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Academic Paper

Learning Experiences for Academic Deans: Implications for Leadership Coaching

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Abstract

This paper is the result of a unique combination PhD research and an intensive leadership coaching among Academic Deans and equivalent leadership roles within a university in the Middle East. Academic Deans have a complex 'in between' role. This level of complexity can create significant leadership and personal challenges. Coaching can offer an opportunity to enable these middle leaders to develop insights and strategies to cope with these challenges. However, a competent coach is not enough to work with the complexities of this group of people. A more flexible and adaptive coach is needed with a repertoire of skills and processes to draw upon to serve the needs of the coachees. Employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study identified some key themes in the findings about the ways in which the Deans learned. These include developing a mindful, reflective and calm environment, learning preferences are associated with the subject disciplines of the Deans and learning by observation. Drawing on adult learning theory and the research data this paper explores the development of such a process framework and concludes that a competence based approach to coach develop is inadequate for the complexities of the task.

Keywords

Learning, reflection, strategic thinking, coaching framework, academic deans,

Article history

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Introduction

Academic Deans are at the centre of academic decision-making and represent the middle leadership of an institution of higher education (Buller, 2007). For an Academic Dean to develop into the role and to become effective, he or she needs to learn continually at both personal and professional levels and coaching can offer such an opportunity through a managed conversation (Gallwey, 2000; Bertrand, 2018). While coaching can help coachees in their learning and personal development, coaching process models, however, often help coaches far more (Lennard, 2010). Additionally, Kilburg (2004) reminds us that the proliferation of coaching models leads to Dodoville where all are successful and all must have prizes! This study attempts to develop an alternative,

flexible framework aimed at helping the coach to adjust to complex coaching situations. Whilst, Chapman (2010) and Stout-Rostron (2014) support the importance of coaching models to provide a structure for coaching conversations as well as the overall coaching journey, Bluckert (2010) argues that in a Gestalt approach to coaching, the coach needs to make use of themselves in order to work in the moment. This suggests that a rigid model is not always appropriate and great flexibility is required by the coach. Garvey et al. (2018) suggest that a 'repertoire approach' is more appropriate and this clearly has implications for coach education and development. More recently, Stelter (2019) argues that, as coaching practice becomes more of a dyadic dialogue, basic competency frameworks for coach development become inadequate. He argues for a hybrid approach between mentoring and coaching.

According to Sarros, et al. (1998), the Academic Dean is the least researched and most misunderstood role in the higher education enterprise. The role and responsibilities of an Academic Dean vary widely from institution to institution. However, according to Buller (2007), all Deans play a middle leadership role. They relate upwardly to the senior leadership, sideways with their equivalents in other functions, supervise heads of department and chairs of a departments as well as other academic colleagues, students, administrative staff, develop strategy and in some cases have budgetary control. Performing these multifaceted roles can create a significant personal and professional challenge for a dean. It has also been argued (Zhang et al., 2008; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) that middle leaders play a similar and crucial role in any organization and Wolverton & Wolverton (1999) argue that middle leaders may experience problems of role ambiguity, stress and burnout that may result in higher turnover, low productivity and ultimately lower job satisfaction. According to Tucker (1988), in the context of higher education, in a large institution, a Dean will interact less and gain less support from the senior team while in a smaller institution, this interaction may be greater. Additionally, Wolverton & Wolverton (1999) suggest that universities can lack clarity in setting expectations for Academic Deans who are hired on scholarly attributes and achievements but are expected to perform with leadership and administrative excellence.

Commonly, Deans are appointed for their teaching and research abilities and these alone do not prepare a Dean for the role. They need key skills such as communication, strategy, fund-raising, organizational and time management skills, collaboration and the ability to establish collegial relationships (Kalargyrou & Woods, 2009). One way potential Deans prepare for the role is through training programmes and, indeed, Aasen and Bjorn (2007) recommend leadership training for Deans but also suggest that this is followed by further organizational and personal development activities such as coaching to enable the transfer of learning to the Dean's context. This has the potential to support individualized learning and development of Deans and through coaching they may learn how to deal with stress, manage their time and develop their communication abilities.

In addition, it is also possible that Deans may educate themselves through both formal and informal processes of learning and these may include reflective processes such as coaching, peer mentoring and action learning (Blackmore & Blackwell, 2006). However, one issue that may influence the way in which Deans' learn identified by Favero (2006), is the influence of their academic background. He argues that Deans in pure fields, such as science and engineering rely more on trial-and-error than those with disciplinary backgrounds of applied fields, such business.

This research explores these issues in relation to coaching by asking:

- What are the lived learning experiences of Academic Deans that contribute to their role?
- How may the learning experiences of Academic Deans inform the design of a leadership coaching framework for middle leaders?

This paper:

- Explores the literature on adult learning theories in relation to coaching

- Considers the findings from an intensive semi-structured interview process that was subject to an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) process
- Considers the findings from an interview with an independent coach who worked with Academic Deans that was subject to an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) process
- Develop a conceptual framework leading to a 'learning leadership through coaching'

Learning Theories and Coaching

This literature review offers a summary of the key adult learning theories that may contribute to the coaching process. There is little doubt that research influences practice and 'there is nothing as practical as a good theory' (Lewin, 1951: 169). While there is no theory that is unique to coaching (Brunner,1998; Passmore et al. 2013; Peltier, 2001), it is possible to examine a range of learning theories and find resonances with the ideas presented in the coaching literature. In this summary of the literature, we adopt a set of 'proxy theories' to inform the study. These indicate that coaching has the potential at least to be a very powerful learning process.

Both coach and coachees are learners (Garvey et al. 2018). As Stelter (2019) points out, the coach needs to learn from their coachees in order to develop the art of dialogue. According to Cox (2013), coaching is a facilitated, dialogic learning process and its demand has risen due to the need to overcome increasingly complex problems in the world. Arguably at least, adult learning theories comprise the largest set of theories that have relevance for the coaching processes. An understanding of adult learning principles and theories could therefore support the learning processes of both coaches and coachees.

Several theorists including Knowles et al. (1998), Schon (1983), Kolb (1984), Maslow et al. (1987) and Rogers (1989) make major contributions to the understanding of adult learning and by implication, the learning that is facilitated by coaching conversations.

Knowles et al. (1998), for example, presented six assumptions about adult learners as follows:

1. Adults are self-directed in their learning
2. Adults are goal-oriented in learning
3. Adults have reservoir of life experiences to learn from
4. Adults are interested to learn to solve real-life problems
5. Adult have practical orientation – they learn to apply knowledge
6. Adults respond more to intrinsic motivators than extrinsic.

Schon (1983) developed the concept of the 'reflective practitioner' and argued that being:

> "*mismatched to the changing character of the situations of practice – the complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflicts which are increasingly perceived as central to the world of professional practice*" (Schon, 1983, p. 14).

Kolb (1984) provided insights into the idea that adults learn from their experience and in accordance with certain 'styles' of learning. Later Kolb & Kolb (2013) argued that certain subject disciplines favoured certain learning styles.

Maslow et al. (1987), through the notion of a 'hierarchy of needs' suggested that this hierarchy provided the underpinning motivations to learn beyond mere survival and Rogers (1989) offered insights into the 'core conditions' for adult learning which, for some, provides the underpinning 'humanistic' value set (Peltier, 2001 and Zeus & Skiffington, 2005) for coaching relationships. Among these core conditions, Rogers (1989) suggests the ability to reflect is central. Another

contribution to learning is the idea of mindfulness. Becoming aware through mindfulness can enable transformation (Kets de Vries, 2014; Langer, 1989).

These theories offer an opportunity to understand the learning experiences of adults and, in the case of this study, those in the role of Academic Dean. As discussed above, Academic Deans are exposed to many challenges and their ability to learn and act is critical to their ability to perform the role.

It is not argued that Academic Deans learn in different ways to other people in a similar middle leadership role. On the contrary, it is very likely that Academic Deans are exposed to similar challenges found in any middle leader's learning environment. For example, goal setting, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, political knowledge, professional judgement, tension-filled situations, accumulated experiences, problem-solving, and need for self-actualization and congruence with their values. In relation to this, Winters & Latham (1996) argue that when a task is straight-forward, specific goal setting often leads to improved performance. However, when the task is complex, for example in the complexities of being a middle-leader or Dean (as is this study), Seijts et al. (2004) argue that 'learning goals' are more relevant and it is through these that there is a shift away from specific task outcomes and towards the 'discovery of task-relevant strategies or procedures' (p.229). In the related process of mentoring, Garvey &Alred (2001) argue that mentoring activity can enable mentees to learn to 'tolerate complexity'.

Consistently, the learning theories, as outlined by the theorists above, remind us about the importance of contexts and conditions for learning, reflection on assumptions, beliefs and choices of action and outcomes. However, it has been argued (Gray, et al. 2016) that an over emphasis on outcomes can drive out the relational aspects of the coaching dyad and others (de Haan, 2008; Stelter, 2019) argue that it is the relational aspects that are crucial to the success of coaching.

Sammut (2014) argues that the closest learning theory to coaching is Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory. This theory describes the conditions and processes essential for adult learners to make a transformative shift, which may be necessary for them to be able to deal with the contextual challenges they face. These include the use of experience, critical reflection and rational discourse as key parts of the process of learning. According to Taylor (1998), Mezirow later considered the notion of 'holistic orientation'; the awareness of context and authenticity of practice. In a transformative learning process, adults reframe their perspectives and become more engaged in life with a sense of self-direction and purpose. Within the concept of transformative learning, the learner constructs meaning from their experiences and this may involve deep shifts in beliefs, values, principles and feelings (Mezirow, 1991). According to Du Toit (2007), in coaching, this may happen as a result of the coach providing supportive challenge to the coachee's thinking.

Adding to this, Freire's (2000) theory of education for social change introduced the concept of praxis; a process of dancing between action and reflection. Here, this process aims to enhance the learners' awareness of the socio-cultural dynamics that may play a major role in their lives.

In this particular study, context and values play a role and it is important to be mindful of, for example Harrison & Stokes (1992) (later popularized by Charles Handy) version of culture in an organizational context where they identify four, sometimes overlapping versions of culture – Power, Person, Task and Role.

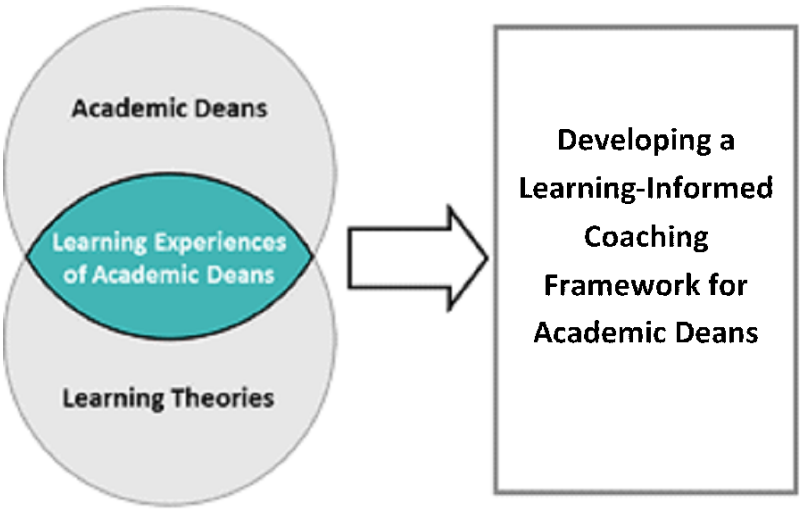
Handy (1993) argues that universities have traditionally tended towards a 'person' culture where there is little loyalty to the organization and more loyalty to the specialist subject and research. This in itself has the potential to create staff recruitment and retention issues. However, in the context of this study, there is a strong 'power' orientation where 'power' is held very strongly by a few people and control is exercised through strong bureaucratic processes and social ties. There is also a strong, almost nepotistic, tradition within this university where sons follow fathers into the university as undergraduates and re-join as academic faculty members after a postgraduate education in

either the USA, Canada or the UK. One consequence of this is that Deans may not apply for the role and follow standard HR recruitment procedures, instead, they are appointed to the role by the most senior people in the university rather than chose the role for themselves.

The learning theories outlined above may help to inform how Academic Deans learn about themselves and the roles they play in their institutions. These learning experiences of Deans may then inform the architecture of the learning process in the shape of a facilitated conversation and a learning journey. The unique value of this research is in the understanding of how Academic Deans learn to be more effective and by applying this knowledge to a flexible structure that may facilitate their learning so that they could become what they would like to become within the role.

Figure 1 provides a conceptual framework for the applied research project. It integrates the Academic Deans and their learning experiences as informed by learning theories to develop an heuristic of leadership coaching.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Applied Research Project



In view of the above, this research addresses a gap in the literature on the learning of Academic Deans who are at the centre of academic decision-making in the institutions of higher education. There may also be implications for coaching for middle leaders in general.

Research Questions

The main purpose of this qualitative research is to understand the lived learning experiences of Academic Deans and then use this understanding to inform a coaching process framework. Based on the literature review and in keeping with the purpose of the research, we have framed the following two questions that guide the study:

- What are the lived learning experiences of Academic Deans that contribute to their role?
- How may the learning experiences of Academic Deans inform the design of a leadership coaching framework for middle leaders?

Research Method

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative method rather than quantitative is appropriate. This study is set in the natural setting of a Middle Eastern University and there is no

attempt to test any hypothesis, prove something or to develop any universal truths – a deductive approach. Rather, this study takes an inductive approach where theory is generated through the analysis of the data (Gray, 2017; Bryman and Bell, 2015). The choice of research method is largely determined by the purpose of the research and in this case, it is about exploring the Academic Deans' learning experiences.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), first developed in health psychology settings (Callary et al., 2015; Roberts, 2013, Larkin, et al., 2011; Smith, et al., 2009), is a research approach for examining how people make sense of and understand their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009) and therefore, it is an approach that is appropriate for this study. Recently, Rajasinghe (2019) confirms this argument that IPA is an appropriate research method for coaching due to its inherent subjectivity and social nature.

According to Benner (1994), these lived experiences are daily routines, habits, activities, practices, and meanings of concern to people as they relate to and interact with their world. Van Manen (1990) suggests that the meaning of a lived experience is usually hidden from the person living it! This is because individuals generally live in an automatic mode of everyday habits. The IPA approach is designed to explore the hidden meanings.

IPA has three theoretical underpinnings and although it is a relatively new research method (Smith et al., 2009), it is informed by long standing research philosophies of phenomenology and hermeneutics (Dahlberg et al., 2008) and ideography (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012).

Phenomenology is the study of human experience from the point of view of the person being studied. Its central tenant is related to intentions, meanings and enabling or contextual conditions. Phenomenology attempts to explore the sense people make of these interacting elements.

Hermeneutics is about the art, or indeed, science of interpretation. According to Ricoeur (1970), hermeneutics is based on two schools of thought. The first being the hermeneutics of empathy and the second being the hermeneutics of suspicion.

The hermeneutics of empathy are related to creating a safe environment where the research participants are able to explore openly their responses to the questions and are helped to make sense of their own interpretations. Arguably, this is similar to the concept behind coaching.

The hermeneutics of suspicion is about offering an external critique or challenge to the interpretation or the meaning an individual may attribute to a phenomenon. It could be understood as an attempt to establish a universal truth through critique.

In this study, it is the experiences of the participants that are privileged through hermeneutic empathy rather than through hermeneutic suspicion. Empathetic hermeneutics is about honouring and respecting the interpretations of the participants and in this way, it is a mirror of coaching philosophy and is therefore appropriate for this study.

Smith et al., (2009) claim that IPA involves double hermeneutics because while participants make sense of their world, the researcher tries to interpret that sense making.

The third theoretical orientation of IPA is that it depends on is ideography. The main idea here is to explore every single case before making any general statements. According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012), "ideography refers to an in-depth analysis of single cases and examining individual perspectives of study participants, in their unique contexts" (p.363).

Some researchers, who have conducted coaching studies, have used IPA as a research approach. For example, Passmore & Mortimer (2011) used IPA to explore the experiences of driving instructors in the UK who were using coaching as a method for novice drivers. They found IPA an

effective approach to explore the potential value of coaching for development of novice drivers. Lech et al. (2017) applied IPA design to understand and explore the experience of PhD students who had received coaching. Dodds & Grajfoner (2018) used an IPA design to explore the interaction between national culture and coaching methods that executive coaches use in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). However, Passmore & Mortimer (2011) caution that while applying IPA design, the researcher must be aware of their own influence and bias and focus on the detailed examination of participant's account. They therefore advocate a neutral objectivity on behalf of the researcher. However, Smith et al. (2009) suggest that qualitative analysis in itself is *interpretative* almost by definition, therefore, in this study, we tend towards Smith et al.'s (2009) position and acknowledge that objectivity is 'a figment of our minds; it does not exist in nature' (Skolimowski, 1992:42) and argue that 'The more central a concept, principle, or skill to any discipline or interdiscipline, the more likely it is to be irregular, ambiguous, elusive, puzzling, and resistant to simple propositional exposition or explanation' (Schulman, 1993). This is the domain that coaches find themselves during coaching encounters.

Data Collection and Analysis

Sample selection is an important issue in qualitative research because it, potentially at least, impacts the quality of research outcomes (Gray, 2017). The legitimacy of any qualitative research is associated with the richness and detail of the data and not to do with the creation of generalised statements about the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2002). In this type of exploratory study, priority is given to the sample that represents the phenomenon of the study and not that of a wide population (Smith, et al., 2009). Additionally, in IPA studies, for example, Wagstaff et al., (2014); Wagstaff and Williams (2014); Roberts (2013); Pietkeiwicz and Smith (2012); Smith, et al., (2009), homogeneity is prioritised. In this study, we follow this tradition.

In this study, the data were collected from two sources. One being through semi-structured interviews of five out of six academic/college Deans of a Middle Eastern university. The sixth Dean had recently been appointed and therefore was not included in the sample because he was too new to the role to have had an opportunity to consider the challenges. To get sufficient depth of insight into the participant's experiences, Smith et al. (2009) suggests that a sample size of five is enough.

The second source of data came from a semi-structured interview with the coach. The coach came from Europe and had previously been an Academic Dean. It was felt that this background experience was necessary in order to help establish the coach's credibility (Ridler 2013, 2016) among the coachees, who were very new to coaching. The purpose of this interview was not to triangulate (an approach associated with suspicious hermeneutics and positivism) but to gain a further perspective, without breach of confidentiality, on the contextual issues affecting the coachees' learning experiences.

In this sense, the full sample of participants was homogenous and follows justifiable the variation of IPA developed by Rajasinghe (2019) where the coach was part of the data collection as well as the coachees.

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and listened to again to improve the accuracy of the transcripts as well as to develop an understanding of the emotional responses of the participants communicated through the tone of voice and speech idioms. The transcriptions were read a further three times to try to fully comprehend the content, language used, including the metaphors, symbols, repetitions, etc. and the context. This stage of the IPA method is shown below in Frame 1.

Frame 1: An extract from interviews with researcher's comments

Original transcript (partial)	Exploratory Comments
Researcher: *How much of your disciplinary background influences your learning style?* *'The way you think about issues is totally different perspective and so I can see the difference. I don't exactly how much of my way of thinking is an outcome of what I learned in school but I can see the difference.'* (D2)	• I look at issues differently due to my disciplinary background • I'm certainly influenced by my discipline but can't quantify it.
'I think yes. I think in my discipline, or in computing, or the way I work in computing is that if I cannot do it, if I cannot understand something, then I don't ask anybody else to do it. I have to understand it first. Maybe because it comes from the background of coding and making programs' (D4)	• I understand and learn through my discipline [computing] • I prefer to learn it my disciplinary way

Identification of Themes

The next stage is to look to identify emerging themes. Although these themes are, in some senses, moving into a higher level of abstraction, they are still grounded in participants' accounts of their lived experiences. This is part of the hermeneutic circle, which, according to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012), "the part is interpreted in relation to the whole and the whole is interpreted in relation to the part".
Frame 2 demonstrates examples of emergent themes.

Frame 2: Examples of developing Emergent Themes

Original transcript (partial)	Emerging Themes
Researcher: *How much of your disciplinary background influences your learning style?* *'The way you think about issues is totally different perspective and so I can see the difference. I don't exactly how much of my way of thinking is an outcome of what I learned in school but I can see the difference.'* (D2) *'I think yes. I think in my discipline, or in computing, or the way I work in computing is that if I cannot do it, if I cannot understand something, then I don't ask anybody else to do it. I have to understand it first. Maybe because it comes from the background of coding and making programs'* (D4)	Disciplinary background influences learning of Deans
Researcher: *How often do you reflect during or post an action?* '*And I think this is really very important learning source. Otherwise if you feel that you always doing the right decisions. Nobody can claim that he's always doing the right decision or the optimum decision.*' (D1) '*I do reflections daily. Sometimes I'm harsh on myself also. Reflection is important especially when the change is fast. You need to always observe things and maybe create a feedback. So, I do this quite often.*' (D5)	Deans are reflective learners

Clustering of Emergent Themes

The emerging themes are then grouped based on their similarities. This involves clustering of emerging (subordinate) themes into super-ordinate themes as show in Frame 3.

Some of the themes lack weight among the sample and were therefore dropped during the clustering exercise.

Frame 3: Clustering of themes

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Role of the Deans is to attract and retain faculty	• Emphasis on the role of faculty • Engage faculty and students • Creating conducive environment for faculty • Dean is talent manager • Ensuring support for faculty • Enabling growth for faculty members
Disciplinary background influences learning of Deans	• Perspective is largely dependent on disciplinary background • Discipline influences though can't quantify it. • Understanding of problems through my discipline • Discipline helps define problems • Discipline helps in analysis of problems
Deans learn by observing behaviours and interactions	• Learn by observing others' behaviours • Observe their reactions - Learning by interaction • 70-80% of my learning is from observing others • I started learning by observing my mother cooking food • My visual instinct is strong • By observing and interacting, I can predict behaviours
Deans are reflective learners	• Reflection is an important source of learning • Reflection helps in arriving at the right decisions • Reflection is my daily routine • Reflection is important when change is fast • It is a feedback for me
Deans think clearly when relaxed	• When relaxed, less influence of factors inhibiting my innovative thinking • Make better decisions when relaxed • Achievement is higher • Better quality when no deadline pressure • Perform important work at night because that's my relaxed time • I'm creative only when relaxed • I enjoy my work when relaxed and therefore experience productive learning

Findings and Discussion

Following this method, five super-ordinate and, to some extent, overlapping themes were created as follows:

- Theme 1: Attract and retain faculty
- Theme 2: Disciplinary background
- Theme 3: Learning by observation
- Theme 4: Reflection
- Theme 5: Think clearly when relaxed

In this section of the paper, we will take these themes and discuss them, with inputs from the interview with the coach who worked with this group and an additional seven Deans or equivalent from within the same university. We also incorporate the literature review within these discussions. The paper concludes with a tentative coaching heuristic framework based on this analysis and discussion.

Theme 1: Attract and retain faculty

Academic Deans play several roles to achieve the mission of their colleges. However, from the interviews, the most critical role identified was to attract and retain faculty members for their colleges. They reported that they find it very challenging to hire colleagues. For example:

> *'So faculty recruitment to me is the most challenging aspect, not only how to recruit but how to take care of the faculty while they are here'* (D1)

Deans in this sample also talked about the challenges they face to recruit and keep the talented professors and researchers who are backbone of a college. This issue was particularly important for research-oriented colleges where faculty members work in teams and other collaborative environments. The participants suggested that these challenges were related, but not only limited to, compensation and benefits, research grants, cultural fit, and career opportunities. In Higher Education (HE), there is a growing competition among colleges to attract and retain academic staff:

> *'It is definitely the recruitment of the right talent, not only attracting but also retaining the right talent within the college so that constitute a lot of efforts not only from me but from the team that is working with me*.' (D5)

This issue is seemingly adding a layer of complexity into the role as well as being a relatively new purpose for the role of a Dean. In line with Wolverton & Wolverton's (1999) comments, this adds to the complexity of the role, for which the Deans may not be equipped. Although most Deans in this study said that they preferred to work with chairs and senior faculty members to make consensus-based decisions (in line with cultural norms in academia), without adequate understanding or support in recruitment, selection and reward processes. The coach indicated that this aspect of the role may be a source of stress and therefore have an impact on the Deans' ability to perform in other areas of their role. Some Deans did not feel equipped to deal with recruitment and retention and had little HR understanding. Another issue is, the cultural norm in HE is to recruit for subject matter expertise and research profile without consideration of the interpersonal fit and commitment to the institution. The dedication that academics have for their subject and for their research can outweigh considerations of commitment to the university, which may compound the problem of retention. This, added to the strong 'power' culture and 'role' focus (Harrison & Stokes, 1992) in this specific context, where people are often appointed rather than apply for roles means that, Deans may feel a responsibility for the retention and recruitment of staff but lack any authority to act independently.

The coach noted that he observed a cultural shift among his coachees where the almost nepotistic tradition, a product of a collectivist culture (Hofstede, 1997) is changing and newer, younger members of the faculty are not necessarily following their fathers into the university and are seeking opportunities elsewhere. This also has the potential to place stresses on the system and on the Deans in particular who are charged with the responsibility of retention and recruitment. Responsibility without authority is a potential source of stress (Garvey, 1994) for leaders.

Clearly, some people handle this type of stress better than others and some feel a greater sense of 'control' than others. The coach, working with this group of people, reported that some wished to discuss health and wellbeing issues which were related to the pressures of the retention and recruitment issues.

Coaching could play a vital role in enabling Deans to 'come to terms' with their situation, reframe or 'transform' their thinking (Mezirow, 1991) so that they come to learn to 'tolerate complexity' (Garvey & Alred, 2001).

Theme 2: Disciplinary background

The interview data shows that the disciplinary background of the Deans makes a profound impact on their approaches to learning. Most of them actively engaged with this question and stated that it enabled them to consider this issue for the first time. All the Deans stated that their disciplinary backgrounds determined how they viewed issues and analysed problems. For example, one, from a multidimensional discipline, believed that he considered issues from several different angles before coming to a conclusion. Another, who compared himself with Deans of different disciplinary background, said:

> *'The way you think about issues is from totally different perspective and so I can see the difference. I don't exactly know how much of my way of thinking is an outcome of what I learned in school but I can see the difference*.' (D2)

Deans with backgrounds in social sciences stated that they tend to think about issues holistically and in 'big picture' terms. One who studied computer science said that his discipline had influenced his ways of learning new things and even teaching. According to him:

> *'I think yes. I think in my discipline, or in computing, or the way I work in computing is that if I cannot do it, if I cannot understand something, then I don't ask anybody else to do it. I have to understand it first. Maybe because it comes from the background of coding and making programs*' (D4)

Given that the main discipline in this university is science and engineering, most Deans said that they were systematic, logical thinkers who always tried to first establish principles and valued quantitative over qualitative analyses to make insightful decisions. Kolb & Kolb (2013) called it a predominately 'converging' approach to learning. Convergent thinkers tend to prefer "technical tasks and problems rather than with social issues and interpersonal issues." (Kolb & Kolb, 2013:13). This is borne out by the coach's experience in working with these people. Some of the challenges presented in the coaching conversations related to the difficulties the coachees had with social and interpersonal issues.

For some, this was an additional source of tension and stress in that they found it difficult to appreciate 'people issues' from a social perspective and tended to think about them in technical ways making it difficult for them to appreciate the political nature of some of their colleagues' behaviours.

This issue has significance for any coaching framework developed for people in this role is that any coach working in HE needs to be cognizant of this. It is necessary for the coach to be able to make use of the coachee's approach to learning in order build rapport and trust, however, challenge is also a part of coaching and the coach also needs to be able to challenge so that the coachee may reframe their thinking and approach (Schon, 1983; Mezirow, 1991; Du Toit, 2007).

The coach reported that, some preferred working with tools, such as 360 questionnaires, numerical data and drawing diagrams helped to appeal to the rational thinking of the coachees and enabled them to engage in thinking rather than through conversation. Some favoured a technical approach to discussing issues, wanting to move to practical solutions rather than wishing to 'explore' an issue.

According to Gray et al. (2016), in coaching, the over emphasis on the technical can drive out the relational aspects and whilst these people have a preference for the technical in the coaching conversations, it is important for the coach to find ways in which the coachees are able to develop their interpersonal and social abilities as leaders. It may also be possible that the coach's background as an Academic Dean may have assisted the development of the relational aspects, either due to the credibility this may bring but also this may be more akin to the dynamics of mentoring in the Stelter (2019) sense.

Clearly, a more extensive study is needed to explore these issues, however, these findings also contribute, albeit in a small way, to Kolb & Kolb's (2013) claim that certain subject disciplines favour certain career choices and occupations.

Theme 3: Learning by observation

Deans interact with many people including faculty, students, staff, peers and other stakeholders inside and outside their colleges. From the interview data, the Deans also seem to learn by

observing peoples' behaviours and then they apply this learning in future interactions in an attempt to improve their own performance. One Dean said:

> *'So I learn from interacting with people by observing people I think I have to see the reaction to my decisions and what I say. This is I learn, because I will modify what I say, what I do in the future*' (D1)

Some of the participants suggested that this relates to their own student times when they would observe teachers in the classrooms and demonstrations in the laboratories and then quickly understand how to do it. As one Dean stated:

> *'I started learning by observing other people. I remember even at very young age, if I see somebody doing something, after seeing him once, I do get a pretty good idea of how it can be done and then I try it myself at my hand and something like that. I see teachers and how they solve questions on the board once and then I'm capable of solving it again.'* (D4)

Some Deans observe and learn from others' behaviours more deeply. According to one Dean:

> *'Definitely I learn by the way they talk, by the way they handle things. It gives me what are the things that will interest them, I think that part is important for me also to work with them and understand how they think.'* (D5)

According to Kolb & Kolb (2013) predominantly visual learners do not tend to learn through verbalization. This presents a challenge to coaches in any context because coaching, according to Cox (2013), "is a facilitated, dialogic learning process." The emphasis on verbalization therefore, may present problems for coachees who are predominantly visual learners. From the point of view of a coaching framework, when working with visual learners, the coach suggested that asking the coachees to reflect on concrete examples that illustrate the issue they wish to discuss and to enable them to visualize and explore situations proved to be a successful approach.

Theme 4: Reflection

Related to and following on from the previous theme, the interview data suggests that most Deans regularly engage in reflection. They report that they find a lot of value in reflection and consider it as one of the important sources of learning. One Dean who evaluates his decisions afterwards, said:

> '*And I think this is really very important learning source. Otherwise if you feel that you always doing the right decisions. Nobody can claim that he's always doing the right decision or the optimum decision*.' (D1)

Another Dean said, he reflects during or immediately after an action. He believes it is important to learn from what has happened and get a deep understanding of it as soon as possible. This may be akin to Freire's (2000) the concept of praxis where there is a movement between action and reflection to help enhance the learners' awareness of the socio-cultural dynamics that may play a major role in their lives. This is an important aspect of developing a leader.

Another Dean uses reflective learning as a feedback system for his actions. He claims:

> '*I do reflections daily. Sometimes I'm harsh on myself also. Reflection is important especially when the change is fast. You need to always observe things and maybe create a feedback. So, I do this quite often.*' (D5)

Some Deans use weekends and/or travel times for reflection time. They want to detach from their routine and sit back and then reflect on the past to learn from it.

From the coach's point of view, the majority of the Deans who were coached demonstrated strong reflective tendencies. The coach reported that this was displayed in the time the coachee took to think before responding to a question and that this was sometimes accompanied by an intake of breath or a 'holding statement' such as 'good question that!' Schon, (1983) emphasizes that the understanding of a context for action is key to effective professional practice. He suggests that together, the reflection in action and experimentation through the application the learner's intuitive practice, based on their experiences helps learners to construct a new theory to work from. As 'theory in practice' tends to be the preferred option for the participants in this study, it is important that a coach is both aware and able to facilitate and accommodate reflection by maintaining patience and silence as appropriate. A coach needs to be able to work in the moment (Bluckert, 2010) with the coachee and adjust their approach. Thus, rendering the use of a rigid process model of coaching inappropriate and highlights the need for a more flexible or 'repertoire' (Garvey et al. 2018) framework for coaches to work from.

Additionally, reflection in complex situations is not necessarily a 'goal oriented' activity rather, it is more about strategies, self-insight and processes. Whilst some participants in this study are influenced by the concept of goals as a result of their preferred approaches to learning, a coach may need to work with the notion of strategies, self-insight and processes 'learning goals' (Seitjs et al., 2004) as discussed previously, rather than specific task goals. Developing a strategic or process orientation may be of more benefit to the middle-leader than a reductionist approach of specific goals in order to break down the task. Mezirow's (1991) notion of holistic orientation is also relevant here. Again, there are implications for coach development here as well as for the development of any flexible coaching framework.

Theme 5: Thinking clearly when relaxed

Related to the previous point on reflection, most participants suggest that they learn at a deeper level when they are relaxed. One Dean said:

> *'When nervous or tense in a meeting, I can't think clearly or make a right decision. Therefore, I postpone the decision making.'*

Another emphasized the need to learn how to relax for clear thinking. Other participants said that they take a pause to relax and come back to discussion to clear their cluttered minds. Deans in this study agreed that they enjoy their work and are more creative when relaxed.

As one Dean said:

> *'I learn more when I'm relaxed. Because when I'm under pressure and tension, I don't get that freedom of exploring the different aspects*.' (D4)

The coach observed that some of the coachees were late for the coaching sessions. They arrived in a state of slight panic and were very apologetic and agitated. When discussing this observation in the coaching session, the coach noticed that some cultural issues related to power were evident. On most occasions, they had been summoned to see a more senior person. One Dean, who was not part of the interview programme said:

> '*When the boss calls, you go, whatever you are doing.'*

For some, the coaching sessions helped the Deans to develop coping strategies for this issue through diary management techniques to protect their time and enable a better state of relaxed alertness to develop. In some cases, the coach indicated that Du Toit's (2007) notion of 'supportive challenge' may be an appropriate way to facilitate transformative change.

Deans in this study reported that they achieve more in less time when they work mindfully (Kets de Viries, 2014; Langer,1989). They are more productive and focused and see complex issues more clearly.

Decision making is a major part of a Dean's responsibility and this group of Deans stated that they value the relaxed mindset. According to a Dean:

> '*But when you are relaxed, it means you minimized the influence of other factors. I think when I'm relaxed my thinking becomes clearer and that definitely helps learning and decision making*.' (D5)

According to the coach, some of the Deans were not dealing with stress very well. They were drinking excessive amounts of coffee, not exercising, smoking heavily and not sleeping or staying up late at night. The coach identified some individual concerns about the Deans' personal health and wellbeing.

As discussed in the previous theme, reflection is an important process and reflection tends to be associated with the notion of 'calm space' or mindfulness. It is also here that again, Mezirow's (1991) notion of holistic orientation and the awareness of authenticity within a given context become important. For learning to become truly transformative, the learner needs to reframe their perspectives and become more engaged in life with a sense of self-direction and purpose (Knowles et al., 1998). This becomes possible within a relaxed and reflective environment. Taken with reflection, these two elements contribute to satisfying at least two elements of Roger's (1989) 'core conditions for learning'.

As seen above, the contextual and cultural issues of power distance, masculinity, collectivism and role orientation (Harrison & Stokes, 1992; Handy, 1993) there are potential problems for the Deans. The cultural environment, as previously discussed, could create a sense of powerlessness or a lack of personal control as well as a feeling of intense loyalty to the leaders. This was an observation reported by the coach. For some, particularly those recently educated at doctorate level in the USA, Canada or the UK, where there are different culture norms, the current cultural practices within the university are a source of stress and may create health and well-being issues. Others, seem able to cope with the complexity and accept the cultural norms without creating stresses. Through the creation of a calm and

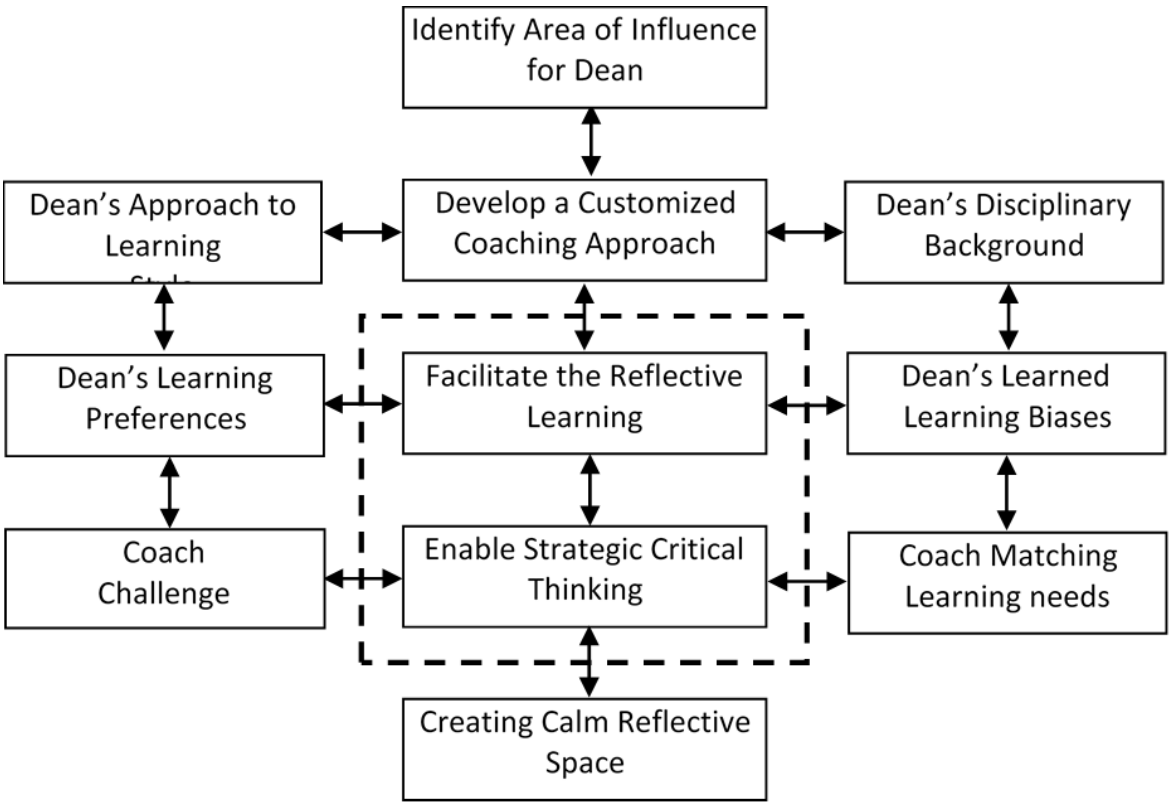
reflective space in the coaching sessions, the coach reported that some of the Deans did make transformative change in relation to personal habits and behaviours.

Overall, a flexible coaching framework needs to be cognizant of these possibilities.

Heuristic Framework for Coaching

As Knowles (1980) argues, the above discussed are the conditions in which adults learn at their best. In taking some of these theories and combining them with an understanding of their role, their context and their experiences, we attempt a description of the main elements that may constitute an heuristic framework for coaching predominantly convergent learners in HE but this may also have applications for middle leaders in general. Keeping in the introduction to this paper, this framework, as presented in Figure 2, offers an alternative to the basic competency framework and acts more as a decision-making process to enable the coach to develop more of a dyadic dialogue (Stelter, 2019). This is more like a hybrid between mentoring and coaching or a 'repertoire' Garvey et al. 2018) approach.

Figure 2: A learning informed heuristic



The main elements of the heuristic framework include:

1. Working from an understanding of what a Dean may feel they can influence and what they think they can directly control in their context.
2. Being aware of and adjusting the coaching approach to suit the learning style of the Dean.
3. Being aware that certain disciplines prefer the technical over the social and interpersonal.
4. Being prepared to 'work in the moment' and adjust
5. Being aware that coaching is primarily a dialectic process and that Deans may prefer the opportunity to visualize through diagrams, visualization techniques or practical examples.
6. Being aware that the technical mindset may prefer the coach to use tools such as questionnaires, 360, numerical data and diagrams in order to provide 'objective data'.
7. Being aware of the use of and the difference between specific goals and learning goals and enabling the Dean to develop strategic critical thinking.
8. Helping to create a calm reflective space to enable the Dean to relax and reflect.

Whilst the above list is not exhaustive, it represents a research and learning informed framework relevant to this specific group of people. It may also have transferrable elements into other middle leader contexts. In Figure 2, the arrows indicate that, for the coach constant and regular monitoring and critical reflection on the coaching encounters is essential. The dotted box represents the central person of leadership coaching. This study is exploratory and more extensive work is needed to develop a more complete framework.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to develop a flexible coaching framework to fill in the gaps in the conceptual framework that we introduced at the start. It is clear from this study, both the interview data and the coach's data, that the role of a Dean is complex and that they are not necessarily equipped to deal with the complexity. On one hand as Aasen & Bjorn (2007) argue, training for Deans may be helpful, particular around the issue of recruitment, selection and retention. On the other hand, coaching offers an individualized leadership development that is contextual, potentially applicable, and relevant.

Implications for Practice

This study raises important issues for coach development. Currently, the dominant model of coach development, as advocated by the professional associations including International Coach Federation (ICF) and European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), is a training-based competence approach. This has two problems. The first is that a training philosophy is one that prespecifies outcomes and delivers content to meet those prespecified outcomes. Garvey (2016) argues that this approach has its attractions in 'accelerating the journey' and satisfying quality issues but that it fails to adequately take into account the complexities of human interactions, learning styles and contexts; it is a linear approach to learning.

The second issue is similar. A competence based approach is reductionist by definition and to argue that human interactions as complex as coaching, for example, may be reduced to simple codes is limiting. Barnett (1994: 73) argues that: 'the notion of competence is concerned with predictable behaviours in predicable situations'. Given the complexities of the coachee's situation and of coaching itself, this is a worrying observation. This study and resultant framework provides some evidence that coaching is far from predictable and is complex. The context and the individual needs focussed consideration. This framework highlights the areas of focus for a coach identified in this study.

Implications for Research

Clearly, more research into the dynamics of coaching relationships and the coaching process is needed. It is important to move away from the evaluative studies that dominate (Gray, et al 2016; Garvey et al 2018) and start to develop insights in to the complexities of coaching with different purposes and within different contexts to enable a more sophisticated, learning informed coaching process which may enable coaches to become better facilitators of dyadic dialogue (Stelter, 2019).

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