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# Building a contextual understanding of coaching: the role of social exchange theory

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore coaching as part of talent management programmes to examine the social dimensions of this practice at individual and organisational levels. We use social exchange theory to extend the understanding of coaching as a relational process and social reward mechanism. We adopt a qualitative single-case study research design and analyse 30 interviews of employees and coaches involved in talent management programmes in a global bank. The study argues that coaching is a springboard for leadership development and career progression based on mutual exchange gains between the employee, the coach, and the organisation. In the context of talent management, coaching was experienced as a social reward and symbolised the employees' status regardless of the extent to which the actual coaching adhered to a designated model or approach. Coaching can foster interdependence, as a co-negotiated and co-constructed space, supporting navigation of talent nomination, leadership development, and career growth. Practical implications include an acute need for clear communication of the purpose of coaching, and likely exchange expectations and opportunities available for coaching participants. This includes transparent communication on how talent status affects the readiness of participants to engage positively in coaching and its symbolic and practical significance.

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Coaching; leadership development; talent management; social exchange theory; financial services; case study

## Introduction

Coaching is an established practice in organisations, and the coaching industry is estimated to be worth over \$4.5 billion US (PWC, 2023). Coaching can take a wide variety of forms, but most definitions emphasise its role as a one-to-one developmental intervention used to support the achievement of designated goals (Cox et al., 2023). In an organisational context, the coach's role is often assumed by a supervisor or individual with management responsibility, and coaching is presented as an alternative to traditional command-style managerial relationships (Nyfoudi et al., 2023). Indeed, such is the ubiquity of coaching that it is now commonly regarded as a generic skill required of all managers instead of an activity undertaken only by those with specialist knowledge and

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insight (Zhao & Liu, 2020). This is reflected in the expanding coaching literature, which has primarily focused on the tools and techniques required to build coaching skills and also to understand the outcomes of effective managerial coaching within organisations (Hui et al., 2021; Nyfoudi et al., 2023). Much of this work demonstrates the value of coaching; however, it does so by studying coaching in isolation from other managerial practices and specific features of the organisational context. For example, the role coaching plays as one part of a wider strategic development programme and the impact that the coaching relationship has on the ambitions of both parties (coach and coachee) has received less attention. As such, we have detailed insights into coaching at the technical or functional level, but we need to understand its symbolic value within organisations.

We seek to address this gap by drawing on an in-depth study of how coaching was utilised within a Talent Management (TM) strategy in a global financial services organisation. Talent management programmes of this kind provide an important empirical context for understanding the role of coaching because they typically represent an attempt by organisations to focus on the development of selected individuals.

Our focus concerns the context in which coaching operates rather than a precise evaluation of its effectiveness within the TM programme or adherence to a predetermined coaching model. To support this analysis, we use Social Exchange Theory (SET) to draw out some contextual factors that explain how coaching is operationalised within TM. SET argues that social behaviour and relationships are developed over time through a series of interactions whereby the two parties operate based on a cost–benefit analysis (Blau, 1986; Homans, 1958). It suggests behaviour can be explained by understanding how people evaluate the potential gain that may emerge from a relationship. In organisational contexts, a social exchange can exist between employees and the organisation, employees, and their supervisors and also coachees and their coaches. Therefore, SET provides a distinctive theoretical framework through which to understand coaching practice because its emphasis on exchange and negotiation within social relationships broadens perspectives on how coaching can contribute to individual and organisational objectives (Blau, 1986; Homans, 1958). We argue that this forms an important contribution to the understanding of coaching because, to date, the coaching literature has remained focused on what works within the immediate context of the coach–coachee relationship rather than how such relationships impact and are impacted by wider social norms and expectations (Bachkirova, 2024).

As our analysis demonstrates, coachees and coaches within the studied TM programmes benefit from coaching interventions less in terms of addressing specific performance and leadership development concerns but more in terms of what participation in the coaching and talent management programme signified for potential career enhancement. In this way, coaching was part of a wider network of social exchanges, many of which led participants to an instrumental view of the benefits of coaching interventions.

To develop these observations, the article is organised as follows. First, we summarise the core features of how coaching has been studied before examining how SET offers a theoretical basis for analysing contextual factors impacting perceptions of coaching. We then introduce the single-case study used in this article and highlight three core themes identified from the analysis, namely coaching as a platform for leadership development,

coaching as a form of social reward, and coaching as holding symbolic significance. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings and the use of SET for understanding coaching and wider concerns within management and leadership development.

### ***Coaching in context***

Many genres and combinations of coaching co-exist in workplaces, and this can lead to confusion regarding its specificities and purpose (Bonneywell & Gannon, 2021; Bozer & Delegach, 2019). Coaching and mentoring constitute developmental relationships, fostering learning through a supportive dialogue to facilitate personal and professional growth (Garvey and Stokes, 2022). These interventions aim to enhance performance and work satisfaction (Dahling et al., 2016; Ellinger, 2013). While coaching is frequently associated with performance and mentoring with career advancement, the terminology exhibits semantic ambiguity (Western, 2012). Despite utilising comparable skill sets (Clutterbuck, 2015; Koopmann et al., 2021), the distinction between these helping interventions remains a subject of debate, contributing to conceptual complexity (Passmore, 2020).

For example, in our study, there was some evidence that coaching was at times similar to sponsorship mentoring (Mangion-Thornley, 2020; P. O'Connor et al., 2019), although in practice these differences were not significant for participants taking part in the talent management schemes. As such, while acknowledging the need for definitional clarity, the term coaching is used here as the term most widely used and understood within the empirical context.

Research into coaching has tended to focus on two broad and inter-related themes: (a) the outcomes of coaching and (b) coaching skills and techniques and how these are enacted within the coach-coachee relationship (Myers & Bachkirova, 2018). A consistent body of research has attempted to evaluate whether coaching works by providing a comprehensive list of coaching outcomes at the individual and organisational levels (De Haan, 2021; Grover et al., 2016). Positive outcomes of workplace coaching include the development of leadership capability, employee well-being (Grant, 2017), increased productivity and performance, behavioural change, stress management, and self-confidence (Bozer & Jones, 2018), goal attainment, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and awareness to promote work satisfaction and sustainable change (Wang et al., 2022).

Taken together, these outcomes provide strong support to the advocates of coaching and for its central role in development activities within organisations. They also pose questions about how coaching can achieve these outcomes, which leads to a focus on coaching skills, techniques, and models and how these are enacted in the coaching relationship. Typically, core coaching skills involve building rapport and relationships, active listening, questioning, facilitation of self-awareness, and reflection (Garvey & Stokes, 2022). Many organisations seek to embed these skills by developing a coaching culture, whereby coaching is an important human resource practice (Saundry et al., 2021), increasingly devolved to line managers (Nyfoudi et al., 2023; Zhao & Liu, 2020). This suggests that coaching skills are a generic part of core management toolkits rather than the preservation of trained coaches; however, the coaching literature has also sought to establish models or

techniques, which require specialist knowledge for their application. Myers and Bachkirova (2018) argue that coaching interactions can be either client-led (based on empathy and collaboration), performance-managed (instructional, formal, and prescriptive), process-led (coach-led and concerned with the application of a designated process), or dialogic (in-depth, explorative and emotion, or values-led). Each of these requires coaches to adopt different styles or to apply different techniques to support coachee development. Recent studies have highlighted the relational and social dimensions of the coach–coachee relationship (Shoukry & Cox, 2018). For instance, by reviewing the ‘active ingredients’ needed for a successful coaching relationship, a meta-analysis based on 37 RCT studies identified co-regulation between the coach–coachee as a predictor of coaching effectiveness (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023). Furthering the concept of coaching alliance, co-regulation refers to the ability of the coach and coachee to influence one another in an inter-relational partnership through the credibility and friendliness of the coach, intrinsic motivation of the coachee and trust (De Haan, 2021).

Despite the breadth of the coaching literature, some important areas require scrutiny to substantiate their role within organisations further (Bachkirova, 2024). Most significantly, for our purposes, research into the nature of the coaching relationship often has a micro focus and does not explore how wider contextual concerns shape perceptions and experiences of coaching interventions (Bozer & Jones, 2018). For example, Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018) claimed that most executive coaching outcome studies overlook the social context, with limited coverage of the interrelation between executive coaching outcomes and the relational, spatial, or temporal context within which they occur. A review of qualitative coaching studies also claimed that the role of personal and organisational agendas is often overlooked despite coaching being identified as an intervention supporting broader organisational change agendas (De Haan, 2019). Another feature of context that receives less attention is the impact of coaching interventions on the coach. As highlighted earlier, studies of coaching outputs emphasise the impact on coachee performance and development. Few attempts have considered how coaches may see their involvement as part of their career development (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019).

Some studies have sought to broaden the focus beyond just the coach–coachee interaction. For example, the political nature of organisational coaching (Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2019) and its possible negative consequences (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019) have been examined. Similarly, Stokes et al. (2021) argue that context plays an agentic role in differentiating coaching from mentoring in practice. Emphasising context not only provides a richer picture of how coaching operates but can also support organisations when they are considering significant investments in coaching to ensure quality provision (St John-Brooks, 2014). Issues around when, how, and why to develop internal coaching capacity must be balanced against the cost and supply of external coaching provision, particularly where coaching has a role in such things as strategic TM programmes.

These are essential extensions to our understanding because they draw attention to where coaching might be ineffective and where contextual conditions may inhibit its developmental potential (Bachkirova, 2024). As a result, there is a need to broaden the analysis of coaching to bring insights into how these conditions might impact the

perceptions of the symbolic role of coaching in organisations, encompassing all parties within an organisational coaching relationship.

### ***Social exchange theory (SET) and coaching***

Evaluating the impact of contextual conditions on the role of coaching requires an alternative theoretical framework to those more commonly used within the coaching literature (Shoukry & Cox, 2018; Stănculescu, 2024). The theoretical foundations of most coaching studies tend to emphasise an individual psychological or andragogical perspective (Cox et al., 2023; Passmore, 2020). Such theoretical frameworks contribute to an understanding of how coaching can lead to changes in individual behaviour, but they are more limited when seeking to address some of the neglect of context in the coaching literature (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018). In this article, we use SET to draw out some of these points, as this theory is based on assumptions about social indebtedness and reciprocity (Cross & Dundon, 2019; Yamao, 2024). Beyond considering the employment relationship as a main economic exchange, SET posits that people exchange both tangible resources (such as goods, information, and financial rewards) as well as intangible resources in the form of emotions, status, power, allegiance, and esteem (Cropanzano et al., 2017). For example, in the employment context, employees will go beyond their usual roles when their employer (and other relevant stakeholders) is seen to offer favourable conditions and experiences (E. P. O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2019). In addition, when organisations demonstrate they value their employees through practices that enhance work-life issues, career opportunities, and training and development, SET highlights the interdependence created among the parties in organisations (Cross & Dundon, 2019).

SET frequently features in HRM, HRD, and TM studies evidencing the connections between strategies, practices, and outcomes, such as perceived organisational justice and organisation citizenship behaviour (E. P. O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2019; Wikhamn et al., 2021). For example, employees in a talent pool are more optimistic about their future career opportunities (Swales & Blackburn, 2016) and committed to developing their leadership skills (Khoreva et al., 2017). In addition, where coaching is perceived as effective, SET explains an increased commitment to self-development and performance across talented employees (Bonneywell & Gannon, 2021). By contrast, SET as a theoretical lens can also identify negative effects in close relationships such as coaching (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019).

Critiques of SET revolve around whether people only make decisions based on what they will receive in return and why many individuals who experience inequalities in organisations do not abandon unjust employment relationships (Cross & Dundon, 2019). Despite these limitations, we deploy SET in our analysis of coaching to make sense of the complexity and interdependence of the relationship dynamics and accounts of coaches, coachees, and organisational representatives across talent-informed learning and development strategies and practices. SET explicates how coaching influences perceptions of HRD relationships and practices beyond the dyadic and suggests that the iterative nature of HRD initiatives needs to be considered (Cross & Dundon, 2019). Doing so helps us shift focus away from the immediate concern with the mechanics of the

coaching relationship to how such relationships influence other aspects of coaches', coaches', and coaching commissioners' experiences and connections.

Bringing these experiences together reflects what Kilroy et al. (2023, p. 514) refer to as 'zones of reciprocity', which describe the 'perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours' that employees contemplate as part of their reactions to employer practices. Through the application of SET, we can explore the extent to which internal coaches also operate within a zone of reciprocity due to the possible benefits accrued from the coaching relationship. In this way, SET provides a relevant framework of reference to address calls regarding the need for more context-sensitive empirical studies to advance understanding of HRD practices and coaching in general (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Yamao, 2024) and also to see both as a social process impacted by the expectations and perceptions that different parties bring to the coaching relationship (Shoukry & Cox, 2018).

### **Research focus and context**

Drawing on SET to explore the impact of contextual factors on coaching, this study addresses the following questions:

RQ1: How does the specific context of a TM programme impact the experience of coaches and coachees?

RQ2: To what extent does coaching form part of an exchange relationship between coach and coachee in the context of a TM programme?

RQ3: Does coaching represent a broader set of ideals within a TM programme beyond an impact on coachee development?

### **Case study research design**

To explore these questions, we adopted a qualitative methodology informed by a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. This supported our concern with the manner in which participants reflected upon their experience of coaching and the contribution this made to the reality of coaching within the case organisation. This is consistent with broader trends in the study of coaching practice, which has shifted from a more dominant quantitative approach to qualitative research methods better suited to drawing out some of the complexities of coaching practice (North, 2013).

We draw upon data from a study of coaching delivered as part of four TM programmes within a global bank in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa (EMEA) regions (see Table 1). The case company, anonymised as GlobalFinCorp in this article, is an American MNE in the banking and financial services sector operating in more than 160 countries. Our study participants, whose names are pseudonymised to maintain confidentiality, were based in the EMEA region, comprising approximately 55 countries and 30,000 employees. GlobalFinCorp has extensive experience designing and operating global talent and leadership schemes, typically including instruction-led, web-based learning, mentoring, coaching, and career discussions with HR managers.

The study draws on the perspective of multiple stakeholders, namely employees selected to be part of programmes featuring coaching (i.e. 'talented' employees), internal and external coaches, and HR managers. From a methodological perspective, using

**Table 1.** Overview of the four TM programmes studied.

Programme	Target participants	Length	Coach	Structure	Format
A	Junior leaders: Vice Presidents	6 months	Internal (HR managers and Managing Directors)	3 coaching sessions	Group and individual Internal
B	Senior leaders: Directors, Managing Directors	3 months	Internal (HR managers and Managing Directors)	2 coaching sessions	Individual, 360° Assessment and Hogan Development Survey
C – Business specific (Consumer division)	Middle management leaders: Vice Presidents, Directors	6 months	Internal (HR managers)	3 coaching sessions	Individual, 360° Assessment
D – Gender specific (Women)	Women senior leaders: Directors, Managing Directors	3 months	Internal (HR managers and Managing Directors) and external	4 to 5 coaching sessions	Individual, 360° Assessment and Hogan Development Survey

**Table 2.** Data collection and interviews with different stakeholders.

TM Programmes in EMEA	1st interview	2nd interview	
Programme A – junior (Vice presidents)	3	1	
Programme B- senior (Managing directors)	2	1	
Programme C- Consumer division- Middle management (Directors)	4	1	
Programme D- senior women (Managing directors and executives)	3	1	
External coaches	3	2	
Internal coaches (Managing directors and HR managers)	2	1	
HR managers	3	0	
Programme managers	3	0	
	23	7	30

multiple data sources allows for in-depth analysis in qualitative single-case studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The primary data involved 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with various managers and employees engaged in the coaching element of these programmes (see Table 2).

### **Sampling**

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to reflect the real-life coaching activities embedded in the TM programmes of GlobalFinCorp (Bryman et al., 2018). In terms of the different forms of purposive sampling identified by Patton (2002, 2015) our approach was closest to criterion sampling given our predetermined criteria that participants must have experienced coaching as part of a TM programme. The sampling of the study participants is based on the structure of the TM programmes, particularly the one-to-one coaching element embedded in those programmes. Based on preliminary meetings with the Head of Organisational Development and the EMEA Talent Manager, all talented employees, coaches, and HR managers from the most recently operated four TM programmes were invited to participate in the research. The call to participate was distributed internally by the EMEA Talent Manager, and all volunteer participants registered their interest directly with the researchers to warrant anonymous participation.

Two programmes (A and B) focused on developing talented employees across countries and business units in EMEA. Two additional programmes dedicated to talented employees from the Consumer division (programme C) and senior women (programme D) were added to the sample so that all programmes deployed in EMEA could be analysed. Participation in the study was voluntary. Given the selectivity of the TM programmes at GlobalFinCorp, only a small number of potential participants were invited to engage in this single-case study. All talented employees interviewed were previously selected by their line manager, who nominated them to join one of the four TM programmes (see [Table 1](#)). In total, 23 people participated in semi-structured interviews, with seven of them interviewed twice (see [Table 2](#)). Following the primary analysis of the data pointing to themes and patterns, we invited all participants for a second interview, out of which seven accepted the invitation. Our data includes interviews with external coaches whose intervention targets talented senior or executive-level employees. It also consists of the views of internal coaches, who are typically Directors, Managing Directors, and HR managers, albeit not line-managing the coachees. Besides, it is not possible to identify any dyadic relationships in the data collected since participants were not asked to reveal the identity of their coach/coachee. This was essential so all participants could freely express their views on the coaching intervention and its impact.

### ***Data collection and limitations***

Each interview lasted between 40 and 90 min and explored attitudes and experiences towards coaching. Interviewees were asked to describe their coaching experiences, either as a coach or coachee (or other stakeholder), regarding how they came to be involved and engaged with the coaching process. We did not explore any specific coaching method/approach/techniques; instead, we focused on how interviewees valued and made sense of the coaching intervention. Subsequent questions then focused on elements influenced by SET, such as how coaching impacted broader attitudes towards other stakeholders and the organisation as a whole. The interview topics included the purpose of coaching in the TM programme, any role played by coaching regarding leadership development, career progression, or any other aspect of career enhancement, the experience of the coaching process, and related expectations. Interview questions reflected the specific position of the interviewees – for example, interviews with HR managers also explored some of the wider strategic goals of the TM programmes to gain a better sense of the organisational context.

We acknowledge that generalisation from a single-case study is problematic, particularly when defined by the expectations of quantitative research. As Smith (2018) argues it is important to recognise that generalisability is still possible in qualitative research, and so we would argue that the value of this qualitative single-case study resides in presenting a rich portrait of a single setting to inform practice and add knowledge on coaching in the context of TM using the lens of SET (Simons, 2009). As such, it is theory-mediated rather than deriving from direct empirical generalisation (Ylikoski, 2019).

## Results

A thematic approach, which is suitable for qualitative inquiry, was used to analyse the data and supported by NVivo (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The data analysis involved anonymising individuals via pseudonyms and prolonged engagement with the data set, including the analysis of fieldnotes, from which emerging topics were identified (Nowell et al., 2017). We used the Gioia methodology to determine (a) the informant-centric codes; (b) themes, concepts, and dimensions; and (c) the aggregated dimensions and overarching themes (Gioia et al., 2013). Table 3 below illustrates the coding process and provides additional statements to evidence the themes.

Our examination of the coding in line with the research question highlighted three core themes (a) coaching as a springboard, (b) coaching as a social reward, and (c) coaching as a symbol. These themes were selected as ones that were best supported by both the weight of evidence but also the manner in which they pointed to distinctive features of coaching that extended beyond one-dimensional explanations of its impact within the organisation. This was relevant to our objective to consider the symbolic and instrumental roles of coaching.

### *Coaching as a springboard for career progression*

The first research question supported a concern with how the context of a TM programme impacts the experience of coaching and the main theme to emerge here was that coaching functioned as a platform upon which participants could plan for leadership and career development. Participants perceived coaching as a gratifying career event, representing a rare opportunity to stop, reflect, and define a personal career plan, and benefit from coaching as a ‘*confidence boost*’ (Lucy, Coachee). There was also a clear view that coaching helps political skills to ‘game’ the way up the career ladder:

I think it (coaching) becomes critical to understand how to navigate; I call it the game. Some people call it politics, you know, but in certain institutions, there is a game that, you know, you kind of approach with the naiveness of, proportionately, ‘what I give into work is what I will get back’, and to become savvy about that. (Carry, Coachee)

Other participants outlined the value of political skills for in-house career growth, particularly for junior employees. In this context, coaching was experienced as a pivotal personalised intervention to support career planning and enhance social capital. Reflecting on a key theme in the coaching literature around blurred definitions of the role of the coach (Garvey & Stokes, 2022), coaches were described in multiple ways as ‘*sponsors*’, ‘*advocates*’, ‘*ambassadors*’ and ‘*mentors*’ who could increase the visibility of their coachees and support internal promotion. One participant commented, ‘*I am quite sure that coaching helps in the positive politics that you need to evolve in any firm*’ (Emma, Coachee).

Participants also explained that their coaching relationships, when successful, could extend beyond the timeframe of TM programmes and become long-term relationships. Assertions were that both coach and coachee mutually benefit from the strong ties developed through coaching. Coachees benefited from the experience, political savvy, global network, and tacit knowledge of their talent coaches, who were typically

**Table 3.** Coding process and additional statements from participants.

Informant-centric codes	Research-centric concepts, themes dimensions	Overarching themes	Statements
<p>Aims and purpose of coaching in TM programmes: Career planning Coaching capability building as a spin-off of TM programmes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Network extension and sponsoring</li> <li>– Consolidation of learning</li> <li>– Adaptive coaching to meet personal needs</li> <li>– Sharing tacit knowledge and experience</li> <li>– Inspire and guide to navigate the internal politics</li> <li>– Knowledge and confidence building</li> <li>– Bespoke career progression</li> </ul>	<p><b>A springboard for career progression</b></p>	<p>[Talent coaching] gives people the individualised process of helping them understand what they need to do to help them moving forward. (Catherine, Coach) The coach is the person who shakes, you know, 'Wake up!' whether that's positive or a negative wake-up. (Anne, Coachee and Coach) When you are actually coaching in a talent programme, you already know that the people who are participating in them are good that's why they're there. So, they have the potential to grow more. I think it's really guiding them through that, and kind of opening the door for them so that, once they actually take the next steps for their career (...), then they are able to independently manage themselves and obviously a team as well. (Charlotte, HR)</p>
<p>Talent coaching as a cost and investment Organisational culture and context</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Coaching perceived as a time-consuming and expensive managerial task</li> <li>– Cost-benefit analysis applied to talent coaching</li> <li>– Coaching as a long-term investment on the individual</li> <li>– Coaching as a reward mechanism for continuous high performance</li> </ul>	<p><b>A social reward</b></p>	<p>They have to keep in mind that they are in the talent programme for a reason. Other people don't get this opportunity. So, they were handpicked, and they were handpicked not just because they were performing well today; also because the business is seeing this potential that they could be leading a bigger business unit in the future or maybe a country department. (Charlotte, HR) First of all, there is some degree of appreciation, you know the company cares (...) so they are looking at what additional resources that they can offer me as an individual; (...) and so, that you're kind of not completely unnoticed (...). We are recognised and rewarded. (Eleonor, Coachee) I am a firm believer, actually in the power of coaching and the ability to- and from my perspective_ the ability to give back. (...) I feel I have an obligation to pay back_ more particularly to women, if I am being honest with you_ pay back to the organisation. (Anne, Coachee and Coach)</p>

(Continued)

**Table 3.** (Continued).

Informant-centric codes	Research-centric concepts, themes dimensions	Overarching themes	Statements
Mutual expectations related to talent coaching between the coach, coachee and organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Enacts the mutual duties and expectations between talented employees, coaching, and organisation</li> <li>– Signalling coaching as desired leadership style</li> <li>– Symbol of high status</li> </ul>	<b>A symbol</b>	In the *** Department, we have to take a slightly longer view, there's more an emphasis, and I think the senior managers get that there's a large amount of their role is talent management, is coaching. (Georges, Coach) On being identified by a senior person, on being mapped as well, I think coaching plays a massive role in that (...) When you have the chance to be associated with the right people, it definitely plays a massive role in making you move and having brand ambassadors, because that's what you need to navigate anyway. (Emma, Coachee)

GlobalFinCorp senior business leaders or HR managers. For example, talent coaching was described as an *'opportunity to talk through what might be some of the barriers to further success in the organisation, either personally or professionally'* (Anne, Coachee, and coach). For Alan (Coachee), *'the purpose of the whole programme was (...) to be promoted or to change your current job to another and upgrade your professional career'*. To meet this expectation, the role of the coach was to *'leverage on the knowledge and experience accumulated in the organisation'* (Amy, Coach).

Those selected to act as coaches used these roles as evidence that they were suitable senior leaders who met the company's expected leadership skills and behaviours, so coachees were not alone in using coaching as a basis for career progression. For instance, internal coaches expected a reciprocal contribution from their coachees through internal sponsoring of their coaching capabilities. As Emma observed:

If you are positively impacted by a coach, you are the brand ambassador for him as well. Trust me, I know my coach. (Emma, Coachee)

The interdependence of relationships created through the coaching was reinforced by coaches identifying the benefits of their involvement with an employee identified as 'talented', whereby the coachee can also advocate for the coach. Further interdependence arose where participants highlighted the mutuality of their coaching relationships as a series of exchanges and mutual gains that sustain long-term relationships.

Frustration and cynicism were expressed when career enhancement was not forthcoming. For example, Nathalie (Coachee) explained that when promises of career growth were not fulfilled, the talent status may be experienced as a *'hard landing'*, offering *'no formula'* to progress on the career ladder. Other participants questioned the purpose of the TM programme which, in turn, created a context in which suspicion and anxiety were expressed about coaching. Indeed, Charlotte (HR manager and coach) acknowledged

that without an obvious link to career progression ‘*some people don’t really know what the coach is there for*’.

### **Coaching as a social reward**

Although the context of the TM programmes supported expectations that coaching would lead directly to career progression (regardless of its impact on personal development), the second research question drew out a theme that indicated a less instrumental view. Instead, several participants viewed coaching as an end in itself, regarding it as one of the more overt social rewards for being selected to be part of the TM programme. For example, some talented employees described the personal attention provided by their coach as a relational reward, showing that the company ‘cares’, and wants to ‘invest’ in their professional development (Eleonor, Coachee). Coaching experiences led some participants to report feelings of increased duty towards the organisation’s success (Eleonor; Lucy; Anne, Coachees). Eleonor explained coaching as a recognition of the individual’s contribution to the organisation and coaching as a mechanism for strengthening her relationship with the company:

So, you feel a little bit of love that they care about you, and they want to spend time and money on you, and so that you are kind of not completely unnoticed (. . .). So, it’s a two-way street, (. . .), and that’s again like one of the ways how a firm can help me take a broader, more strategic, and high-level perspective on being part of the organisation. (Eleonor, Coachee)

Again, the emphasis here is not on coaching as a mechanism for enhancing personal skills and performance, but as a practice that can induce a range of implicit duties and responsibilities that nourish the talented employee–organisation relationship (Mangion-Thornley, 2021). In Eleonor’s case, after 2 years of ongoing coaching with an external coach, she recognised her increased work performance as an outcome by going ‘*beyond [her] job description*’. Likewise, Lucy (Coachee), experienced coaching as a gratifying ‘*confidence boost*’ to encourage progression to the next level in the leadership pipeline. Similarly, Anne (Coachee) defined herself as a ‘*firm believer*’ in coaching and endeavoured to ‘*pay back and give back particularly to women*’ in the organisation. Further, Eleonor perceived coaching as an additional benefit that ‘*adds to the pot*’ of the company’s existing benefits and rewards scheme. Although not automatically conducive to a promotion or immediate career progression, it was seen as ‘*a good to have*’ despite the limited number of coaching sessions in the TM programmes and the impermanence of the talent status (Nathalie, Coachee; Adam, HR).

### **Coaching as a symbolic indicator**

The third theme emerged from our third research question which sought to examine if coaching had a wider significance than just individual development of talent, namely that coaching was used to symbolise notions of desired leadership capability across the organisation. For example, Charles (MD and internal coach) advocates that ‘*there is many things that can make a good coach that can also make a good leader*’. Further, Elizabeth (HR) explains that ‘*it’s expected [from]*

*leaders to act as a coach for the team*’, which unveils the organisational narrative in favour of leader-as-coach managerial style and an implicit expectation for leaders to progress in the talent pipeline by developing themselves as coach and coaching others.

This echoes the role of coaching as a platform to develop strong and reciprocal relationships presented above. Following positive engagement in the coaching process, some coachees were invited to become coaches in future TM programmes. This HR-led invitation was based on the feedback provided informally by internal and external coaches. It was seen as a sign of a good fit with the company’s vision for leadership and suggested potential for future progression in the talent pipeline. As George explained:

There’ll be the smaller group [of employees] that think, yes, I can do that [coaching] to make me sort of a better person, whether it’s here or outside work or whatever. And they’re the people that I think eventually go into the really big leadership roles. (George, Internal coach)

Again, the specific developmental outcomes of the coaching process were marginalised here in favour of assertions that engaging in coaching symbolised appropriate leadership potential. Additionally, George explained that coaching could be used to further differentiate between those within the TM programme – a form of the elite within an elite. For instance, the EMEA Executive Committee had selected 12 internal leadership coaches to participate in a coaching masterclass which, in George’s view, indicated that:

... they know who they think are the next leaders coming through the pack that they need to give the extra toolkit to. And that’s the right approach—the targeted coaching to people who will use it to take themselves and the [organisation] to the next level.

Another example of the use of coaching as a symbol of managerial and leadership tenure is provided by Oliver (Coachee and coach):

To be honest, I really use it as a way to acknowledge formally the management responsibilities and all. (...) I use [coaching] more as a kind of ritual thing and you know, this is the acknowledgement as manager.

Here, coaching was used as a rite of passage, which symbolised sustained personal achievements and new talent status for talented employees themselves and other employees in the organisation.

Conversely, those within the TM programme who reacted negatively or resisted coaching were perceived as not fitting in with the firm’s desired leadership approach:

For this type of people, the coaching comes against their own internal values. So, they sabotage themselves. They’re going to criticise the [talent] programme (...) when the reality is that they are not so happy in their position, but they’re also not willing to change something, so they don’t give it a real try. (Lucy, Coachee)

Thus, coaching was used to symbolise cultural fit with the organisation’s desired leadership and coaching culture. Specifically, it was seen as a support mechanism to shift the organisation from a command–control approach to a coaching style. Such a style was framed as supporting *‘better quality conversations’* in GlobalFinCorp and helping to broaden the leadership repertoire of managers (John, Adam, HR).

## Discussion

Our analysis has intentionally not sought to make a judgement as to whether the coaching described here fits with a specific model or approach, or the extent to which it is better understood as mentorship or sponsorship, in part because these issues were of little concern to our respondents who consistently used the term coaching to describe their experience and practice. Instead, the use of SET enables a focus on the dynamics of complex relationships and interdependence formed between the coach, coachee, and the organisation, more than on the question of coaching practice.

Exploring these dynamics allowed us to address our research questions. RQ1 considered the role of coaching within a suite of HRD/TM programmes, and our study has shown how in this context coaching is regarded as a form of social reward that supports future career development, particularly through enhanced networking opportunities across the organisation. RQ2 asked about the extent to which coaching supported an exchange relationship between coach and coachee and here we have shown evidence that coaching creates interdependencies where both coach and coachee are able to derive benefits from the interactions. If the talented employee responds well to the support provided and, in exchange, talks about coaching in favourable terms, the internal coach feels gratified and will benefit as a leader themselves through improvements in their internal reputation. Finally, RQ3 considered whether coaching represented a broader set of ideals within a TM programme that extended beyond coachee development. Our findings have demonstrated that there is more to coaching than enhancing personal skills in that it can establish longer, deeper connections and commitments across organisations each of which reveals something more substantial about leadership styles.

### *Theoretical contributions*

Combined, the answers to our research questions show how our positioning of coaching is consistent with SET, which suggests that all partners benefit simultaneously from their social interactions, and *'the only cost that they incur is the indirect one of giving up alternative opportunities by devoting time to the association'* (Blau, 1986, p. 16). Consequently, our first contribution is to extend contemporary insights from SET applied to HRD (Kilroy et al., 2023; Cross & Dundon, 2019; Kim & Kuo, 2015), by providing evidence for how different stakeholders recognise social exchange occurring through relationships which are part of TM and HRD programmes. Our study indicates that coaching entails social exchange in the context of TM programmes, and it is a practice where this exchange creates mutual benefits for coaches and coachees and the wider organisation.

A further contribution shows how both talent coaches and coachees value their relationships and interactions beyond the usual short-term nature of coaching, something which has to date received little focus within the literature. Our study shows the significance of fostering longer-term coaching relationships to support the development of leadership skills, map their career options, and, crucially, navigate the firm's politics. Coaching relationships typically continue beyond the timeframe of the TM programme and take on features of informal mentoring, with mutual benefits of association for all partners. Reciprocity and social exchange appear to sit at the heart of these mature

relationships, where participants outline internal coaches offering their services to help junior managers, junior managers advocating for the skills and support of their coaches, allowing all to mutually recommend each other as being ideally suited to be senior leaders in GlobalFinCorp. This appears to mitigate the lack of a guarantee of career progression post-TM programmes and mutually ensures that all participants maintain their talent profile (E. P. O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2019).

Our third contribution is to show that by deploying SET as an analytical lens, we draw attention to how longer-term coaching relationships and interactions develop because the mutually beneficial interactions and exchanges (Blau, 1986) override the typical short-term focus of coaching. Our findings emphasise the role of coaching as a platform for leadership development and social capital extension, seen as essential for in-house career progression, echoing the findings of others (Richardson et al., 2017; Seibert et al., 2001). A final contribution points to the manner in which SET also helps explain the nature and function of coaching beyond the dyadic relationship. It presents it as a social interaction fostering reciprocity and mutually benefiting everyone involved. Our study captures how 'zones of reciprocity' (Kilroy et al., 2023) can develop in coaching due to the instrumental and symbolic roles that coaching may play in the context of TM. Participation in coaching, as either coach or coachee, or organisational advocate, conveys status and symbolises a desired change in culture away from more direct command style management.

### **Practical implications**

This view of coaching presents an important extension of its significance over and above the traditional focus of the psychological, technical, and developmental dimensions of coaching (De Haan, 2019; Passmore & Lai, 2019). By considering coaching as a social exchange and social reward, this study contributes to shifting our understanding of coaching in organisations from the one-to-one conversation to develop future leaders, to focus on the relational, social, symbolic, and political dimensions of coaching and the power dynamics at play in its use (Fatien Diochon & Nizet, 2019). Specifically, we advocate that HRD managers should not view coaching in purely developmental, upskilling, or transactional terms, but instead recognise the symbolic and political nature of coaching. This approach can benefit from recognising that coaching generates a dynamic, socially constructed space, highly prized by coachees, coaches, and other connected stakeholders. As a co-negotiated and co-constructed space, talent coaching fosters a sense of interdependence between the different parties involved, whereby any broken promises of career growth lead to disappointment and may generate mistrust in the employee relationship (Sumelius et al., 2020). Indeed, where coaching is not embraced by coachees, fewer connections and opportunities for future leadership and career growth can occur, reinforcing the challenges of managing expectations of individual gains in talent coaching.

### **Conclusion**

Drawing on SET, the study argues that coaching may be perceived as a social reward and a social exchange in the context of TM. Specifically, coaching may

induce a perceived obligation from the coachee, coach, and organisation to reciprocate high-quality relationships developed over time through a series of exchanges (Blau, 1986).

Before turning to the implications of our study, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. As a study of a single organisation, we make limited claims to generalisability, instead seeking to identify key theoretical insights based on a depth of contextual understanding. Also, the study was primarily cross-sectional, and a more longitudinal approach would have drawn out some of the longer-term outcomes and experiences of the coaching relationship. It is also relevant to recognise that our study omitted employees not participating in talent management programmes. There is some evidence that these employees are likely to experience negative work motivation (Lai & Ishizaka, 2020) and alternative insights on exchange relationships among those excluded from HRD interventions. In particular, future research could consider the attitudes towards coaching of those who do not have access to something considered (at least by our respondents) as a form of reward and the extent to which this might undermine attempts to build a wider coaching culture. Finally, the terms of the research access limited the ability to explore the same coaching relationship from a dyadic perspective, which could have deepened the analysis.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to further the applicability of SET in the context of TM and HRD (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015; King, 2015; Narayanan et al., 2019; E. P. O'Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2019) and coaching (Kim & Kuo, 2015), while also advancing our understanding of coaching in organisations. In considering coaching as a social reward, this study argues that coaching may be effectively deployed as a strategic HRD intervention. This suggests practical implications for HR managers, and internal and external coaches. Particular attention is needed on the role, training, and coordination of internal and external coaches, often overlooked in organisations (Fatien Diochon & Nizet, 2019). From an organisational perspective, coaching was used to facilitate leadership change, and shift the organisation from a command-and-control style to an espoused coaching style. This study suggests that communication on the organisational purpose of coaching needs to be made explicit to all stakeholders. Specifically, raising awareness among coaches and coachees that a coaching relationship may require an exchange is helpful in achieving mutually agreed outcomes. As such, transparent communication of the role of coaching to support those involved in TM programmes is essential, confirming the work of Dries and De Gieter (2014) and Sumelius et al. (2020).

The study also has implications for how dyadic relationships, such as coaching, are understood when adopting alternative theoretical frameworks like SET. One of the criticisms of SET is that it can lead to the commodification of social interaction, where each relationship is assessed based on a cost-benefit analysis. As such, there is the potential for SET to produce a more cynical view of coaching as promoting an instrumental mindset and form of neo-individualism where all stakeholders value coaching only to the extent it produces personal benefits (Tabarovsky, 2015). Indeed, our study demonstrates that coaches, coachees, and organisational advocates benefit from understanding the impact of engaging in those relationships, within and beyond the specific TM/HRD programme. This is supported by the concept of active (explicit) and inactive (implicit) social exchange in the workplace (Cropanzano et al., 2017), whereby the employee

would still reciprocate implicitly in the presence of uncontrollable factors, such as the end of a TM programme and formal coaching relationship, bringing a new psychological dimension to SET (Ahmad et al., 2023).

However, the potential cynical interpretation of SET simplifies its breadth as an explanatory device. It fails to recognise that an exchange-based perspective can both enable and constrain individual agency in different ways (Cook et al., 2013). As well as drawing attention to the instrumental view of coaching, our study shows that for coaches and coachees, the notion of being part of an exchange supported a range of outcomes where coaching was considered a way of generating a discretionary effort and a more altruistic sense of giving something back to others in the organisation. Failure to engage with coaching and the organisational mindset around it was seen to undermine leadership and career opportunities. This shows how adopting a theoretical framework such as SET opens up the analysis of coaching and dyadic relationships to a wider range of dynamics, and also points to where future research may focus its attention. For example, future studies could consider the extent to which the symbolic implications of coaching simply reproduce a form of individual agency designed to reinforce rather than challenge organisational rhetoric and long-standing power relationships. Confronting the concept of coaching as a purely developmental practice through the use of SET offers the opportunity to understand in-depth its complexity when used in organisations to elicit change. In this way, our study encourages future research that draws coaching away from a more self-contained technical narrative and recognises its significance as part of wider theoretical debates on the future of managerial practices.

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