Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders: a way of enabling transfer and sustainability of learning for all external coaches?

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Abstract

The Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) emerged from a longitudinal doctoral study researching coaching practice, and currently it is the only empirical model for external one-to-one stand alone coaching of leaders which enables transfer and sustainability of learning. But is the model transferable to other coaches? My post doctoral collaborative action research study indicates that this transferability is possible. A diverse range of coaches were able to apply the model whilst retaining their professional identity as a coach. The next step is to develop a set of competencies and create a collection of experiential case studies.

Key Words: coaching, leaders, transfer of learning, sustainability of learning, collaborative action research

Introduction

It could be argued that one of the strengths of the professional field of business coaching is its diversity of approach which provides a wide choice of coaching approaches in the market for leaders and organisations sourcing an external coach. This wide choice in the market aligns with my philosophical belief that there is no one right way of coaching; as a social constructivist I believe that business coaching should not be demeaned to a standardised approach with the built in assumption that there is one way of coaching which will enable a diverse range of leaders to learn and develop. Megginson and Clutterbuck (2005) suggest that raising the issue of techniques in mentoring and coaching can be reductionist and lead to a formulaic approach to coaching which could be seen as contrary to the humanistic tradition that coaching and mentoring represents. However, I can also see that this diversity of approach could present some difficulties for commissioners of coaching who are attempting to select coaches with a good match for their needs. Being presented with such a wide range of coaching approaches could make it difficult to ensure that their investment in coaching reaps suitable benefits for both the leaders and the organisations unless each diverse approach has clarity about how those benefits are achieved.

As an experienced commissioner of coaches in the 1990's and the millennium decade, I had firsthand experience of this challenge at a time when empirical research in coaching and mentoring was sparse. We were relying on mainly experiential based coaches to inform us of what to look for when selecting coaches to work with leaders in organisations. Whilst experience based approaches have some advantages, they are limited in terms of evidence based practice. Therefore, when I set off on my doctoral research journey in 2007, I was determined to have a focus for my research to help build this evidence base, particularly as most of my coaching for leaders work is in the charitable and public sectors. "If organisations are going to invest scarce resources ... [they] will need evidence that such an investment can produce desired results. Desired results could be interpreted as … learning being transferred back into the workplace and then sustained over time." (Cook, 2011, p5) Hence my decision to explore what both helps and hinders the transfer and sustainability of learning in the one-to-one external coaching process and relationship.

Why is transfer and sustainability of learning important for leaders and their organisations?

Cook (2013, p115) argues that organisations "are expecting much more than simply an expensive conversation" when they commission external coaches to work one-to-one with their leaders. However, it is easy to fall into the trap of trusting the coach to ensure that the coaching sessions are enabling learning and development not simply providing a confidential environment in which issues can be aired. Testimonials should be sought from both individual clients as well as funding organisations with the question: what specific benefits can be expected from this investment in coaching for leaders? This is about accountability for both the commissioning organisations and the coaches. My doctoral research (Cook, 2011) argues that transfer and sustainability of learning is one way of determining a return on

investment. If the learning transfers from the coaching session to outside that experience and that transferred learning sustains over time (even after the coaching sessions have been completed), then the investment has accrued the benefit of learning and change over time.

In the available literature appertaining to transfer of learning, you will find a range of relevant expressions including transfer of training and the transfer system (Baldwin &Ford, 1988; Olivero, Bane & Kopelman, 1997). Transfer of training nearly always refers to the transfer of learning from a training programme (Baldwin and Ford, 1988) and therefore holds limited relevance for the transfer of learning from a one-to-one stand alone coaching situation.   Ruona, Leimbach, Holton and Bates (2002, p.220) prefer the expression "transfer system" in which "transfer involves the application, generalisability and maintenance of new knowledge and skills."   Spencer (2011) has studied the transfer of training using coaching as a tool for that transfer. She reviews the work of Holton, Bates and Ruona (2000) and concludes that "the LTSI [*Learning Transfer System Inventory*] model may be inadequate to consider coaching's contribution to training transfer" (2011, p.4); the limitations of previous transfer of training and transfer system theories are also recognised in the work of Stewart *et al.* (2008). All of this work aligns with the seminal work of Olivero, Bane and Kopelman (1997) who used coaching to enable the transfer of learning from a formal training programme to the workplace. Whilst this focus on transfer of training and transfer system is not entirely relevant for transfer of learning from one-to-one coaching, it is helpful to confirm that coaching is an enabling tool for learning purposes which may be important for leaders and their organisations to consider when coaching is helping them meet their learning needs.

The other outcome of the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) is sustainability of learning, specifically learning sustained over time. Whilst the literature on sustainability of learning in a coaching context is sparse (unsurprising considering the requirement for longitudinal study), there is the seminal work of Wasylyshyn (2003) and Wasylyshyn, Gronsky and Haas (2006) who briefly examined coaching and sustainability of learning alongside other areas of research. Their focus on coaching outcomes and, in particular, sustained behaviour change as the desired outcome, is particularly relevant; specifically, the "importance of the 'live' coach-executive working alliance" (Wasylyshyn, 2003, p102). However, Smith, Oosten and Boyatzis (2009) provide the most current applicable work for this study on their research into *coaching and sustained desired change* which appears to have more of a focus on learning and development. Although, Cox (2013, p.138) sums it up very well in her pragmatic enquiry when she states that "one of the unwritten goals of coaching is to ensure enduring learning and development for the client that can be sustained long beyond the end of the coaching intervention". This is important for leaders and their organisations to know that leaders will emerge from the one-to-one coaching experience as an independent learner, sustaining their learning and any changes beyond the coaching experience.

Unfortunately, there continues to be very little empirical research conducted into the transfer and sustainability of learning from an external, one-to-one, stand alone coaching experience to outside that experience. Although, during my post doctoral research, I did source some more recent published work on the transfer of learning from training programmes (De Ridjt *et al*, 2013; Weisweiler *et al*, 2013). The paucity of research in this field strengthens my continuing interest in the transferability to a diverse range of coaching providers of the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) which has an additional focus on application of learning in the workplace as well as what facilitates the learning and enables the transfer and sustainability of learning back in the workplace (Styhre and Josephson, 2007; Allan, 2007). The Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) remains the only coaching for leaders model which focuses on the transfer and sustainability of learning, providing a clear focus of return on investment for commissioners of training.

What is the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model?

My doctoral study was a longitudinal collaborative action research study researching my coaching of leaders practice over a period of just over one year. The action element was me coaching four leaders in the charitable sector from Advance, Mencap and Rethink; and there were three action research cycles. For two of the cycles, I was coaching the leaders one-to-one and for the final cycle there was no coaching input. Therefore, the first and second cycles were mainly focused on transfer of learning (although the second cycle did have some sustainability of learning outcomes) and the third cycle entirely about sustainability of learning.

The Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (see Figure 1 below) is based on the principle of collaboration. In the coaching environment, the coach and the client have both individual and shared responsibilities and through collaboration transfer and sustainability of learning is achieved. Sometimes the transfer of learning is intended, stemming from specific content the client brings to the session; and sometimes it is unintended transfer of learning which does not directly stem from the content brought by

the client but happens in the moment during the coaching sessions. The specific content brought by the client is not itself significant and there was a wide range of topics brought by the leaders in my doctoral research. For example, political acumen, relationship management, strategic and operational leadership, performance management, valuing direct reports, as well as more general leadership competency development (skills, behaviour, style, traits, etc). One client reflected that they "*had increased in confidence as a leader*", another that "*the coaching has helped me work more positively with my weaknesses*" (Cook, 2011, p110). This breadth of intended and unintended transfer and sustainability of learning as well as the breadth of topics covered in my doctoral research coaching sessions, encouraged me to believe that the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders (Cook, 2011) model could be applied by other external coaches with their clients.
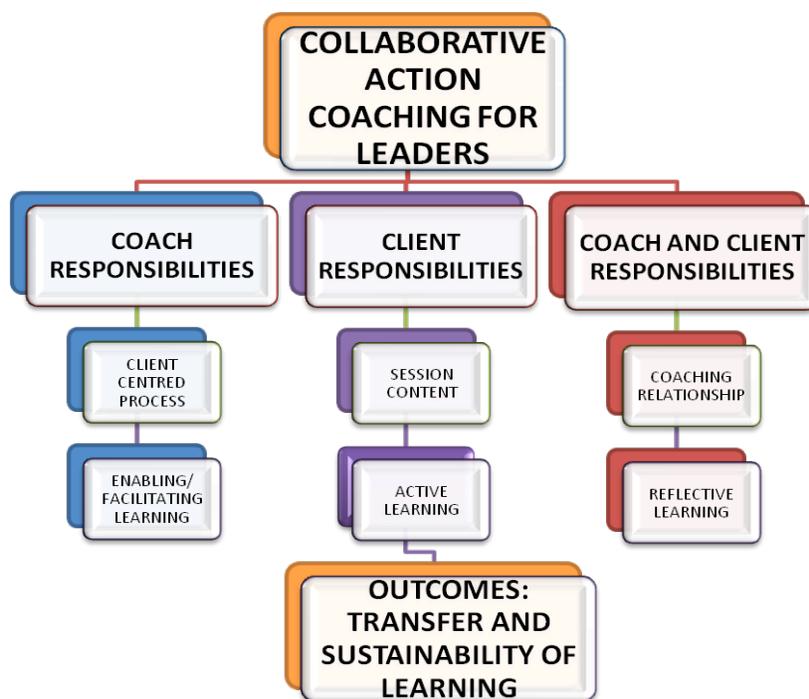

Figure 1: Transferring and sustaining learning through coaching: a collaborative action coaching for leaders model (Cook, 2011)

One interesting point about the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) is that all six categories and all 33 themes (see Figure 2 below) have an equal weighting, ie there is no one category or theme which dominates in terms of transfer and sustainability of learning; it is the combination of all categories and themes which creates the coaching approach which enables transfer and sustainability of learning outside the coaching experience. Cook (2015, Appendix 1), provides a more detailed briefing for the practical implementation of all the categories and elements.

CATEGORIES					
COACH RESPONSIBILITIES		**CLIENT RESPONSIBILITIES**		**COACH AND CLIENT RESPONSIBILITIES**	
CLIENT CENTRED PROCESS	**ENABLING/ FACILITATING LEARNING**	**SESSION CONTENT**	**ACTIVE LEARNING**	**COACHING RELATIONSHIP**	**REFLECTIVE LEARNING**
THEMES					
Coach In Charge Of The Process	Encourage Practice Back In The Workplace	Contracting: Start Point	Colleague Feedback	Comfort	Reflective Diaries
Tailored Tools/ Techniques	Share Experience To Facilitate Learning	Client Bringing Content	Transfer Of Learning Measures Identified	Safety/ Confidentiality/ Trust	Feedback Provider Sessions
Challenge/ Support	Suspend Judgement		Being Open To Learning	Coach And Client Match	Record-Keeping
Client Context	Not Therapy		Client Takes Responsibility For Their Learning	Face-To-Face	Coaching Supervision
Physical	Lasting Impact		Reflective	External Coach	

Environment	Of Coach		Practitioner		
Setting Goals	Coaching Consultancy			Honest Dialogue	
Sounding Board				Primary Role As Coach	
Friendly Support				Keeping In Touch Outside Coaching Sessions	

Figure 2: Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model – identified categories (6) and themes (33) (Cook, 2011)

There are numerous examples from the original doctoral study of how specific categories and themes contributed to the transfer and sustainability of learning, here are a few from the third and final action research cycle (the one without the coaching input). For the Coach Responsibilities, specifically Client Centred Process, it was found that tailoring the number and timing of the coaching sessions to each individual client was important for the sustainability of learning, highlighting the importance of Client Context. Therefore, a structure of monthly sessions, or something similar, may not be as beneficial in terms of transfer and sustainability of learning.

For the Client Responsibilities, specifically Active Learning, Colleague Feedback/Reflective Practitioner one client said "*I do reflect on what people say far more than before and I do ask people for feedback more than I have done in the past*" (Cook, 2011, p.106). Finally, for the Coach and Client Responsibilities/Reflective Learning, even in an organisational environment where reflective learning was not prevalent, clients found that the act of reflective learning (Reflective Diary) helped them transfer and sustain their learning. Both the breadth and depth of these learning experiences indicate that it is not just the collaborative nature of the model and the six categories, but also the specific themes under each of these categories which contribute to the transfer and sustainability of learning.

However, as this model was built from a collaborative action research study into my coaching practice with the categories and themes emerging from a very specific coach/clients experience, at the end of the doctoral research I was left with the question about the model's transferability to other external coaches of leaders. Bearing in mind the diversity of coaching approaches in the professional field of coaching, I was left wondering whether it is possible for other professional coaches to apply the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) whilst retaining their individual authenticity?

The post doctoral research study

These questions led me to conduct a post doctoral research study with three independent external coaches of leaders participating voluntarily. A paradigm of social constructivism in which meanings are constructed as people engage with the world they are interpreting (Creswell, 2009) continued in this post doctoral study. The post doctoral research questions were:

1. Is the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model transferable across a range of professional coaches?
2. Does the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model enable the transfer and sustainability of learning when implemented by a range of professional coaches?

As my doctoral study had been successful in its collaborative action research methodology with the methodology itself influencing the content of the model and I had designed a specific collaborative action research methodology for coaching research (Cook, 2010), it seemed important and relevant to continue with the same methodological design (see Figure 3 below).

However, the research environment was slightly different in that I was not creating theory but exploring an existing theory. Carr and Kemmis (1986, p.162) helpfully suggest that "action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out". Also, the methodological approach could still be regarded as a "living theory form" of action research in that it is grounded in the ontological "I" of the researcher and uses a "living logic" of experiences at the moment (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006, p.41) which allows the individual experiences to dictate the research journey. This was important when researching a range of unique experiences, most significantly the individual coach contributions to the coaching experience in the study.

There were two action research cycles; the first cycle had coaching sessions and lasted for about six months; the second cycle had no coaching input and lasted for about three months; overall, about three months shorter than the original doctoral longitudinal study. Each element of the Cook (2010) model was applied to the post doctoral study although the 'feedback providers data' element was less strong with client participants less willing to hold formal feedback provider sessions as was the case in the original doctoral study. Although the 'feedback providers data' was collected more informally, it was still collected and analysed.

As a starting point (Bassey, 1998), I provided detailed briefings on the Collaborative Action for Coaching Leaders model (Cook, 2011) for each of the 'coach/researchers' including specific discussions about how to retain their authentic way of working whilst applying this model. In addition, they were provided with full information on the collaborative action research process. During the coaching and data collection processes, I was available to deal with any queries on either the model or the research data collection process. The key data emanated from the 'research diaries' and other reflective work completed by both the 'coach/researcher' and the 'collaborative researchers' (who were all leaders in organisations) including feedback from colleagues, across two action research cycles.
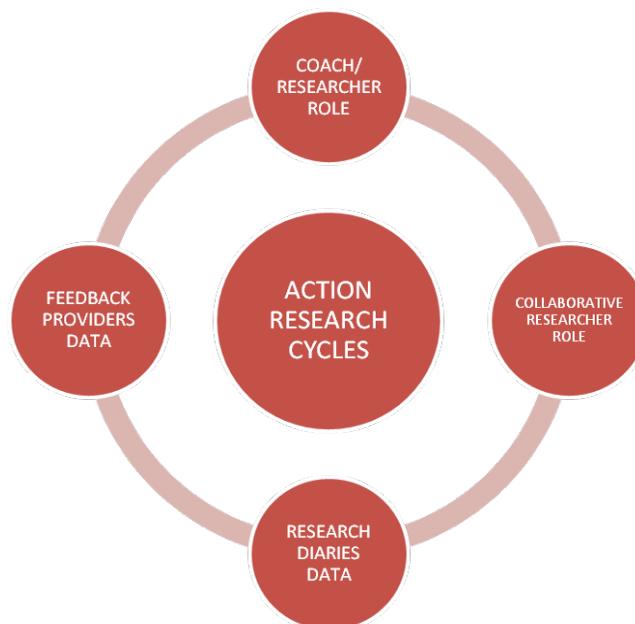

Figure 3: Developing a coaching model from researching our own coaching practice, through collaborative action research (Cook, 2010)

The three 'coach/researchers' were recruited via an open professional coach network and their participation was entirely voluntary. The three external coach/researchers all had their own individual philosophies of coaching practice including NLP and neuroscience and they all had their own coaching processes and ways of building relationships firmly established over many years of practice (Cook, 2015). The usual ethics processes were applied to the study including participant information and consent forms for both the coaches and their participating clients. Participating clients were offered the opportunity to communicate directly with me if needed. The coaches gave consent for their names and brief personal details to be provided in any work produced or presented but the clients were anonymous to me, their identity was only known by the 'coach/researcher'. As outlined in Cook (2010, p147), both "surface and non-surface" considerations were taken into account in order to establish a strong ethical environment for this post doctoral collaborative action research study. This included the opportunity for all participants to be "authentic at all times" (Cook, 2010, p148)

The data analysis process also mirrored the original doctoral study, using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to analyse the data and identify themes emerging from the data. The analysis of the data enabled a detailed look at each category and theme of the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) in order to answer the two research questions about transferability to other coaches and transfer and sustainability of learning when the model is applied by other coaches.

Is the model useful for all external coaches of leaders and their clients?

The findings from this research were reported to the 2015 UFHRD Conference (Cook, 2015) and have gone some way to answer the research questions. Overall, despite the diverse nature of the three participating 'coach/researchers', the post doctoral study found:

- the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model is transferable across a range of professional coaches.
- the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model enables the transfer and of learning when implemented by a range of professional coaches.

There was evidence of transfer of learning and some limited evidence of sustainability of learning with each coach able to retain their authentic approach whilst applying this model. Whilst learning had been sustained, the evidence was limited due to the slightly shorter period of time for this post doctoral study (around three months). The collaborative nature of the model was reinforced as important for the transfer and sustainability of learning, and all the six categories (see Figure 1 above) were continuing in importance. One coach/researcher said: "*the model encourages the coach and leader to move the coaching experience away from an 'interesting' conversation to a meaningful, learning experience*".

However, it was the 33 themes (see Figure 2 above) which were not entirely reinforced as important by all the 'coach/researchers'. It was felt that five of the themes could potentially be removed without any negative impact on the transfer and sustainability of learning; namely, Coach Responsibilities/Client Centred Process/Physical Environment; Coach Responsibilities/Client Centred Process/Friendly Support; Coach Responsibilities/Enabling/Facilitating Learning/Not Therapy; Coach and Client Responsibilities/Coaching Relationship/Comfort; and Coach and Client Responsibilities/Coaching Relationship /Face-to-Face (Cook, 2015). Although, not all the 'coach /researchers' agreed that these five themes should be removed. It could be argued that these five themes were very specific to the original doctoral research experience, ie there was something about me and the collaborative researchers and our collaborative experience which enabled these themes to emerge. However, they could also be reflecting the greater breadth and depth of the original doctoral research study. The remaining twenty-eight themes were reinforced as important to the transfer and sustainability of learning. (Cook, 2015)

A few elements were highlighted as important to the transfer and sustainability of learning when the model is used by a diverse range of coaches:

"*very workable, practical and ethical model*";
"*allows for the power and the presence of the coach*";
"*encourages both coach and client to keep focused on transfer and sustainability of learning*";
"*encourages the client to develop as an independent learner and self coach*";
"*the strength of the reflection element of the model makes this model different to others*"; and
"*good measure of adding value as a coach*".

In addition, there were some suggestions for development of both content and use of the model:

"*understanding of self and bias for the coach*";
"*using the model at the contracting stage*";
"*assessment in action by the coach of the leader*"; and
"*enabling/facilitating self coaching*"

The post doctoral study findings indicate that the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) could be useful to all external one-to-one coaches of leaders who are committed to the transfer and sustainability of learning as a return on investment for the organisations funding stand alone coaching. These findings also indicate that the model is flexible enough to allow the coaches to retain their authenticity whilst applying the model in their coaching practice.

When presenting on my post doctoral study at the 2015 UFHRD Conference, I was approached by a coach in the USA who was keen to apply my model to her coaching work as a Military & Veteran Career Transition Coach (she has given permission for her name to be used: Sarah E Minnis PhD). Her request interested me as she was not specifically coaching leaders in a business environment but intuitively she felt drawn towards the model. Similar to the post doctoral study, I spent time with Sarah briefing her on the model, answering any questions about applying the model and facilitating reflective learning discussions about the practice of applying the model. I asked for a quote about her experience to date:

> This model has helped me provide more salient and accessible coaching for the veterans with whom I work. It has been key to my better structure and focus as a coach through the reflective process engaged enabling me to work at a greater depth and level of intensity with this population's unique needs.

Over time, we will be able to assess the extent of the transfer and sustainability of learning but is positive to date.

Conclusion

Ives (2008, p100) argues that "by understanding more clearly the nature of the difference between approaches, it will also be easier to fit a coaching model for specific situations". Such matching of approaches to both clients and the needs of clients is of course important. However, my post doctoral research is providing an early indication that the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011) could provide a coaching approach which allows individual coaches to retain their professional identity at the same time as providing an evidence base for the transfer and sustainability of learning for the client and their organisation.

However, it is early days in this exploratory process. Whilst the post doctoral study and Sarah's experience are showing very positive results for the transferability of the Collaborative Action Coaching for Leaders model (Cook, 2011), another very important point emerged from the post doctoral study which is the competency starting point for the coach. It was suggested in the study that a coach applying this model may need to have a certain level of experience and expertise in order to understand and be able to implement the breadth and depth of the model. Therefore, there is a need for some work to develop a set of competencies specifically for this model and assess how they align to the International Coach Federation eleven competencies for coaches (ICF, 2008) and this will be taking place in 2016/17. It is also important for more coaches to apply this model to their work to continue to explore the post doctoral research questions regarding transferability of the model and transfer and sustainability of learning through application of the model. Therefore, if any coach is interested in applying this model to their work, just contact me and I will be delighted to provide all the necessary information and briefings. It is planned that the case studies of applying this model will be published.

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