amongst participants based on hearing others' views and stories and the opportunity this gave to learn and expand perspectives. The realisation of not being alone reinforced the connection with other women leaders, as Phoebe remarked, 'I took away I am not alone, some of the challenge you may face as being a woman, parents, kids and family … there are women out there who are going through the same thing.' Revealing that others felt the same isolation as under-represented group helped initiate and then solidify the relationships between the group members.

This sense of communal understanding, collective identity and appreciation of what life is like for the female leaders in each of the groups was powerful and revealing to participants. Often the participants linked these insights back to the male-dominated environments where they were frequently outnumbered in their leadership teams, and in the teams, they led. The coaching enabled them to recognise and reconnect with who they are as women and identify with their coaching group. Pam expressed it thus:

> `What was eye opening was to see how many things we have in common across functions and regions etc. Some things that you thought no one else was facing and then you talk to the others and you see everyone has faced it at some time, so it makes it feel much more manageable.'

Whilst not all participants reported feeling the same level of connection in their groups, most reported getting a sense of support from knowing they were there and they would be understood by them.

Modelling Development

This theme arises from the respondents' reflections on the combined individual and group coaching interventions revolved around how they could look at things differently, personally and collectively, and take this learning back to their teams and divisions. Padma observed, 'I was conscious of my

behaviours; I understood the sort of impact I was having and I changed and explained why I had changed to help others in my team.'

Many participants also reported deploying elements of the initiative they had experienced and running development sessions for women in parts of the organisation. These activities were recognised amongst the coaches and PT members where later individual and group coaching sessions included evidence of the participants engaging in more inclusive understanding and developmental interactions with their own teams and peers, all based on participants being eager to share their experiences and model ongoing development. Chris explained this as enabling the space where 'the whole group intensifies and amplifies; they do build community and networks being like-minded female talent in the system it felt they are in here together and can hear other women comment and share common experiences.'

The third and fourth themes were highly connected as this sense of collective identity led to modelling commitment to personal development and supporting the diversity of the organisation itself. Participants talked about reinforcing this acceptance of the organisation's different cultures and backgrounds in their own divisions and teams and the value of different approaches taken into other countries and parts of the business. The identification of the overlay of organisational culture and national culture appeared to have a generative, perspective expanding impact on the participants. This evidence of the women acting as role models, in the way they were developing themselves and modelling behaviours within their own teams, and the wider organisation, meant their leadership qualities were recognised as aligned to those espoused by the corporation.

Giving back

The fifth and final theme reflects how for over half of the participants their involvement in the programme led to desires and actions to 'give back' to others in some form. This altruistic commitment manifested in different ways. For some it involved embarking on training to develop

their own coaching capabilities and deploying those skills within the organisation, and for others it stretched beyond the organisation to support various causes. This commitment to giving back built on the recognition of collective identity arousing a more general altruistic orientation expressed as:

> `I made a personal commitment [that] whatever I get out of it I need to use it to help someone else, we grow, it doesn't necessarily have to be about something in work it is about how we are as people.' (Phoebe)

The feelings of belonging and collective identity, together with an increased sense of self-esteem engendered an altruism that stimulated this desire to give back, to support other women, and people, in the same way that the participants themselves, had been supported. Participants met this desire to give back, both inside the organisation by becoming a coach, and running development sessions for other leaders, and externally by working with other educational institutions and groups and individuals. The women articulated this as continuing their own growth whilst supporting others in their development based upon recognising the value of their own resources and networks. Peta's comments capture the essence of those whose own coaching experiences led them to decide to become a coach: 'the first thing I did was register to be trained as a coach – so I have coached some people the skills I got there, I use them with my team, my peers, my friends, my sister.' Likewise, Paula highlighted, 'I am now coaching two people' and her giving back stretched beyond the organisation, 'outside of the company I am participating in a forum in a university; it opened my eyes to other things happening in the world.'

Another dimension to giving back was described by several participants as a shift in their support for others. Paula expressed how the programme had prompted her to go beyond her organisational boundaries, 'It was so powerful for myself; I am more involved in the development of young women. … I am sharing what I learned.' The experiences of the women in connecting with their own self-development and others who have experienced similar leadership journeys, through the individual executive and group coaching, manifest in a commitment to support others on a similar journey, within and beyond the organisation supporting wider social change.

The process of group coaching served for some participants as an initiating source or impetus for the process of deeper thought and reflection which they felt able to then undertake in their individual coaching sessions. As Petra identified:

> 'I think you need both – when you step out of the group coaching you need time to reflect – you need an outlet to take that to – you need to take it into a discussion one-to-one and the individual coaching did that.'

This taking from group to individual was also reported by Peta:

> 'In group coaching things would get me in my stomach and I would take it into individual coaching. The groups gave me perspective on what I thought and then the individual allowed you to dig deeper in that perspective.' (Peta)

In this way the initiation and generation of thought was prompted by the process of group coaching and then transferred to the individual coaching which provided the space and forum by which the process could be continued to a deeper and more reflective level.

In addition to the complementary nature of the individual and group coaching, participants also identified a synergistic or amplification effect of having both types of coaching: 'Each is powerful in its own way but when you combine them together you get a lot more out of it. Individual being able to think through and the sharing is really useful' (Phoebe). This was echoed by Pam: 'I think the two were very important ingredients, they helped one another – one plus one equals three in this case – a powerful combination.' This combinatorial impact was identified by the coaches as well:

> 'it amplifies significantly I think the group coaching [...] three to the power of three it is a much greater number, there is something bringing the power of individual coaching and group together' (Chris).

The result of combining both types of coaching into one process for participants to experience has a strengthening, accelerating and expanding impact.

Discussion

The majority of participants saw the simultaneous use of individual and group coaching as part of their female leadership development programme as highly beneficial. The process of experiencing individual coaching enabled highly personalised and specific development for each female leader according to their needs, whilst the group coaching brought several collective benefits. From a gender perspective, the development of the women's sense of identity as leaders surfaced as a key aspect of the process of the combined approach of both individual and group coaching.

The group coaching supported the women's development particularly in the areas concerning their relationship to others and the balance between their roles as leaders, their own families, their group and other organisational members. The finding that the women were relieved to discover the feeling 'that I am not alone' is a profound reflection of the value of connection and sense of belonging that the group coaching gave them. This finding builds on that of Vinnicombe et al. (2013) who found that participants on their female leadership programme made exactly the same point. The women identified the group coaching as helping to understand the complexities each other face and the multiplicity of ways of handling their own work and family balance and leadership dilemmas.

The social nature of group coaching is highlighted here supporting female leaders in their personal choices and recognition of others' struggles and choices. The notion of connection was spoken about frequently, it tended to be referenced to the immediate coaching, and then more broadly to the female population of the organisation. This collective perspective and sense of belonging brought about specifically through the process of group coaching is relatively new to the research on coaching and mentoring female executives (Broughton & Miller, 2009; Leimon et al., 2011; Skinner, 2014). In addition, the value of group coaching in this organisational in-situ programme is evident, as opposed to the de-contextual setting of a business school programme studies (Florent-Treacy, 2009; Kets de Vries, 2014; Ward et al., 2014).

For participants the simultaneous experience of both forms of coaching, fostered connections and a sense of belonging, which can understood as increasing participants' social capital - defined here as 'the quality created between people' (Burt, 1997, p. 339). The degree to which leaders are effective frequently depends on the quality of their networks and social connections across the organisation (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006), i.e. the quality and depth of their social capital. Furthermore the quality of relationships and networks have been frequently cited as one difference, and potential inhibitor of female leadership career progression and longevity (Proudfoot, 2007). In this way, the individual and group coaching experiences appeared to create a productive environment for social capital to be developed by these female leaders through their shared reflection activities (Bilhuber Galli & Müller-Stewens, 2012). In the context of the highly matrixed, globally dispersed and complex organisation, facilitating female leaders' development of social capital was recognised as powerful and with the potential to constitute a significant breakthrough in shifting female leaders' sense of belonging and ability to progress further.

The collective identity achieved in most groups, augmented participants' confidence and self-awareness kindled by the individual executive coaching, led to role-modelling and the development of others in the female leaders' teams and divisions. These findings confirm that leadership development initiatives can generate shared understanding of leadership behaviours and create both bridging and bonding social capital where leaders' personal growth and networks amplify learning and connections within, and between, their own teams and units, buoying social capital in the organisation (Espedal, Gooderham, & Stensaker, 2013; Stensaker & Gooderham, 2015). In addition, many of the female leaders committed to and demonstrated further prosocial behaviours and actions based their combined coaching experiences. Activities such as, speaking about their leadership journeys; developing as mentors and coaches themselves within, and beyond the organisation, went past the original remit of the original leadership development initiative. This indicates that how social capital once developed and fostered within leadership development programmes can extend outside

of initially anticipated beneficiaries. This study offers a significant contribution not only due to the enhanced understanding of coaching as a social activity and process, capable of building social capital resources, invaluable for female leadership development specifically. While the organisation directly benefits from more confident and connected female executives, who are keener to progress their careers, there also appears to be an internalisation of the learning, through the two forms of coaching on the programme. For many of the female executives their experiences led them to seek out how to support others who may exhibit similar characteristics to their own, feel compelled to enhance their own relational skills (as leaders and coaches) and initiate networks to tackle social capital inequalities they have previously, often unknowingly, experienced. This finding also portrays coaching, or at least the two forms of coaching in this leadership development intervention, as important for building relational skills and social resources, modelling supportive behaviours, fostering commitments and behaviours to develop others so that social inequalities can be tackled.

Conclusions

In a case study directed at female executive development, identifying how combined forms of coaching stimulate the social capital for individuals and across an organisation, was not anticipated. Facilitating female leadership development and career progression has been identified as a challenge in contemporary organisations attempting to tackle inequalities (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013; Skinner, 2014), and while access to social capital and networks have been suggested as part of this problem (Sheerin & Hughes, 2018), the extent to which connectedness, shared experiences and prosocial behaviours were articulated by coaching programme participants and other respondents was a surprise. This study identifies coaching as a social process (Shoukry & Cox, 2018) and specifically, it highlights the powerful interplay between the two types of coaching from individual to group and back again. The complementarity and synergistic nature of the simultaneous coaching interventions on the female executives, their teams, the organisation and beyond suggests coaching can be an

enabler of social change too. There are claims of coaching stimulating individualism through its alignment with neoliberal values (Tabarovsky, 2015), but this study identifies a catalytic feature to a combined group and individual executive coaching leadership development initiative, which develops social capital for participants, the organisation and beyond, to support equality and diversity.

The impact of experiencing both types of coaching simultaneously and the amplifying effect was observed, not only by the participants, but also by the coaches and PT members. The combination of the two types of coaching enabled a specific population of leaders to work on their own leadership needs and challenges and in-situ connect with others within the organisation. This tailored support allied with the collective benefit of the group coaching led to synergies beyond typical executive coaching interventions.

While limitations of the research can be found in the nature of qualitative research in general, the approach taken offers the richness of insights affordable in a case study methodology. Given the nature of the sampling in terms of size, composition and the specific organisational context within which the study was carried out, the research findings cannot be broadly generalised to the wider population. The findings, however, warrant further investigations of the synergies achieved by simultaneous coaching modes and the initiation and cultivation of social capital for participants, the organisation and beyond. Thus whilst the effectiveness of coaching interventions in organisations may appear to be positive, further research in the area of how coaching can be utilised in complex, multinational organisations facing unprecedented scope and velocity of change, is to be welcomed (Grant, 2014). Additional research exploring coaching as a social process, specifically in relation to social capital, as well as the use of simultaneous individual and group coaching of different populations and across different organisational settings is warranted following this study.

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