

Academic Paper

# Coaching in a Higher Education Institution in the Middle East: Reflections on the Obstacles and the Way Forward

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## Abstract

Coaching is widely adopted by various types of organizations in order to facilitate the achievement of personal, professional and organisational goals. This case study of a coaching programme in a private higher education institution (HEI) in Oman, aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, identify the challenges encountered by the participants, and provide recommendations to design coaching programmes that are sensitive to participants' contexts. Participants were senior and mid-level leaders in academic and professional services departments in the institution. Focus group discussions involving coaches and written feedback from coachees informed the evaluation process. The participants affirmed the effectiveness of the coaching programme in building professional capacity but also drew attention to a number of barriers such as cultural aspects and trust issues. Few studies have investigated the effectiveness of coaching in Middle Eastern HEIs and therefore this case study may provide unique contextual insights to other HEIs in the region.

## Keywords

coaching, higher education institution, Middle East, obstacles, solutions

## Article history

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## Introduction

Coaching involves the process of future focused dialogue in which a facilitator (coach) and a participant (client/coachee) engage in open dialogue, active listening, and reflection, aiming to stimulate the self-awareness and personal responsibility of the participant (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). A number of studies have recognized the importance of coaching as a performance enhancement tool (Bachkirova et al., 2010; Gormley & van Nieuwerburgh, 2014). Coaching creates a culture where the coach engages in dialogue with optimism and purpose with the coachee to potentially encourage self-efficacy, openness, and reflectiveness. When practised consistently,

coaching results in mutual respect and trust, and supports personal and organizational development and growth (Burt & Talati, 2017).

Although the differences between coaching and mentoring are blurred, some theorists (Lancer, Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2016) have attributed a career development focus to certain mentoring models with the mentor being experienced and knowledgeable in a particular area. Coaching models such as developmental coaching (Lancer, Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2016; similar to 'developmental mentoring'), and cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2015), on the other hand, are characterised by a focus on individuals, their aspirations and the development of self-efficacy, although the coach may have some advice or knowledge to share with their coachees. It would, therefore, be possible to place coaching and mentoring on a continuum and when viewed from this perspective, it is impossible to dichotomize the two. However, the study reported in this paper can be situated towards the developmental or cognitive coaching end of this continuum.

The benefits of the cognitive model of coaching are well-acknowledged (Batt, 2010; Costa & Garmston, 2015; Gyllensten et al., 2010) for its effectiveness in nurturing "self-directed learning" through the use of several techniques involving insightful questions, paraphrasing and pauses. It has been described by Costa and Garmston (2015, p. 13) as an approach whose purpose is to "to enhance and habituate self-directed learning: self-management, self-monitoring and self-modifying". The emphasis on self-improvement as well as the focus on community are the unique features of Cognitive Coaching which may be the reason why it is preferred over other models.

Although various coaching models and their implementation have been discussed in the literature, the constraints of implementing effective coaching programmes are well known. Various inhibiting factors have been discussed including cultural differences and inappropriate coaching techniques, the lack of suitable and qualified coaches, the non-availability of time for both participants, and the inability to build trust in coaching relationships (Hakro & Mathew, 2020; Starr, 2004). Organizations who adopt this approach strive to train staff, provide equitable opportunities, and motivate staff to be part of the programme. This requires considerable time, skills, resources along with adequate planning and commitment from management (Stewart-Lord, Baillie & Woods, 2017).

The success of each coaching model may vary with different levels of impact on individuals and on the performance of organizations. Coaching has often been referred to as an 'art' (Bird and Gornall, 2015) and its effectiveness is associated with several factors ranging from design, context, the implementation process, and the evaluation of such interventions (Gray, Garvey & Lane, 2016). Several studies have conducted a systematic evaluation based on feedback to gauge the effectiveness of coaching as an effective tool, exploring the obstacles or the supporting factors (Connor 2017; Desimone & Pak, 2017; Thach, 2002).

Evidence suggests that several educational institutions that have embraced coaching programmes have succeeded in their objectives to nurture leadership skills, improve performance through professional and career development, and promote the growth and development of the organization (Jones et al., 2016; Netolicky, 2016). However, a review of the literature revealed that adoption of coaching programmes in Middle Eastern HEIs is not very common and given the findings regarding the effectiveness of this intervention in Western educational contexts, there is a critical need to examine coaching practices in this region. Therefore, the description of the coaching programme at Middle East College (MEC) in Oman should be an interesting case study, contributing to the coaching literature.

## **The Case**

Middle East College is one of the largest private institutions of higher education in the Sultanate of Oman. Established in 2002, the institution is committed to building appropriate leadership models, promoting organizational development, and providing coaching programmes to its staff members to

realize these aims. The coaching programme was designed and implemented for MEC staff in collaboration with academic partners in the UK under the title of 'Leadership Development Programme'. Its aim was to encourage the personal and professional development of its staff, nurture leadership skills, and thus promote organizational development.

The current paper is designed to evaluate the impact of coaching interventions introduced in one of the HEIs in Oman. The programme was offered to the academic and professional services staff with the objective of fulfilling the organization's learning and developmental needs, including the identification and preparation of leaders. It was delivered over the duration of one academic year, culminating in the internal coaches completing their certificate courses from Chartered Management Institute, UK.

The leadership programme, aimed at mid and senior-level leaders, was designed in two phases. External coaches trained by the Chartered Management Institute, UK (CMI) facilitated these sessions. The first phase of the programme involved 360 feedback sessions, a three-day intensive workshop series, and lectures. The 360 feedback process enables

"collecting, quantifying, and reporting coworker observations about an individual (i.e., a ratee) that facilitates/enables ... the collection of rater perceptions of the degree to which specific behaviors are exhibited...the analysis of meaningful comparisons of rater perceptions...the creation of sustainable individual, group, and/or organizational changes in behaviors valued by the organization" (Bracken, Rose & Church, 2016, p. 764).

In the second phase, 10 selected individuals from the first phase of the programme received training as internal coaches (Phase Two) and in turn, coached the other participants who had completed Phase One of the programme. They were offered a certificate course from CMI, UK as part of their training as internal coaches. The course was delivered through face to face contact classes and workshops delivered by certified CMI experts. Support for those registered on the course was also extended through online tutoring and feedback sessions. Learning materials were shared and assignment submissions were managed through an e-learning management tool. The ten selected participants in the second phase of the programme were assigned two to three coachees each. The authors of this paper also participated in the second phase of the programme. Hence, they are in the unique position of bringing an emic perspective to this study as they were first-hand observers as well as participants. Both the authors have been working in this organization for almost a decade. This ethnographic flavour contributed towards a valid framework within which they could analyse and interpret the findings of the current study.

The implementation of the programme was designed to introduce the coaching culture into the day to day management practices and activities of participants. The paper evaluates the impact of the programme intervention, measured against the defined objectives of the programme and the individual assessment of the participants. The current study identifies the factors, which hindered or helped in the implementation of the programme. The paper also assesses the overall impact on participant behaviors through coaching. The evaluative case study approach adopted in this study should provide insights into the effectiveness of coaching programmes in Middle Eastern HEIs and the unique contextual factors at play during their design and implementation. The paper further evaluates some of the reflections and feedback of the participants. The major contribution of this paper, among others, would be that it is among the first studies of its kind reporting on coaching interventions in HEIs in the region.

The rest of the paper contains a review of the literature followed by the methods employed to address the objectives. Key findings are then discussed and some recommendations are proposed to address some of the obstacles identified in the implementation of the coaching programme at this HEI.

## Literature Review

Coaching and mentoring have been differentiated as two approaches towards the facilitation of personal and professional development. As Thomson (2013, p. 207) points out, “coaching sits towards the non-directive end while mentoring is towards the directive end”. A review of studies that have attempted to evaluate the impact of coaching programmes on individuals and organizations have revealed that the outcome of coaching could yield long-term benefits for participants (Franklin & Franklin, 2012; Starr, 2004). Studies have also been undertaken to measure the impact of coaching on specific aspects of personal and professional development such as leadership skills (Corner, 2017). For example, Le Comte and McClelland (2016) investigated the effects of implementing a coaching and mentoring programme among about 400 staff members engaged in the health services in New Zealand. The programme aimed to develop a distributed leadership style, promote professional and personal development, and encourage positive relationships. Using surveys and semi-structured interviews, they found positive leadership behavior changes, increased retention rates, and better networking.

Educational institutions have also realized the potential benefits of coaching for all their stakeholders. As Knight and van Nieuwerburgh (2012, p. 10) point out, “there is growing consensus about the potential of coaching in education”. In a case study conducted in a secondary school in New Zealand, Anso (2010) reports on the impact of coaching on the HOD and staff of a department. The study reports the impact of the initiative taken by one HOD who applied the principles of coaching to herself and her department. Reflections on how a coaching approach helped to develop a teaching strategy, and its impact on staff participants who may be resistant to change are insightful for other educational contexts, both in terms of teaching strategies and professional development.

In the higher education context, Thomson (2012) reports on the implementation of a coaching programme in the University of Warwick, UK. Participation in the programme was voluntary and open to academics, and administrative and commercial staff. The participants were given three one-day workshops, four coaching sessions, and an option to receive 360 degree feedback from their subordinates and other colleagues. The benefits that were observed were that this programme facilitated networking among different groups of staff members and also allowed them to share successful initiatives. However, Thomson (2012) reports that even though some coaching relationships were very productive, some were not successful after a few initial meetings. This model of coaching described by Thomson (2012) seemed to have had partial success judging by the success of some coaching relationships and the continuation of communication among those participants who had embraced the coaching culture. It could have possibly been improved if it had received board-level endorsement or if it had been an institution-wide initiative, which was systematically implemented.

Many other studies of coaching implemented in higher education institutions have reported some encouraging results (Lofthouse, 2019; van Nieuwerburgh, 2018). Geber (2010) reports the substantial improvement in the research output of early career researchers at a university in Johannesburg, as a result of implementing internal coaching sessions for participants. Bertrand (2019) reports on the beneficial impact of coaching on academic deans and other senior leaders in American universities. These benefits were perceived not only in the professional development of the deans who participated but also on a personal level by improving their empathetic behaviour and self-awareness.

Lochmiller (2014) points out that coaching is essential for nurturing leadership skills among leaders in educational institutions, especially given the complexity of such contexts. Based on her empirical studies of leadership coaching in several and varied educational contexts, Robertson (2016) emphasizes its importance in meeting the needs of educational leaders and its effectiveness in equipping leaders with the skills they require to work collaboratively with their colleagues. These

studies have all pointed to the beneficial impact of coaching in the higher education sector, impacting many stakeholders, ranging from students to deans of universities. However, these programmes are all implemented in Western universities with one exception. There is a marked lack of evidence on the adoption of coaching as a practice in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Middle East and North African region. Barring an exception (Hakro & Mathew, 2020), the authors could not find any relevant literature on coaching in the region. The nonexistence of literature is quite understandable, as coaching as a practice is relatively new in this region.

Several feedback mechanisms have been adopted by studies on coaching, ranging from questionnaires to reflective accounts based on the literature, focus-group discussions (Connor, 2017; Lofthouse, 2019) and semi-structured interviews. Rossi and Freeman (1993, p. 5) define evaluation as the “systematic application of social research procedures in assessing the conceptualization and design, implementation and utility of social intervention Programs.” The nature of the coaching process can perhaps be best evaluated through qualitative analyses and through insightful reflections rather than strict scientific procedures adopted in social science research procedures (Rossi and Freeman, 1993).

Kirkpatrick (1998) differentiates between different levels of evaluation criteria or segments such as reaction, learning, behaviour and results. Kraiger et al. (1993), on the other hand, emphasized cognitive, skill-based and affective outcomes in evaluation. There is an ongoing debate on how to evaluate coaching and mentoring programmes and the recommendations are substantial (Ely et al., 2010; Ely and Zaccaro, 2011; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). Ely and Zaccaro (2011) suggest antecedent and the contextual variables in the evaluation of programme outcomes. Wanberg et al. (2003) propose the evaluation of individual improvements in skills, leadership behaviour and style, efficient personal and self-management, team leadership and management of complementary tasks, and conflict management. Hayes and Kalmakis, (2007) recommend active engagement in research as a measure of coaching effectiveness. Gray (2004) has recommended several approaches for evaluation including the case study approach based on interviews and qualitative data evaluation.

The results of such evaluations are encouraging. Several studies (Ammentorp et al., 2013, Stewart-Lord, et al., 2017, van Oorsouw et al., 2014) have revealed that both coaches and coachees were able to develop professionally and personally and demonstrate enthusiasm to engage in shared activities and professional development opportunities. Such positive evaluations are also reported in studies of coaching programmes in educational institutions (Gray, 2018, Iordanou, Leach & Barnes, 2015). Ely et al. (2010) suggest that the coach and coachee relationship played a key role in the success of the coaching experience.

Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) identified different research methodologies for evaluating coaching programmes and noted that the qualitative approach has a very significant and valuable role in understanding the richness of human interactions. Sinclair and colleagues (2007) used group and telephonic interviews for evaluation. They report a number of personal benefits, a heightened sense of motivation and enthusiasm, and enhancement in the abilities of participants to deal with the challenges and frustrations encountered in the work place.

Although most of these studies have used various evaluation mechanisms, their findings indicate that the coaching process yields significant positive outcomes. The discussion of the literature in this section has clearly revealed a gap in the availability of research on coaching practices in HEIs in the Middle East although the adoption of coaching by HEIs and its benefits for personal, professional and organisational improvement have been acknowledged. The extent to which the objectives of the programme were achieved and the potential obstacles to be overcome, based on the evaluation of participant feedback in specific contexts will corroborate previous findings as well as uncover new dimensions such as cultural factors which will yield insights into the supporting as well as the inhibiting factors underpinning a coaching programme in a particular setting. In this context, case studies of coaching programmes in HEIs in countries in the Middle East, such as



Oman will provide insights into whether they yield the same benefits as these countries, which are far-removed geographically and culturally from their Western counterparts.

## Methodology

### Context of the case study

Middle East College (MEC) is an educational institution in the Sultanate of Oman which has recently adopted and implemented an organized coaching programme for its mid- and senior level leaders, both from academic as well as professional services departments. More than 20 senior and mid-level managers participated in the programme.

### Approach

This study adopted a qualitative and evaluative case study approach, with an interpretive or constructive epistemological perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This aligns with recommendations in the literature about the adoption of a case study approach to the evaluation of coaching programmes (Gray 2004), especially since the examination of socio-cultural variables in a context that has not been studied exhaustively need a qualitative lens. Qualitative data collection tools were employed such as focus group observations and the evaluation of feedback forms in line with some previous studies (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011; Sinclair et al., 2007).

The authors bring 'emic' perspectives to this investigation as they are both participants in the coaching programme; hence the 'thick' descriptions of the context and the participants lend it an ethnographic flavour. Ten coaches and seven coachees who participated in the coaching programme at MEC participated in this study. Participant information sheets and consent forms were distributed by the two researchers to the participants. They were advised of their right to opt for withdrawal from this study at any point of time. Participants were also assured that their identities would be anonymized and that the data would be safely stored on a private password-protected computer. The Ethics and Biosafety Committee of the institution approved the purpose and objectives of the current study and the data collection methods used, such as focus group discussions (FGDs) with coaches and feedback forms were used to gather feedback from the coachees. The coachees' permission was sought to quote their responses in the feedback forms after removing any information that would reveal their identities.

### Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

The FGD approach was adopted because this study attempts to obtain insights from a group of participants who might engage in meaningful conversations about the topic in a group setting, sharing ideas and practices. As Hennink (2013) explains: "Perhaps the most unique characteristic of focus group research is the interactive discussion through which data are generated, which leads to a different type of data not accessible through individual interviews. During the group discussion participants share their views, hear the views of others, and perhaps refine their own views in light of what they have heard" (pp. 2-3).

A focus-group discussion was held with the coaches after they had completed coaching sessions every month from August 2017 until July 2018. In the meantime, a number of informal discussions on professional issues connected with the implementation plan of coaching and the various aspects of the coaching scheme at MEC were held in the Staff Lounge of the institution. The venue of the FGD was the Staff Lounge which was chosen for its informal setting. The 10 participants were informed in advance of the time and venue. The two authors who acted as moderators during the discussion decided that it was necessary to limit the discussions so that the objectives of the

current study could be addressed within the time constraints. The coaches recounted the discussions that occurred during the coaching sessions and the feedback received from the participants. The discussion points mainly fell into three categories: 1) participants' experiences, perceptions, expectations, personal development and their impact on the organisation; 2) nature of the obstacles encountered and; 3) recommendations to address the issues identified. The discussions were then noted, recorded, transcribed, summarized and 'member-checked' to ensure accuracy in reporting the findings. Since the participants were well-known to the authors and considering their small number, their feelings were comparatively easy to judge from their interactions as well as their body language.

## Feedback Forms

The feedback forms were designed to gather information from coachees about the effectiveness of coaching sessions and their recommendations to enhance them. The first feedback form was administered to coachees after the first three coaching sessions and the second round of feedback was collected at the end of the coaching programme in July 2018 (see Appendix 1). The feedback forms consisted mostly of open-ended questions with a few Likert-scale type of questions. The first form was designed to collect some preliminary impressions from coachees regarding their coaching experience and to invite suggestions to improve the sessions. Delivered at the end of the programme, the second round of feedback was intended to gather the personal reflections of the coachees and capture the extent to which the targets and the achievements of the programme were achieved, the overall success of the programme, and other parameters: building rapport, the support provided by the coach, the climate of inclusiveness, trust, and integrity or lack of it, and the extent to which sharing of experience, knowledge, and motivation occurred. The parameters were judged based on a scale of 1 to 5 from strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, to agree and strongly agree.

The main themes underlying the data were identified independently by the two authors by reading the transcripts of the focus group discussions and the analysis of the responses provided in the feedback forms by the coachees. The data analysis process involved rearranging the comments in response to each discussion point. The authors then re-read the transcripts carefully in order to identify the main themes and sub-themes that occurred under each category.

The notes and transcripts of data were coded based on the themes identified a priori as well as any emerging themes or sub-themes. For example, the discussions relating to the obstacles to the implementation of the coaching programme were identified first and later, the types of obstacles were identified as sub-themes. The data transcripts were relatively small and hence they were manually analysed. High inter-rater reliability was achieved in the coding of data through multiple rounds of discussions between the authors.

## Results and Discussion

All the coaches and coachees conveyed the impression that the coaching sessions were friendly and non-intimidating, providing evidence of personal rapport. This may perhaps be attributed to the training of the internal coaches and the attitude of the coaches in general which is captured in one senior manager's comment: "MEC leadership believes that learning is highly contextual and personal in its nature and coaching is... a process that should be inclusive, innovative in its nature, and one which empowers learning."

Another manager added that:

"Coaching creates a culture in which the full value of employees' strengths and talents are being unlocked and the onus is on the employees themselves to take responsibility for finding

the solutions to their problems.”

One coach spoke about his coachee who was able to realize his potential through self-reflection and interactions with his coach, stating that the “coaching sessions helped him realize that he could initiate several enhancements and potentially further his career in the organization”. These reflections reveal that the coaching philosophy of these internal coaches echo the models espoused as effective in Western educational contexts (Robertson, 2016).

This discussion was picked up by another coach who felt that, as a coach, he was clear about his approach: to build trust and rapport with the coachees in one-on-one sessions, provide support to the coachees to reflect on their strengths and limitations, create an enabling environment of inclusiveness, listen actively, and share experience and knowledge to achieve self-directed learning. This coach’s reflection echoes the findings reported in various studies (Cox, 2012; de Haan & Gannon, 2017; Ely et al., 2010; Ianaro, Schermuly, & Kauffeld, 2013) about the importance of coach-coachee relationships for coaching success.

It is apparent from these responses that the coaches let the coachees take the lead and had confidence in their coachees’ potential. This stance adopted by the coaches may have contributed to the building up of rapport in the coach-coachee relationships. The formal agreement between coaches and coachees to keep the sessions confidential and to be open to discussion of all areas of the 360 feedback may have also played a part in enhancing trust. It must be mentioned here that these coaching behaviours were encouraged and practised during the training of the internal coaches at MEC. Most of the coaches reported that after each session, action plans were discussed in order to gauge progress.

Two coaches spoke about the effectiveness of the 360 feedback on their coaching sessions during the FGDs. One of them reflected that the coachees were relatively open to discussion regarding the issues raised in their 360 feedback. This attitude helped them identify areas of concern and devise strategies and alternative ways to handle these issues.” This was supported by another coach who believed that the 360 feedback provided both the coach and the coachee with a starting point as the latter was convinced of the legitimacy of such multi-level and objective feedback and the need to act upon it. These themes regarding the effectiveness of the 360 feedback and clarity about the objectives of the coaching sessions were echoed in the feedback forms filled by the coachees at the beginning and end of the programme. One coachee’s response was that the coach provided an ideal environment to introspect on the strengths, limitations and ambiguous areas in the 360 feedback evaluation. Another mentioned that the sessions were helpful in aligning personal and organization goals and optimizing team effectiveness. One participant’s (coachee) response was that

“....based on the 360 feedback, during the coaching sessions, I was able to introspect on my strengths, limitations, engage with my manager’s, peers’, and subordinates’ view points and take corrective actions”.

Another coachee responded that “the discussions with my coach helped me formulate a plan to address my weaknesses which were identified in the 360.” The type of goal-focussed coaching approach discussed here, which Grant (2014) identifies as an important predictor for coaching success, has apparently been facilitated by the 360 feedback. This feedback suggests that the coaches had deployed some effective coaching techniques in line with the cognitive model (Costa & Garmston, 2015) such as active listening, goal setting and promotion of introspection so that coachees had the space to reflect and develop solutions to issues that were identified in the 360 feedback.

Most coachee responses in the second round of feedback indicate that the majority of respondents strongly agree that there was a quick building of rapport during the initial sessions. There was a similar positive trend in their responses regarding the encouraging attitude of the coach, the



effectiveness of the sessions to identify and achieve goals, and the values of trust, integrity and honesty that guided the relationship. The criticality of building trust and rapport for achieving coaching success has been widely acknowledged in the literature (Cox, 2012; de Haan & Gannon, 2017) and it is no surprise that this theme emerged from the coachee responses. One coachee's response indicated that she was not sure about whether integrity and trust were a part of the coaching sessions. This opinion was echoed by a coach who pointed out that the different cultural backgrounds of the coach and coachee may be factors inhibiting the building of trust and rapport in coaching relationships. Another coach echoed the same sentiments adding that the coach-coachee dyads need to be carefully paired as cultural differences are particularly sensitive for many of the participants. Perhaps this facet of coaching has emerged because of the unique context of this HEI which is located in the Middle East.

Overall, the participants' feedback suggests that the impact of the coaching programme was positive although there might have been a few exceptions as well as a few challenges, which affected the achievement of coaching objectives. The findings of the FGDs and the feedback from the coachees indicate that the outcomes were consistent with the objectives of the programme, including personal development of the participants which, in turn, would lead to organizational development. The increased level of reflection and clarity in purpose and thinking, improved confidence, better problem solving skills, improvement in sharing of practice, communication and relationship-building, positive attitudes towards professional and career development, in addition to self-learning and development were the most important benefits that were identified by the participants. At an organizational level, the rewards include the enhancement of a reflective and collaborative culture, and personal and professional development.

## **Obstacles and constraints**

Despite the positive aspects, which were apparent through the feedback on the coaching exercises, a number of obstacles and constraints were observed in its implementation. Some of the common obstacles that were identified from the analysis of the FGDs and the feedback forms could be broadly categorised under four themes: (1) a general lack of time to engage in coaching, especially amidst hectic schedules; (2) culture and trust issues; (3) an inability to build sustainable coaching models when immediate benefits were not evident and; (4) a lack of rapport and trust in a certain cultural and corporate ecosystem where coachees perceived the coach as a threat when they were direct reports or if they belonged to an unfamiliar culture. Some of these barriers such as trust and time issues have already been discussed in the literature (Wilson, 2011). However, the cultural undercurrents which are the unique characteristic of an HEI in this context, perhaps, might not have been covered in previous studies.

### **General lack of understanding of the value of coaching for the organization**

There was a general perception among all the coaches that there was a lack of clear understanding about the value of the coaching exercise. One coach reflected that "most of the participants were neither aware of its value nor its benefits, at least initially." One of the coaches added to this discussion saying that his coachee:

"was not able to make sense of the exercise. He was not clear initially as to how the organization's corporate strategy is aligned to the department or individual goals. This changed over time".

Another coach reflected that his coachees also "took a considerable amount of time to open up and engage in meaningful conversations. However, I noticed that the participants over time have realized its value". Although this factor regarding the purpose of the coaching exercise was initially identified as a constraint, it is evident that most of the participants were fairly clear about the purpose of the programme after a few initial sessions. The correlation between goal-setting and coaching success (Grant, 2014) is evident from these reflections.

### **Lack of time and skills**

There was a general perception among both coaches and coachees about the lack of available time to engage in meaningful coaching conversations. Most of the coaches and coachees were working under a tight schedule and were busy with the day to day activities of their institutional duties. It was apparent in the responses from the FGDs and the feedback that participants often struggled to reserve the time and energy to participate in coaching sessions. The mid- and senior-level leaders who took part in the coaching programme are extremely busy during certain months of the year. For example, academic leaders are extremely pressed for time during the semester until the announcement of results while for staff members from Registry, the peak time would be during student enrolment.

Another major theme that emerged during the FGDs was with regard to the training received by the coaches. For many, it was their first experience of coaching and therefore, in spite of the fact that the coaches were completing a professional certification course from Chartered Management Institute, they did not feel very confident about their techniques. One coach observed that “it was my first opportunity to engage as a coach. The concept is relatively new at MEC, I have struggled to gain the coaching skills and techniques...the coaches at MEC still need additional training for reinforcement of coaching skills”. Another remarked,

“a number of coaching challenges were noticed; however, success and learning depends on the ability of the coaches and coachees to encourage shared learning and knowledge, practice coaching techniques, and engage in open communication.”

From the responses during the FGDs, it appeared that coaches felt that the internal coach training programme might not have prepared them sufficiently to handle certain unique problems that may arise in this context, such as the issues surrounding a multi-cultural coach-coachee dyad. However, most of the coaches seemed to have worked through the problems although there were a couple of participants who were sceptical about the effectiveness of coaching sessions when the issue of culture was brought up. The need for continuous investment of time and reflection into coaching relationships is relevant here (de Haan & Gannon 2017; Ianaro et al., 2013), for building coaching relationships that are characterised by trust, transparency and rapport.

### **Insufficient reward and recognition**

Many coaches proposed that the participants of the programme should be made aware that their engagement in coaching was linked with the performance management system, carrying a clear message of incentive, rewards and recognition within the system. The coaches felt that although the coachees perceived a vague association of successful coaching with rewards, it was not strongly aligned and explicit enough to motivate participants.

### **Coach-Coachee Pairing**

In a multi-cultural organization like MEC, it is essential that senior leaders be sensitive to the cultural nuances that surround any professional relationship, which involves two people from different ethnicities and nationalities. Sometimes even more than culture, disciplinary background or simply a lack of trust between two individuals, could inhibit the coaching process. Leaders at MEC, therefore, need to consult both the coaches and the coachees to make sure that both are comfortable in their roles before assigning their roles. As one coach observed during the FGD,

“I have observed during the initial piloting of the coaching programme that many individuals were quite skeptical of their coaches mainly because they did not know them very well or because academic and professional services staff were paired.”

It appears that many of the problems related to coach-coachee pairings can be eliminated if the participants are consulted beforehand and the leadership is sensitive and considerate to individual

preferences and sensibilities. These findings point to the criticality of appropriate coach-coachee pairings, without which the coaching culture might become a superficial and unsustainable culture, which does not actually permeate into every level and activity of the organization. Again, trust and relationships are a recurrent theme in this coaching context.

One positive outcome of proper pairing could be the development of a “collaborative and distributed leadership approach” (Le Comte & Beverley McClelland, 2016 p. 318) in MEC. This type of leadership can be fostered by coaches who understand that today’s organisations cannot be sustained by a few recognized leaders but by networks and professional relationships. Leaders in MEC who have undergone formal training with external coaches can help their coachees overcome their inhibitions about communicating with their ‘bosses’ and develop as leaders through active listening and encouragement to explore new ideas in order to help them set challenging but reachable goals. It has been acknowledged (Nicolson, 2015) that this approach encourages people to take responsibility for their actions and develop their critical thinking skills to solve problems instead of looking up to one person to lead. MEC will be the richer for nurturing this type of leadership style which can only be inculcated by trained coaches who are also the current leaders of the organization.

### **Commitment of the leadership**

One of the major challenges is that top management should be committed to the purpose of the coaching and its implementation at MEC, one coach noted. He stated that:

“the management has also tried to be supportive, encouraging and motivating so that the employees can participate in the process and show their commitment to the longer term goals of sustainable growth and competitive advantage”.

It is very important that participants should have access to coaching tools, its applications and facilities for deployment, which can only be made possible through board-level endorsement. This theme of support from the management is a recurring one in the literature (Stewart-Lord, Baillie & Woods, 2017) and is apparently a critical aspect that influences the effectiveness of coaching programmes.

### **Overcoming the obstacles**

Working with the participants, key strategies to address the obstacles in the implementation of the coaching programme identified were discussed. One coach reflected that an early engagement with the coachee was the key strategy. He also emphasized the importance of clear articulation of the purpose of coaching and its links with performance and individual development and organizational goals”. The need for forging effective coaching relationships and goal-setting were recurrent themes brought up by both partners. Another solution put forward was to let the coachee direct the conversations, in line with the cognitive model of coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2015) that the internal coaches were trained in.

Most of the participants raised the issue of the time that would need to be carved out from their already hectic schedules to make room for meaningful coaching conversations. They all proposed that coaching activities would need to be better planned so that it does not become another item to be ticked off. They suggested that coaching activities should be concentrated towards the lean periods of the academic year during the inter-semester breaks, with a few retreats being scheduled out of the campus to break the ice and facilitate rapport building. Most participants felt that careful attention to timetabling and sensitive coach-coachee pairings would help them overcome the obstacle of time. The coaches were unanimous in their opinion that since the institution had already invested in this approach, further review and careful planning by taking all participants on board would surely provide a return of investment. The issue of time investment, often raised in the

literature (e.g. Sorensen, 2012), perhaps needs contextual solutions like these, especially when funding and other resources are scarce.

## Alternate strategies to address negative outcomes

It might be the case that introducing a coaching culture in MEC at all levels might not be met with immediate acceptance. People might resist this change due to a fear of the unfamiliar, a lack of belief in coaching, in the individuals who have been assigned to them as coaches, and so on. A root cause analysis of over-performance or under-performance can unearth the reasons behind them. For example, a coach whose coachees have consistently complained about the lack of trustworthiness of their coach over a few semesters has to be re-evaluated. A panel constituting internal and external coaches can monitor and review the programme continuously to make sure that it is achieving the outcomes set forth at the initiation of the programme. Additionally, supervision and continuing professional development of the internal coaches could be an effective strategy to overcome a few of these coaching challenges (Iordanou, Leach & Barnes, 2015).

During the FGDs, one of the coaches, a senior manager, proposed that sending messages of endorsement to colleagues can be one of the most powerful ways in which employees can be made aware of management commitment to the programme. This particular coach heads several departments and has one of the busiest schedules in the organization. He revealed that during the coaching sessions, he did not allow any interruptions and after a while, employees in his office realized how committed he was to this institutional initiative.

Another coach continued this discussion thread by opining that coaching should be built into the MEC Performance Management System. In this way, he felt that employees would be motivated and the programme would become a sustainable model. This step, however, may not address the issue as it runs counter to the principles of this institutional coaching model that is underpinned by the principles of self-motivation as well as the views of experts who recommend “benign organizational support” (Cox, 2012, p. 427) which is essentially non-interventionist. Yet another internal coach joined the discussion by pointing out that since senior level leaders are coaching mid-level leaders, it would help in identifying the next generation of MEC leaders. He said that the coaching approach would complement the other activities of the institution by helping in the formulation of a succession plan.

## Reflection on own coaching approach

The first author’s reflections of her own coaching experience in the initial few sessions with one of her coachees will perhaps help readers to vicariously live through her coaching experience and draw insights. There were two coachees assigned to her, with whom she had scheduled and conducted several coaching sessions. She belonged to an academic department while both the coachees were from professional services. One of them was the head of a professional services office and considered a trusted and experienced employee by the MEC senior team. This account, narrated from the point of view of the first author, will therefore be in the form of a vignette.

*We decided that a more neutral and informal setting, in a café on campus, would be more appropriate to have the initial session. During the first meeting there was a discussion about the difference between coaching and mentoring and an understanding that I would not be the source of ‘solutions’ if she chose to discuss her goals or her problems at work... After she had shared the problem she was having with her report, she waited for me to respond, so I fought my impulse to provide solutions and instead followed the cognitive model of coaching and attempted to ask leading questions.*

*The next meeting went much better because it looked like her issues with her colleague had reduced to some extent. However, I got the distinct feeling that Amal (pseudonym) would have*

*wanted her line manager or someone from the professional services area to be her coach... it is the coachee who should actually decide who she wants as her coach. She pointed out in the feedback form that coach-coachee pairings can make or break the coaching programme at MEC and senior leaders need to be sensitive to the preferences of coachees when it comes to the choice of coaches.*

This narrative reveals that the coach has internalized the principles of cognitive coaching by choosing to be compassionate and non-directive. The reflection also unearths some challenges, such as the coach-coachee pairing issue and the lack of understanding of the facilitative nature of the coaching model adopted by this internal coach. Unless these issues are resolved, the collaborative and facilitative model of coaching, which have been identified as effective for fostering leadership qualities among practitioners and administrators in the education sector (Robertson 2016), will be undermined.

## Summary, Conclusion and the Recommendations

This paper reports the findings from an evaluation of the effectiveness of implementing a coaching programme in Middle East College and the challenges encountered by the participants during its course. Findings reveal that, overall, both coaches and coachees have positive perceptions of its effectiveness on personal, professional and organizational development. On the other hand, the various challenges encountered by both coaches and coachees during the coaching sessions were uncovered.

Various challenges such as cultural issues, lack of trust, time, coaching skills, rapport, and belief in the benefits of coaching were identified and discussed during the FGDs and were also reflected in the feedback from coachees. The solution to these issues such as ensuring appropriate coach-coachee dyads, scheduling of coaching sessions during lean periods, and the endorsement of senior management have been proposed as solutions. However, other solutions proposed, such as the evaluation of coaching performance through a performance management system runs counter to the principles of cognitive coaching which emphasize the non-judgmental and compassionate approach to coaching. It is evident that most participants feel that the coaching intervention is effective and sustainable if the programme is carefully planned, reviewed and improved on a continuous basis. Ultimately, an ideal balance between the rigid approach of formally evaluating participation in coaching and the flexibility of coaching that caters to participants' needs has to be achieved to facilitate the evolution of the coaching dimension in the organization until it is fully integrated into the organizational culture.

Some observations that can be drawn from the findings of this study are that programmes should be carefully designed and implemented to avoid some of the obstacles identified in this study. As this study reveals, the cultural and social context, and the background of the participants (Plaister-Ten, 2010) are critical factors that might influence the outcomes of coaching programmes. Although Plaister-Ten (2010) discussed the need for skilled cross-cultural coaches in a business environment that is increasingly multi-cultural, and called for further research in multiple contexts to explore this aspect of coaching, there has been limited work in this area. Effective evaluation mechanisms are another significant aspect of coaching programmes as all stakeholders, including organisations and the participants themselves, require to review the effectiveness of coaching in order to justify the cost of the programme (Bachkirova, Arthur & Reading 2016; Gray, Garvey & Lane, 2016). The results of this study may help in the design, implementation and evaluation of such programmes in similar contexts and the lessons learned may be invaluable, considering that unique cultural contexts may require customized programmes for coaching success.

Although the case study design of the current study may limit the generalizability of the findings, this approach has enabled the authors to reveal useful new insights into the cultural dimensions of



coaching which can inform the design of programmes in similar contexts. Most higher education institutions in this part of the world are relatively young and the impact of coaching interventions on such institutions is not well-understood. Clearly, the need for future research on coaching in Middle Eastern HEIs and other similar under-researched regions can contribute to the rather sparse literature currently available so that the benefits of coaching can be made more widely accessible to such relatively resource-poor institutions.

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## Appendix 1: Coachee Feedback Form – two pages

Coachee/Mentee Feedback Form

|   |       |
|---|-------|
| Name of Coachee/Mentee:   | Date: |
| How have the sessions moved you forward (please specify any actual outcomes achieved)?      |       |
| * The sessions helped me in focusing on my work and how to delegate work to my employees.   |       |
| What have been your key insights as a result of the sessions?                               |       |
| * A better mechanism in time management.<br>* good delegation ways and how to delegate.     |       |
| As feedback to your coach/mentor – What have been the most useful aspects of the sessions?  |       |
| * The coach helped me on how to prioritize my responsibilities and the work assigned to me. |       |
| As feedback to your coach/mentor - How could these sessions be improved?                    |       |
| * We should try to meet more and discuss my strengths and weaknesses.                       |       |

Thank you for your feedback

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Please comment on the following as part of your observations from your coaching sessions, using the scale as follows:

- 1 - Strongly disagree
- 2 - Disagree
- 3 - Neither disagree nor agree
- 4 - Agree
- 5 - Strongly agree

| My Coach...   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Was able to quickly build rapport in the initial sessions                     |   |   |   |   | ✓ |
| Supported and challenged me in an encouraging manner                          |   |   |   | ✓ |   |
| Enabled me to define clear goals and focus on what I really wanted to achieve |   |   |   |   | ✓ |
| Created an environment for inclusiveness, trust, integrity and honesty        |   |   |   |   | ✓ |
| Asked relevant questions which raised my awareness of the situation           |   |   |   |   | ✓ |
| Listened to me to seek a better understanding of my situation                 |   |   |   |   | ✓ |
| Shared experiences and knowledge which helped my thinking                     |   |   |   | ✓ |   |
| Motivated and empowered me to achieve my goals                                |   |   |   | ✓ |   |
| Provided me with regular constructive feedback                                |   |   |   | ✓ |   |
| Increased my self-awareness   |   |   |   |   | ✓ |

Thank you for your feedback