

**Academic Paper**

# Business coaching processes that facilitate the successful implementation of business improvement projects

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## Abstract

This article is a summary of a research assignment investigating the Business Coaching Processes (BCPs) that support the implementation of Business Improvement Projects (BIPs) in order to gain a better understanding of the coaching processes and tools applied. The selection of coaching processes and tools is most often influenced by the coaching context, the background of the coach and the outcomes required. This study found that the selection and application of processes and tools were influenced by factors not considered and showed a 45% deviation from current literature. This study reflects actual practices applied to support the implementation of BIPs.

## Keywords

business coaching, business improvement, business improvement project, change management, coaching model, coaching process,

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## Introduction and background

This research explored cases where business coaching was used to support the successful implementation of a Business Improvement Project. A key step in any BIPs is to implement the change, regardless of the outcome required, the tools or techniques used or the approach taken. (Hernaus, 2008). Furthermore, leaders are faced with many challenges in today's volatile, uncertain, complex and unclear environment. Organisational considerations, such as culture and dynamics, further provide a changing environment (Kauffman & Hodgetts, 2016: 157).

According to David Rock (2008), business coaching increases focus and reduces the stress response in the brain which makes it an effective intervention in assisting to make change more acceptable to those involved. He further states that the change process requires rewiring of the brain, and coaching can assist to facilitate this process (Rock & Donde, 2008: 10). This aligns by the definition of coaching by Cox et al: "Coaching could be seen as a human development process that involves structured, focused interaction and the use of appropriate strategies, tools and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the client and potentially for other stakeholders". (Cox, Bachkirova, Clutterbuck, 2010). The influence of business coaching also extends to creating sustainable change in the organisational

culture and coaching is about change and transformation. However, coaching can also be used to help people accept their reality in order to let go of expectations both for themselves and the organisation (Kahn, 2011: 194).

The profession of business coaching has emerged from a combination of various fields such as adult learning and training, consulting and change management, psychology, and systems thinking (Rock, 2008). The coaching model(s) or process that the business coach uses is often selected based on what is familiar to the coach. However, other factors to consider are the organisational culture and dynamics, which will inform a complete process (Kauffman & Hodgetts, 2016: 157).

## **Looking at factors contributing to the failure and success of BIPs**

Organisations embark on Business Improvement Projects (BIPs) to enhance their market share and competitiveness by producing better quality products or services at a lower cost and to exceed customer expectations (Keating, Olivia, Repenning, Rockart & Sterman, 1999: 120). In order to become more competitive, companies embark on projects to improve themselves and through this to create a culture of continuous improvement and/or continuous learning (Kotter, 1995: 59).

A study conducted by Industry Week in 2007, revealed that only 2% of companies awarded for excellence for the BIP implemented, managed to maintain the level of excellence they achieved subsequent to winning an excellence award (Liker & Rother, 2015). Trahan, Burke, and Koonce, (in Hernaus, 2008) found that as many as two thirds of all restructuring and reengineering efforts failed in some way. A number of reasons can be proposed for these failures, such as underestimating the difficulty of driving people from their comfort zones, becoming overwhelmed by the tasks at hand, not displaying the behaviour required or people who do not personify the required behaviours, and failing to deal with influential persons who resist the change effort (Kotter, 1995: 59; Liker, 2004). In investigating the success of where BIPs worked, it was more about changing the behaviour and human thinking processes (Rock, 2006) than, for example, making changes to the process itself (Kotter, 1995: 59). People's response to the impact of the changes depends on their commitment and buy-in to the process (Keating et al., 1999: 120).

Business coaching has become popular as a result of organisations starting to understand that their success lies in getting the best out of their talented people instead of only changing processes or updating systems. Coaching can assist by addressing specific issues and by helping people to acquire new skills and develop the competencies required to create personal and organisational shifts.

## **Placing the business coach in business coaching under the spotlight**

It is very important that business coaches can articulate what they can do for an organisation by understanding what informs their actions as coaches. Many business coaches received training in specific theoretical models, also referred to as approaches. These coaching approaches have their origins mainly in psychological models or frameworks.

David Lane developed a structure, originally based on applied psychology and then adapted to the coaching profession, to serve as a coaching framework. The structure has three aspects, namely: perspectives (What will inform us?), process model (How will we get there?) and purpose (Where are we going and why?). Coaches use this framework to reflect on their perspectives and to inform the kind of coach they want to be. Influencers of perspectives are education, beliefs, values and worldview. It also helps coaches to define the nature of client selection and the outcomes that the coaches seek to achieve through their coaching. Lastly, coaches need to develop a process model to achieve the coaching purpose. Lane's framework focuses on the coach (Lane & Corrie, 2009).

Business coaching is defined as coaching "occurring within an organisational context with the goal of promoting success at all levels of the organisation by affecting the actions of those being coached" (Kahn, 2011). Therefore, according to Marc Kahn, the role players in organisational coaching are the individual

receiving the coaching (client), the coach and the organisation who is funding the coaching intervention. Khan is head of Organisational Development for Investec Worldwide and has a strong practitioner background, supported by a strong grounding in coaching. He is also the author of the book *Coaching on the Axis* which focuses on defining the three-way relationship between coach, client and organisation.

A coach applies various coaching models during the lifecycle of the coaching agreement. The coaching approach that a coach selects to work with will guide the actions of the coach (Barner & Higgins, 2007: 148) and will inform how the business coach will structure the intervention (Kauffman & Hodgetts, 2016). Different coaches will use different methodologies to assist their clients (Brown & Grant, 2010: 84). Different coaching methodologies can be applied to deal with different coaching areas (Liljenstrand & Nebeker, 2008: 57). The coaching method employed by the business coach (BC) to address the coaching topic can affect the effectiveness of the coaching.

## **The link between business process and coaching process**

When I studied Industrial Engineering I learned that a business process has a beginning and an end, it has a defined duration and one process can integrate with another process. A process has a specific duration and most importantly, a process is repeatable. Comparing the business process to the coaching process, various similarities are noted. Business coaches work towards a specific business need, which calls for collaboration between multiple people or groups and stakeholders. It also takes place over a period of time. Once a coach has defined the coaching process, it is repeatable. The conclusion is, therefore, that the term process as defined in business is closely linked to process as defined in coaching (Klopper, 2017).

## **A generic process framework**

A generic process framework was developed to compare current practices with literature. This was achieved by using four different sources, namely Valero and Lee (in Jones & Brinkert, 2008), Liljenstrand and Nebeker (2008), Kahn (2011), and Jones and Brinkert (2008). Each of these authors described a process, tools and/or outcomes. The process from Jones et al. was the most comprehensive and was used as a basis. In order to ensure that it met the organisational context requirements, Kahn's model, and in particular the sub-process steps, was superimposed on this model, and the Models & Tools sections were updated to ensure the three-way relationship between coach, client and organisation was represented.

Lastly, the process steps from Valero and Lee and Liljenstrand and Nebeker were incorporated in the key process steps and aligned in order to have a core process built on common denominators as reflected in literature. Hence, the four key components of this framework are: dimension, the key process steps, the sub-steps, and the models and/or tools used in each of the key process steps. This formed the basis of evaluating the current coaching practices in Business Improvement Projects. Figure 1 below shows the generic process framework.

Figure 1: Generic process framework

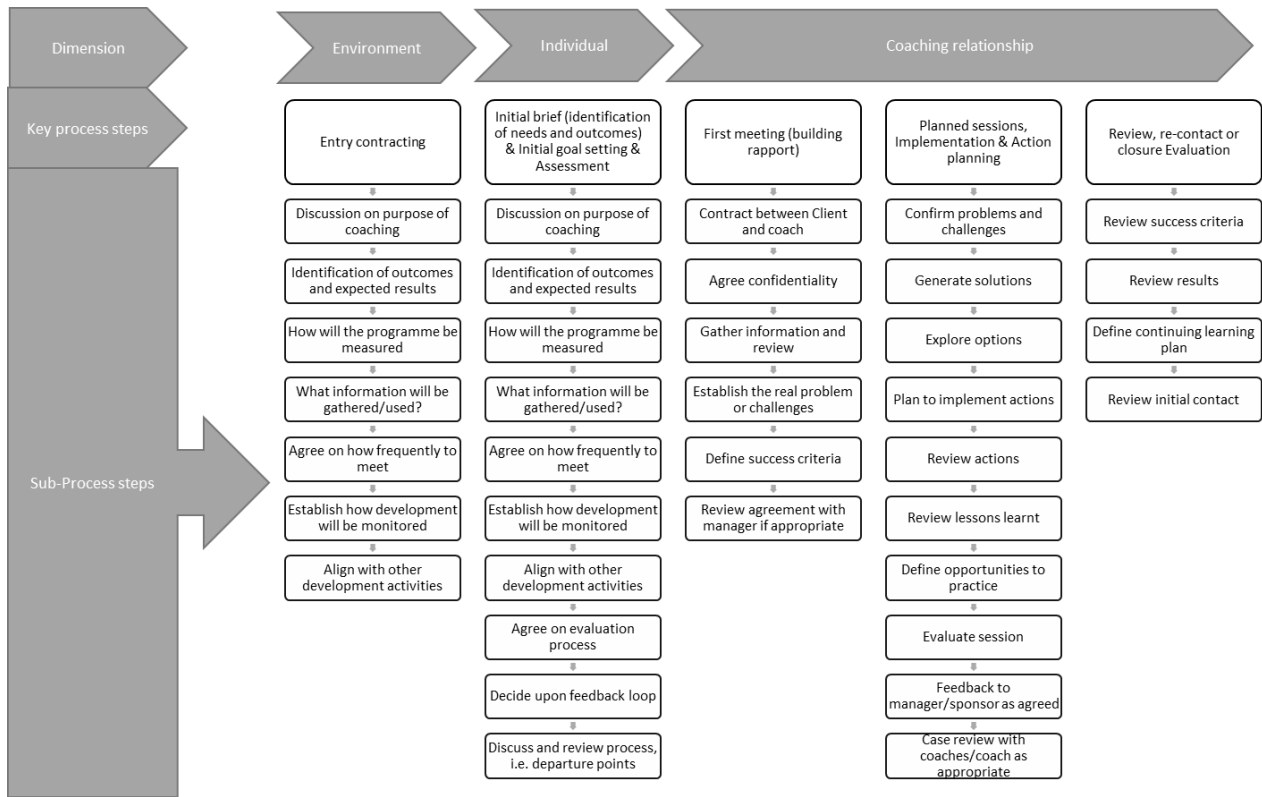
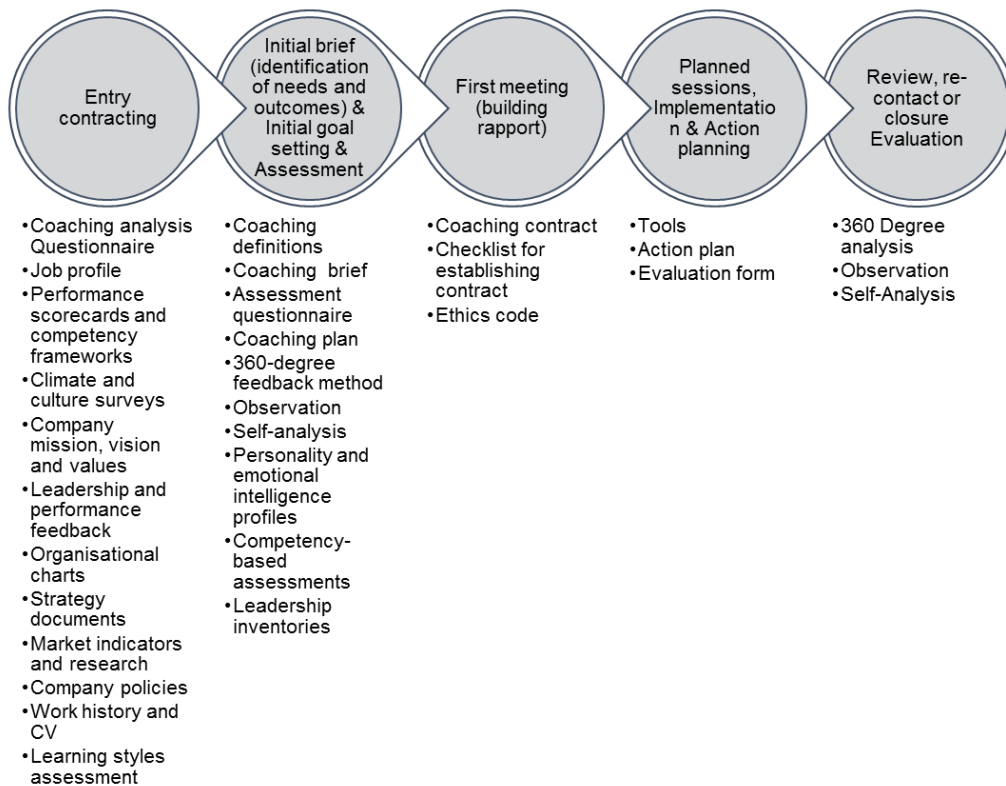


Figure 2: Tools, models and forms used in the key process steps



## Methodology

Lowman (2005) stated that research in the coaching field stems from analysing experiences in case studies and opinions, turning the experiences into theory and testing the theory against phenomenology (Barner & Higgins, 2007: 148). As phenomenology is a qualitative study method, in-depth interviews are the main source of information gathering (Babbie, 1998). Phenomenology also accepts that the researcher has had previous exposure to the occurrence being studied and that the reason for embarking on it is to gain a better understanding and bring new perspectives to the occurrence (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

Being a qualitative study, content analysis was undertaken to examine the data gathered. According to Cavanagh (1997), content analysis is a flexible method to analyse text data. The purpose of such an analysis is to extend an existing framework or theory. It is a more structured process where key concepts or variables are captured based on predefined coding. Data reliability was facilitated by the researcher by providing the interpretation of the interviews to the interviewees (Bryman & Bell, 2015) for verification prior to being used in the analysis.

Participants were asked to complete an information sheet detailing their educational background, work experience and coaching experience and training. They were also required to complete an information sheet on the project involved in terms of the size of the organisation, duration, scope and nature of the coaching intervention and how it supported the BIP programme. This information was used to determine whether the BCs and resulting BIPs met the criteria set for the research. It was also part of the data gathering process to capture the BCs' perspectives and the coaching context. The balance of the information gathered was done through one-on-one interviews conducted by using a coaching approach with mostly open-ended questions. During the interview process, the BCs' detailed the process, tools and methodologies used including their own reflections on these. Each interview was summarised in terms of a process, the generic process framework developed and the reflections, and returned to each participant to verify before including it in the analysis.

The information gathered in the interviews was used to:

- i. Measure current practices against the original framework
- ii. Determine additional information that could be used to build onto the framework
- iii. Understand the coaching context and the influencing factors for the coaching process
- iv. Summarise the reflections of the business coaches on the business coaching process.

## Experimental work and discussion

Six BCs were selected and interviewed, two from New Zealand and four from South Africa. Each process was mapped onto the generic process framework to identify variances in the sequence of the process steps and the elements used in each process. A numbering system was developed to accommodate elements which were not originally included in the generic process framework. Each element was assigned a prefix, which indicated if it was an original element (O) or an added element (A). Each element's utilisation was calculated by determining the total number of projects that made use of that particular element out of the possible six projects and was expressed as a percentage. This indicated which elements had a higher usage or no usage at all. It also allowed the researcher to distinguish between the added and the original framework elements (as per Table 1).

# Findings

## Coaches' perspectives

The BCs had professional degrees in various fields. No or little correlation could be found in the educational background of the coaches, of which two were internal and four external coaches. Two of the coaches were the only BCs on the BIP, one of which was an internal coach and one an external coach. Four of the coaches worked as part of a group of coaches on the BIP. No correlation could be found in work history, education or coaching training. Two coaches had the same coaching qualifications but there was no correlation in the methods and processes they had applied. No correlation could be found between appointing a BC and his/her educational background.

## The coaching context

All of the organisations involved had an international footprint and operated in sectors such as construction, retail, manufacturing, distribution, transportation and petrochemicals. Most of the organisations had between 500 and 30 000 employees. All projects were evaluated against the BIP project categories created by Blumenthal and Haspeslagh (1994). Three of the six projects focused on creating a culture to ensure the organisation can adapt to a changing environment, one focused on strategic transformation and two on creating operational improvements to processes, structure and information.

Each of the BIPs resulted in a number of coaching goals and/or themes. All six projects included aspects of leadership development, team motivation, team alignment and/or improved teamwork. Other themes included resilience, self-awareness, dealing with uncertainty, improved problem-solving and work-life balance.

No correlation could be found in the coaching outcomes and the appointment of the BCs based on their educational background or coaching training. The BCs concluded that a key success factor of their coaching on the BIPs was the ability to build rapport with their clients and to have model agility which gave them the ability to deal with all the presenting issues during the sessions. All coaches confirmed that regardless of the organisational BCP, the process, tools and models used during the coaching sessions were determined by them based on what they felt would provide the best outcome for the client and the organisation. This mainly related to the relevant coaching training they completed, including their educational and work experience.

## Comparing current practices with the generic process framework

Once all elements identified for each BC had been confirmed there were captured in the generic process framework. This expanded the original framework significantly with 55% of all elements being original and 45% added as a result of the interviews with the BCs. Most of the added elements were in the Models & Tools area for the process step Planned sessions. The table below indicates element utilisation against the dimension and process steps, splitting it between the original (O) and added (A) elements and overall against the process steps.

The summary in Table 1 below shows that the utilisation of elements in Steps to Take is higher than in Models & Tools. This indicates that the elements included in the original generic framework for Steps to Take were more aligned to current practices than the elements in Models & Tools. The average utilisation of Models & Tools translates to each element being used once or twice per BIP (1.5 times according to the calculations, but half a tool cannot be used). This shows that the models and tools used by coaches are very specific to each BC. No or little correlation could be found between the chosen models and tools and the coaching themes. The utilisation of the original and added elements for both Steps to Take and Models & Tools is closely aligned. This supports the above findings regarding the more generic nature of the process steps versus the more specific application of models and tools by coaches. To gain an in-depth



understanding of the results, each process step with its associated models and tools needs to be investigated.

**Table 1: Summary of element utilisation**

Dimension	Process step	Steps to Take			Models & Tools		
		Original	Added	Total	Original	Added	Total
Environment	Entry contracting	50%	67%	57%	23%	50%	26%
Individual	Initial brief (identification of needs and outcomes)	76%	67%	76%	30%	20%	25%
Coaching relationship	First meeting	67%	33%	62%	39%	29%	33%
	Planned sessions	83%	None	83%	39%	25%	26%
Evaluation	Review, re-contact or closure	38%	None	38%	33%	29%	23%
<b>Average</b>		<b>63%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>27%</b>

## Findings for the key process steps

The key findings per key process steps are summarised below.

### Entry contracting

Five elements were added (internal goals for the improvement project, introductory meeting, briefing on company approach, pre-training or orientation, and coach-specific methodology) and all original elements were utilised. The elements added were largely due to organisations developing their own BCPs. Two distinctive approaches were identified for the contracting step:

- i. The organisation developed its own BCP to facilitate the implementation of the BIP. In these instances contracting appeared to be more focused on financial aspects such as rate, hours, billing process and frequency.
- ii. The BC was asked to develop an approach and BCP to facilitate the implementation of the BIP. In these instances the contracting appeared to be more structured and defined

### Initial brief

On average, each coach would use a mix of one or at least two tools. Only one BC used four tools. Many of the elements in this section was dealt with in the previous process step, such as the coaching brief. One added element had a 100% utilisation rate, namely creating alignment between the client goals and the organisational goals. The selection of the tools used to create a baseline for measurement and/or to support the coaching goal formulation was based on BCs' own tools they had developed or tools they were trained in. Overall, the usage of the elements in this section appears to depend on the BC's training, background and approach to coaching.

### First meeting

Four of the six coaches contracted verbally and not in writing as the legal contracting was incorporated in contracting with the organisation. Hence, some felt it was not required to have a separate written contract with the client. Another clear distinction in the process was goal setting. Half (50%) of the BCs felt that they could not set clear coaching goals at this point while half felt it imperative that they do, which again highlights the individualistic approach to the BCP.

## Planned sessions, implementation and action planning

The BCs confirmed in one way or another that they do use most of these steps over the BCP but not necessarily all in a single coaching session. The element with the lowest utilisation was feedback to manager/sponsor as agreed. In literature it is expected that the feedback loop becomes a crucial part of the process. However, the BCs contracted in a way that shifted the responsibility for feedback to the client. The generic process framework included only three original elements, which were completely inadequate as 26 elements were added, with an overall utilisation of 26%. Further analysis of the Models & Tools elements resulted in the following categorisation in Table 2 below:

**Table 2: Analysis of the Models & Tools used by Business Coaches**

Models and theory	Tools and techniques
Goals-focused framework	Assessment against objectives client set
GROW	Relatedness exercises
CREATE	Socratic Question frameworks
ARIA	Strengths Grid
SCARF	Reflection
Kolb Learning styles	Consciousness frameworks
Adult learning principles	Incident report
Positive psychology	Scaling
Nancy Kline time to think & testing of assumption	Reframing
Neuroscience	ICF Code of Conduct
Integral four quadrant model	Hawkins 7 environment to reflect
Evidence based coaching	ICF core competencies
Situational coaching	
Group/Team Coaching	

## Closing/review and evaluation

This was one of the most non-specific sections in the generic process framework. Many of the BCs felt that this is the one area of the BCP they would have changed in hindsight. The closing step was very generic. However, this was proven to represent the currently reality which perhaps points to the fact that the measurement of coaching outcomes requires overall improvement. Two of the projects had no formal closeout or measurement. Most of the coaches relied on direct feedback from the clients as an indication of outcomes achieved, through either self-assessment and/or stories of success they shared. Not one of the projects used a monetary ROI measurement.

## Summary of the overall processes followed

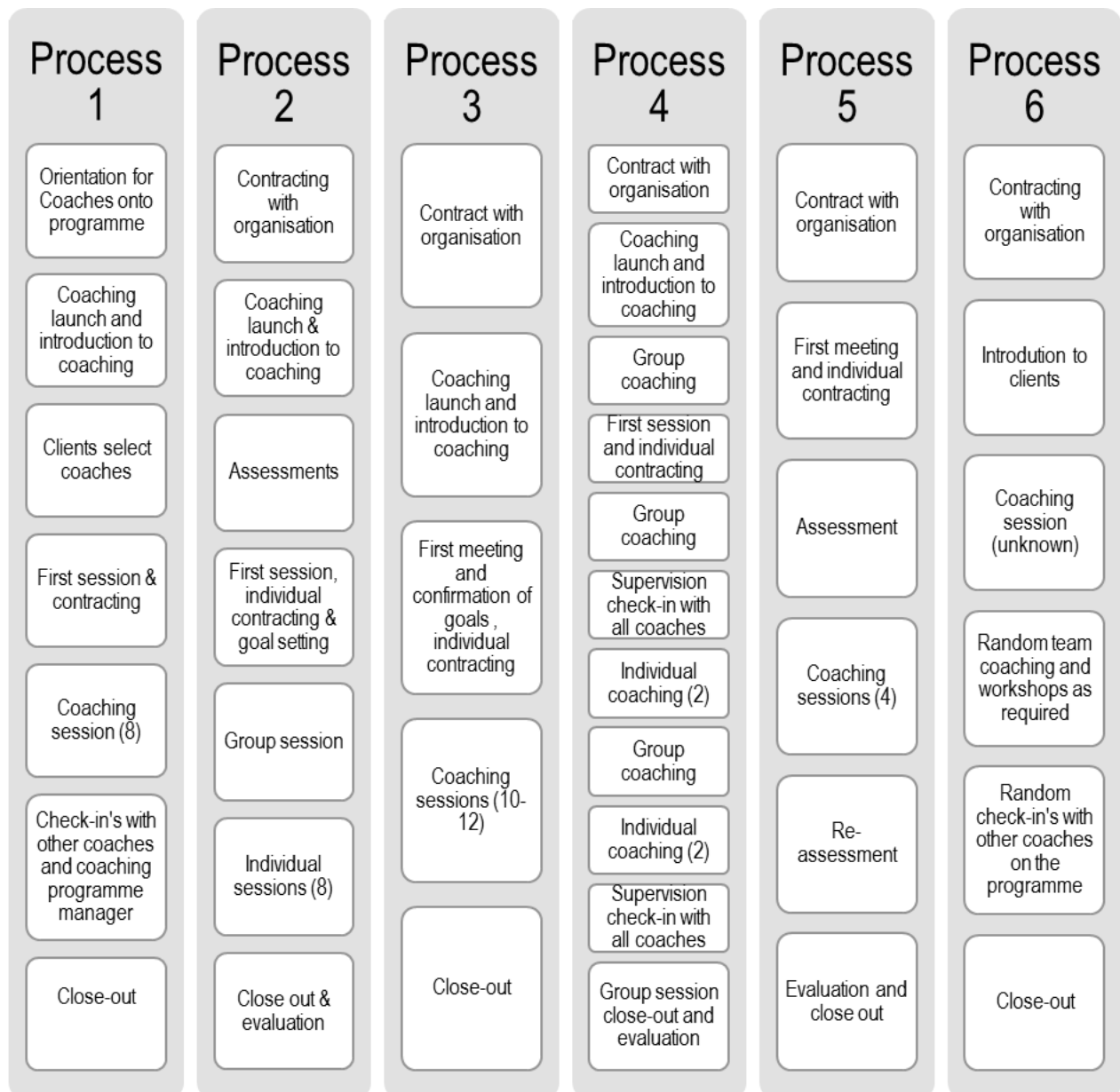
All of the Business Coaching Processes started off by contracting with the organisation, which occurred either in writing or verbally. The contracting varied from project to project; showing little consistency in the processes. In most of the projects, subsequent to the contracting step, the coaching intervention was introduced to the clients in a launch event. The purpose of this event was mainly to introduce the clients to the coaching, the BCP, the BCs and their approach to coaching and, where applicable, select a coach. Sequentially, the key steps in the original generic process framework and the corresponding Models & Tools do not completely reflect reality. This is especially true for *Entry contracting* and *Initial/Individual*



brief, and again between *Initial/Individual brief* and *First meeting*. In these instances, the steps and the models and tools are mixed and not a good fit to reality.

As per Figure 3 below, the two main differentiations in the processes were evident where team coaching was part of the pre-planned process (Process 2 and 4) and/or where assessments were part of the pre-planned process (Process 2 and 5). Another subtle difference showed up in Project 5 where re-measurement took place as part of the evaluation process. The BCP of Project 6 could not be drawn sequentially as it occurred over a two and a half years even though key steps were captured.

**Figure 3: Depiction of the BCPs applied**



The reflections of the BCs indicate a level of alignment around ethics, building rapport and the selection of models and tools, regardless of the coaching context and the BCP applied. The BCs perspectives directly influenced the models and tools applied within the coaching sessions. All the coaches noted that they had no or little ethical issues; in instances where they did note ethics it was more a heightened awareness to manage ethics rather than actual issues. All coaches noted that building rapport and gaining the client's

trust through demonstrated ethical behaviour and responsiveness to the client's needs through model agility were the most critical requirements for intervention success. The selection of models and tools used in the coaching sessions is coach specific. As per the reflections of the coaches, they felt that it was imperative to be responsive to the needs of the clients, which called for model agility. Therefore, they have a toolbox of models and tools that they use during their coaching sessions depending on the needs emerging during these sessions.

It seemed that the use of internal as against external coaches did not affect the Business Coaching Process. BCPs were also not influenced by the formal educational background and coaching training of the BCs or the coaching context in terms of industry, scope and client base.

The outcome of this study was surprising in that it challenged current literature and the researchers' perceptions regarding the coaching process. A key variance was the lack of connection between coaching context and/or themes and the selection of the BCP as the process appeared to be BC or organisation specific. Another key variance is that the coaching process was not always developed by the coach. The organisation can have a pre-determined approach versus the bespoke solution developed by the BC.

There is a marked variation in the BCP in these instances as is evident in process 2 and 4 in Figure 3. This variation can be attributed to the inclusion of team coaching. Upfront awareness of team coaching as a requirement also appears to have a significant influence on the BCP.

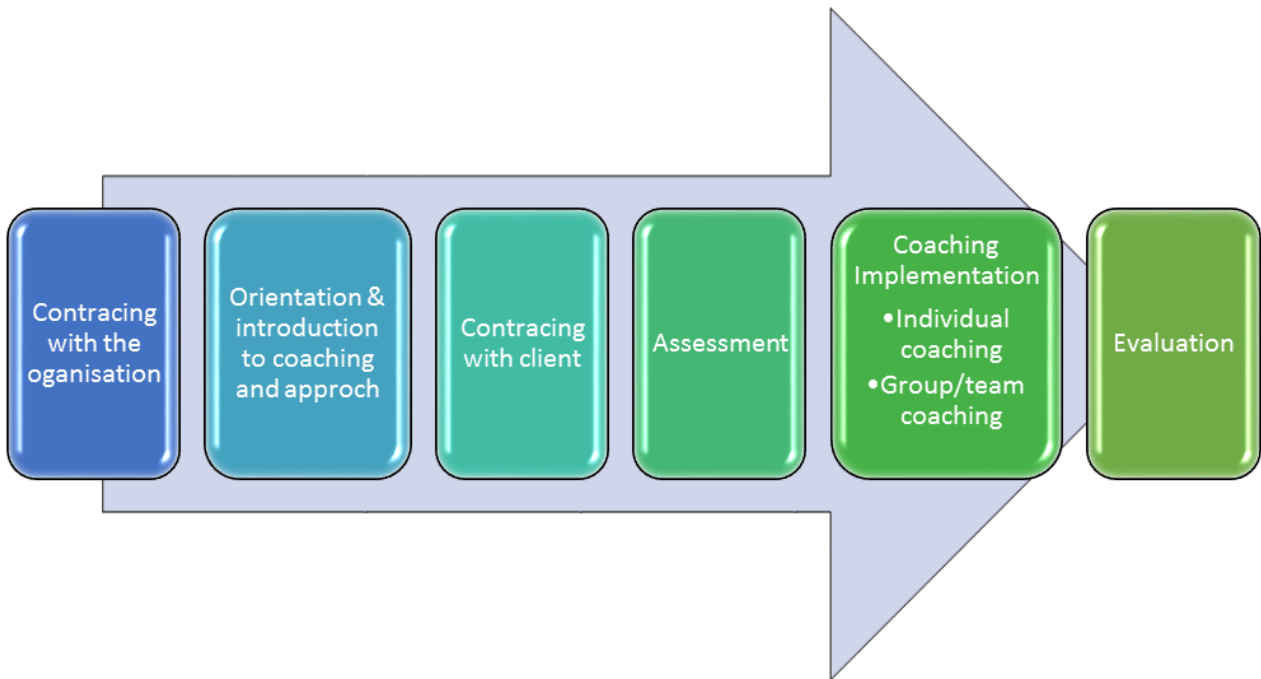
Lastly, where a single BC was used, there appeared to be a more specific pre-defined process and a relationship between using a single coach and a bespoke BCP. Where a group of BCs were used, the BCP was determined by the organisation instead. There was an overall lack of formal measurement of coaching effectiveness, which includes formal pre- and post-assessments.

## Recommendations towards a proposed updated process framework

Even though out of scope for this research, the information gathered and analysed lends itself to be developed into a proposed generic process framework. Based on the utilisation exercise, the BCPs detailed by the BCs and their reflections, some amendment is required to reflect current practices. The following changes were made to the generic process framework towards developing a BCP that reflects current reality. To do this, the key process steps and sub-process steps were combined into six processes to reflect a generic process framework as depicted in Figure 4. Any elements which had a 0% to 17% utilisation rate were removed and/or grouped into other categories to make it more meaningful. The re-allocation of the re-categorised Models & Tools against the most appropriate Steps to Take was done once the correct sequence of steps was determined. Lastly, the elements were grouped together logically, removing duplication and using naming conventions to reduce complexity.

The updated proposed process is depicted in the Figure 4 below. Each process step has a list of recommended Steps to Take and Models & Tools. The Steps to Take and the Models & Tools provide a more flexible approach to select those which are applicable to aid in the design of the BCP. This resulted in a large framework which can be requested from any of the authors.

Figure 4: Revised business coaching process



## Further research

Further research could be undertaken by applying the proposed process to determine how it performs in reality. This would include suggesting improvements around measurement and re-measurement for a quantitative as well as qualitative assessment of outcomes.

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