Academic Paper

How experiencing executive coaching helps coachees feel they are independent learners and self-coaches: an interpretative phenomenological analysis

Duminda Rajasinghe ✉ (Nottingham Trent University)
Bob Garvey (Sheffield Hallam University)

Abstract

Executive coaching is a popular leadership development intervention. Despite the popularity, our understanding of how executive coaching facilitates learning and development is under-researched. We addressed this research gap by exploring how business leaders interpreted their executive coaching experience using interpretative phenomenological analysis as the research methodology. After purposively selecting three coachees and two coaches, we conducted two semi-structured interviews with each participant. The data analysis revealed that executive coaching helped coachees to become independent learners and to coach themselves and others. These findings establish an enhanced understanding of how coaching may facilitate leadership learning and development.

Introduction

Leadership learning and development continues to be one of the strategic priorities in organisations (Day et al., 2014). However, the skills required to perform in the current business environment appear to remain unimproved and conventional development programmes are becoming increasingly obsolete as the "challenges facing contemporary leaders (…) tend to be too complex and ill-defined to be addressed successfully through (…) traditional developmental interventions" (Day et al., 2014, p.64). Executive coaching has been identified as a remedy to address such complex leadership demands (Ely et al., 2010; Korotov, 2017).

Despite the increasing research in the field of executive coaching, this appears to be practitioner-led and remains relatively under-researched (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019). This is particularly true in relation to how executive coaching works (Myers, 2017). Further, the practitioner led coaching literature has been successful in communicating the positive aspects of coaching and most researchers and practitioners tend to focus on the '*effectiveness'* of coaching rather than '*how coaching works*?' (Myers, 2017).

We address this issue by asking how business leaders make sense of their executive coaching experience. We considered participants' experience and their interpretation of that experience as the source of knowledge, therefore focusing on how various individuals experience an event or process. According to Bachkirova and Kaufman (2008) such as a coaching encounter can be a valid avenue of inquiry. Our aim is to deepen understanding of how executive coaching helps individual leaders to learn and develop within a case organisation through a natural conversational engagement using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a research methodology. The study revealed that the coachees with a positive experience of coaching consider that they have become independent learners and coaches of themselves and others.

Literature Review

There are many different but equally valid interpretations of coaching. The debate about what coaching is continues and there appears no consensus (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019). The position that coaching is a social activity (Garvey, 2011; Rajasinghe & Allen, 2020; Rajasinghe, 2020; Shoukry & Cox, 2018) informed by humanist philosophy (Garvey, 2017), enables different stakeholders to attribute different meanings and interpretations to the term 'coaching'. However, such varied interpretations may lead to contradictions of meanings within institutions as well as in the attempts to establish a universal understanding of coaching and coaching practices. There are also diverse discourses of coaching (see Garvey, 2017). Within the adult development discourse, which appears dominant in the coaching literature (Gray et al., 2016), coaching as a leadership development intervention is prevalent, widely used in business organisations (Maltbia, 2014; Western, 2012) and is popularly known as leadership or executive coaching (Ely et al., 2010; Ladegard and Gjerde, 2014).

Adult Learning and Development

Adult learning is widely researched, and it is clear that there are a variety of ways through which learning and development can be delivered (Drake, 2011). Therefore, being conclusive about how adults learn is an onerous task and there is no expectation to do so within this paper. Rather, the aim is to explore potential links that coaching may have with adult learning theories (see, Nadeem and Garvey, 2020) by exploring coaching from three different learning theories below.

Proximal development zone, scaffolding

Vygotsky's (1978) 'proximal development zone' acknowledges the supportive role of the coach in learning and development. This offers a space where peer expertise can be shared non-judgementally, allowing participants to support each other towards their independence. The concept of 'scaffolding', developed by Vygotsky emphasises the relevance of support from an individual with the expertise to develop a learner. The term 'scaffolding' symbolises the temporary nature of the support, complying with the self-perpetuating nature of coaching (Giglio et al., 1998). This implies the importance of support and guidance for learning and development (Garvey, 2017). Vygotsky's (1978) recognition of the significance of both collaboration and context in learning, challenges the relevance of conventional modes of learning that are largely instructor-led. Moreover, Vygotsky's concept of 'More Knowledgeable Other' presents some paradoxes in coaching literature where some highlight the importance of psychology knowledge of the coach

over business knowledge, whereas some place emphasis on expertise in coaching over domain specific knowledge (Whitmore, 2012). Despite these debates, it seems that the concept of a More Knowledgeable Other does play a role in coaching (Fisher, 2023). This may contradict with notions such as neutrality (see Fatien et al., 2022) and being non-judgemental but, in our view, these are skills that the More Knowledgeable Other can also bring to the coaching relationship (Fisher, 2023; Rajasinghe et al., 2022).

Andragogy

Knowles (1984) argues that adults need to take more control and responsibility for their own learning and development. His concept of andragogy has had a significant revolutionary impact on the thinking applied to adult learning (Cox, 2006; Knowles et al., 2015) by challenging the traditional role of the teacher and emphasising the resourcefulness of adult learners. The progress made on accommodating such theoretical constructs in development initiatives was perhaps contestable until coaching established its presence as developmental intervention (Gray et al., 2016; Rajasinghe & Mansour, 2019). In coaching, coachees are encouraged to *own* their development and hold the authority in making their development decisions (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006; Smith & Brummel, 2013; Grant, 2014). Thus, coaching seems to base itself within the philosophy of andragogy. This translates into the executive coaching process where the coachee is encouraged to accept ownership of their learning. It also appears to influence individual motivation and commitment and therefore it allows participants to reach their developmental purpose (Ely et al., 2010).

However, the possibility of such authority within the coaching relationship can be problematic and limited within some discourses in coaching - for example, Western's (2012) Psy expert and Managerial discourse. Within these discourses of coaching, it is likely that the control mechanisms are in place to ensure conformity rather than encouraging novel approaches to work (Fatien and Lovelace, 2015). Moreover, this may also be viewed as an acceptance of that the "problems of performance originate with the individual, be it their behaviour, cognition, or interpersonal sensemaking" (Hurlow, 2022, p. 128) rather than being a product of their social context. In contrast, Western's (2012) Network and Soul Guide discourses appear more supportive and flexible in facilitating individuals to be self-responsible and authoritative about their own learning and development. Our position is that coaching is a 'collaborative and conversational relationship' and therefore the coachee is not the sole creator of their own development.

Experiential and Reflective Learning

Learning from experience is an idea initiated by Dewey in 1938. Athanasopoulou and Dopson, (2015); Cox, 2013 and Rajasinghe and Allen, (2020) all agree that in coaching, coachees are encouraged to learn from their experiences. In experiential learning, the process of learning from experience is given prominence over the content and this complies with the principles of coaching as outlined by Gray et al., (2016). Here, concrete experience is the basis of observation and reflection (Kolb, 1984). Reflecting critically on experience, it could be argued, generates analytical thinking, which becomes an internal process ensuring the coachee-led nature of development (Brockbank & McGill, 2012). Reflective practice in coaching helps "learners to use tensions among different perspectives to expose and connect different assumptions and open up new ways of thinking" (Schulz, 2010, p.23). Reflection thus develops a learner's position towards a particular phenomenon and helps generate actions (Schön, 1987; Mezirow, 1991; Brockbank & McGill, 2012) . It transforms their experience into skills, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs (Garvey, 2011). Therefore, "reflection has the potential to be the multiplier in our professional development" (Lucan and Turner, 2023, p.213).

The intentional reflective exercise of coaching is an internal process in which learners are open to challenges (Du Toit, 2014). According to Brockbank and Gill (2012) this intrapersonal reflection may be effective in facilitating development, but unlikely to be sufficient and they argue that it is

important that individuals engage in reflective dialogue with another, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978) through the 'zone of proximal development,' in order for learning to be more effective. The presence of a coach can help coachees to understand perceptual schemas as well as develop insights on issues they previously may not have been aware of (De Toit, 2014). This facilitates self-understanding and helps coachees to consider the factors that hinder or support their development (Ely et al., 2010). Nadeem and Garvey (2020) argued the importance of a facilitated calm and safe reflective space that a coach can provide to enable critical thinking. This signifies the contribution of the coach in coachee development. However, this is only possible if a healthy relationship is developed between coach and coachee as an essential condition for the effectiveness of coaching (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019).

Situated Learning

Bandura (1997), Garvey (2011) and Lave and Wenger (1991) employ the concept of situated learning in the context of adult learning. Like Vygotsky (1978), they emphasise the social context as a central feature of learning and development. They reject the idea that learning is about acquiring certain types of knowledge or behaviour and models of learning that include stages of development, prespecified learning outcomes and competency assessment. Garvey and Stokes (2022) argue that this linear approach to learning or "traditional developmental intervention[s]" (Day et al., 2014, p.64) is ineffective in addressing the complexities of executive development (see also Nadeem et al. 2021). When learning is viewed as a social process, it becomes more about subjective and contextual conversations, narratives and less about facts (Drake, 2011). This constructionist view of learning suggests that learning takes place through people's interactions. Coaching supports the idea of learning as both a social construction and a social process. It also positions the learner as an active agent of learning (Knowles, 1984; Mezirow, 1991). Brockbank and McGill (2012) believe that the learner's active role enhances their ability to develop a critical perspective into their own practice.

As raised earlier, the role of a critical friend or coach is well placed to challenge the predispositions that coachees (learners) may hold by questioning mental models and 'schemas' (Mezirow, 1991; Bachkirova, Cox & Clutterbuck, 2014). This leads to new understanding and supports learning in the broadest sense (Du Toit, 2014). The coach encourages learning and development through enhanced self-understanding (Brockbank & McGill, 2012) and by connecting individual values, norms, and expectations.

Giglio, Diamante and Urban (1998) argue that coaching also supports a self-directed desire to learn through intrinsically enhanced motivation which supports the andragogic principle outlined above that adults are intrinsically motivated to learn (Du Toit, 2014; Knowles et al., 2015). It does not mean that the external motivators are unimportant but rather that sustainability appears to lie in the former (Bachkirova et al., 2014). Therefore, coaching may enable a more natural and sustainable process of adult learning (Bachkirova et al., 2014; Du Toit, 2014).

The discussions above present some theoretical constructs of learning that are closely related with coaching. However, for coaching to be effective in facilitating learning and development, it is necessary to consider the potential impact of power dynamics and hierarchy in the coaching relationship (see Louis & Fatien, 2014; Western, 2012), as well as organisational culture and other contextual implications (Cox, 2013).

Coachees Becoming Coaches

Giglio et al., (1998) suggest that coaches should extend their support to develop coachees' self-monitoring skills and should "work on improving personal management skills". This idea offers potential to explore coaching as a sustainable mode of learning (Boyatzis et al., 2006). A number of authors (Redshaw, 2000; Knight and Poppleton, 2008; McCarthy and Milner, 2013) acknowledge coaching's ability to be self-perpetuating. However, they caution that this can only be possible if the

coachees' coaching experience is positive. According to these authors, the positive experience of coaching helps coachees to become coaches of themselves and others. However, these arguments are largely uncritical and do not have a sufficient evidence base. This research seeks to add to this evidence base.

Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2015) claim that self-directed learning can be an outcome of coaching given that the coachees may be motivated to engage in the process and as a condition of self-direction. Bachkirova and Borrington (2019) argue that coaching "starts before it starts" (p.348) implying that the coachee maybe oriented towards their own learning already.

In summary, coachee readiness, quality of contracting (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019) and the coaches' ability to provide a positive experience of coaching seems to influence coachees to become self-directed learners. This reiterates the importance of the coach's influence on coachee development and their independence as coaches to demonstrate empathy, facilitate reflection, listen, and challenge, (Ladegard and Gjerde, 2014; Garvey et al., 2018). Moreover, coaches' ability to balance support, challenge, and assessment (Ladegard and Gjerde, 2014) seems to help coachee development to be more self-perpetuating. These elements are also present in adult learning (Knowles et al., 2015) and leadership development theory (Day et al., 2014).

Our interest in exploring business leaders' experience of coaching to help their development places this study within the developmental coaching domain. We acknowledge the contextual nature of the phenomenon and choose to explore it subjectively (see Fatien et al., 2019; Garvey, 2011). The acceptance of the contextual nature and diversity of interpretations of coaching demands we present our position of coaching for this paper as: 'a formal one-to-one collaborative and conversational relationship between a client and a coach that facilitates the client becoming a more effective leader'.

The collaborative nature of the executive coaching intervention, its association with leadership development and the dyadic nature of its form, all justify our approach to seek a deeper understanding of executive coaching by engaging with both the coach and the coachee through a natural conversation.

Methodology

Our aim is to understand the experience of the participants through an interpretative engagement. We consider that understanding is constructed through human interactions (Flick, 2014) which distances our work from objective realities (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). As our research interest explores subjective experience, we argue that "the reality is not always 'out there' but in significant ways is a construction, or an interpretation" (Bachkirova and Kauffman (2008, p.110) and the knowledge is grounded in contextual personal insights (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). These positions closely link with IPA (Smith et al., 2009), a qualitative research methodology based on three philosophical underpinnings, namely phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. The methodology is primarily concerned with "how participants are engaged in a search for the meaning of their experience" (Smith 2018, p. 5) which is a valid avenue of knowing in coaching (Bachkirova and Kauffman, 2008). Our interest in individual leaders, their executive coaching experience and how leaders make sense of their experience closely links this study with IPA's philosophical positions.

Sampling and Data Collection

The focus of the study was to generate deeper understanding; therefore, we placed emphasis on richness, relevance and generating in-depth information over ensuring population representation (Gray, 2014). The "absence of randomisation, generalisation or large sample in (…) this research

(…) is because these are constructs of a positivist tradition" (Hennink, et al., 2011, p.8). Employing large samples undermines the purpose of our study and is at odds with IPA's focus on giving full appreciation of each experiential account with a detailed line-by-line analysis (Smith et al., 2022).

We employed a purposive approach to select, a relatively homogenous sample, three coachees and two coaches. This helped us to enhance the perspective representation of the sample (Smith et al., 2022). Ensuring perspective representation is more appropriate in IPA (Rajasinghe et al., 2021) and this facilitated us to focus on depth of data over breadth. We did not consider participants' religious beliefs, education, ethnicity, sex, or age as criteria for selection or for homogeneity, but the experience of executive coaching for a minimum of six months and being senior leaders in the case organisation. We conducted two interviews with each participant using semi-structured interviews, aiming to deepen the understanding of the content of the first interview. The second interview (20-30 mins) was comparatively shorter than the first one (35-45 mins).

The participants

The coachee participants were positive about their executive coaching experience and believed that executive coaching was assigned to facilitate their development. All the coachees were working with qualified external coaches. The coach participants were also advocates of executive coaching. Both use coaching for leadership development in their current role and act as internal qualified coaches and coaching is considered and marketed as a leadership development initiative within the organisation.

Table 1. Participants

	Pseudonym	Designation
Coachees	Daniel	Commercial Director
	David	Head of Products
	Mark	Director Branch Network
Coaches	John	Head of Organizational Development
	Sarah	Senior Manager, organisational Development

Data Analysis

We transcribed the interviews verbatim whilst repeatedly listening to the recordings and combined both interviews with each participant to ease the analysis. Rajasinghe et al., (2021) and Smith et al.'s (2009) guidance on IPA data analysis was useful to conduct a rigorous line-by-line analysis. In concurrence with the idiographic commitment, we analysed the data case-by-case following steps of analysis (Step 1-4, see Table 1) before the cross analysis.

Table 2. Data analysis process [adapted from Rajasinghe et al (2021, pp 874 – 876)]

Step 1 - Reading and rereading
Step 2 - Initial noting
Step 3 - Developing emergent themes
Step 4 - Searching for connections across the themes
Step 5 - Moving to the next case
Step 6 - Looking for patterns across cases

Empathetic hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1970) and questioning hermeneutics (Rajasinghe et al., 2021) were employed during the analysis to develop a more interpretative account of each participant's experience. We completed analysis of the coachee participants' interviews, both individual cases and cross analysis and then we followed the same procedure for coach participants. Then, we cross analysed super-ordinate themes from both groups to develop the themes presented in the findings. The analysis moves from the specific to the general and from description to interpretation (see Smith et al., 2009). However, we kept the participant experience at the centre of the data

analysis process. IPA acknowledges the researcher's role within the data analysis as they interpret the interpretations of the participants (Smith 2018). This is where double hermeneutics plays a role (see Smith et al., 2009). Yardley's (2000) quality criteria was helpful to ensure the quality of the study from the outset.

Limitations

The study sample is relatively small, therefore statistical generalisability of the findings is not possible. However, readers may consider the possibility of the transferability of the knowledge to other contexts. The study acknowledges the readers' role in the hermeneutic dialogue (see Smith et al., 2009). We recognise that readers may have different interpretations of the findings that can be equally valid and applicable.

Semi-structured interviews are the sole method of data collection, complying with the study's interest and IPA principles. Thus, this study relies on spoken language to understand the participants' interpretations and we admit that their interpretations are "shaped, limited and enabled by language" (Smith et al., 2009, p.194).

All participants were positive about their executive coaching experience and emphasised that they have a coaching culture within their organisation. There is a possibility of self-reported bias which is part of the lived world and subjective understanding in general.

Findings

The study reveals that executive coaching facilitates continuous development of the coachee participants. This continuation is a result of leaders becoming 'independent learners' and 'coaches of themselves and others' due to their positive coaching experience within the subject organisation. We ensured idiographic commitments throughout the research process. However, when presenting the findings, we prioritise the themes over the participants (see Smith et al., 2009) which helps us to present the findings "in a manner that is engaging, coherent and accessible" (Gray, 2014, p.632).

The coachees (leaders) becoming independent learners, and the coachees becoming coaches themselves, are described below in two separate sections and these themes are then critically discussed in the following section. Each section consists of the coachees' and the coaches' perspectives.

Theme: Leaders becoming independent learners

Perspectives of Coachees

Coachees acknowledge that they developed their ability to learn independently due to their engagement with executive coaching and the self-awareness generated by the process, thereby encouraging them to take more informed developmental decisions and actions. Daniel highlights this process:

> "Changing the way you approach situations and better understanding yourself and why do things and having greater self-awareness and being and taking more informed choices".

He frequently refers to the developed awareness and accountability and how that helped him to become an independent learner.

> "First thing actually is developing awareness of you and your style, your techniques, your impact and then you got a choice around how you respond to different events and different

things, and you know ultimately you are accountable for that".

Daniel appreciates that the actions should come from him, and that the accountability of his development is his own. Learning about challenge from the coach, he began to challenge himself:

"It is being challenged and pushed through questioning and it is usually quite unthreading way, but you end up challenging, pushing yourself".

Therefore, there is evidence of Daniel acquiring the required skills to be an independent learner and starting to act on his development goals as he realises that executive coaching:

"Does not give you[him] solutions, you come up with the solutions, it does not do the actions for you, you got to do the actions".

Gradually, Daniel developed his understanding of being self-responsible, action-orientated and motivated to realise his developmental goals.

Mark agrees with the idea that the developed overall understanding of things helped him to become a self-learner. Self-questioning, evaluation and action-orientation developed through executive coaching helped him to become independent. He explains the process of becoming a self-learner by saying:

"Think about a time when you are at your best, and you perform at your best and you thought really good, and what was going [on in] your life then (8.30, not clear) what were you doing and how you were doing it, and then think about a time when you get frustration".

This extract demonstrates that the coaching encouraged him to evaluate and question himself to enable him to become more independent. He accepts that not getting answers from the coach and continued self-questioning encouraged him to seek help from within himself and to reduce dependency. He also appreciates that his coach was not sympathetic to giving him answers, explaining:

"Not sympathetic to some of the challenges we work through, but empathetic in the way they have approached it".

Mark emphasises that the choices and the decisions were his own although encouraged by the coach. This feeling of ownership encouraged him to continue to work on his personal development since, in his view, executive coaching aims to develop independence and to give the coachee authority in their development. He said:

"You choose whether to listen or whether to act and you have a choice, you got to want to do it. You got to want to be challenged yourself".

David also argues that 'developed understanding' is the source of independence. Engaging in the process encouraged him to undertake a self-evaluation which resulted in actions. In turn, this developed his confidence and encouraged him to continue to apply learned techniques and theories. As a result, he has become an independent learner:

"You start to understand what sort of things (…) trigger you to get frustrated; be more aware of it and what the response I actually wanted to not get frustrated by it to be more aware; understanding what is triggering it and then adapting and becoming more natural".

Furthermore, not receiving direct answers from the coach, as others noted, has been helpful to encourage him to be independent and to realise his potential. David said:

"There is a kind of pure school of thought of coaching that the all the answers are within the coachee and just about teasing them out and I think there is a big, a lot of that is true".

The awareness and the opportunity facilitated through coaching seems to have developed the participants' self-confidence. Additionally, all coachees claim that executive coaching enhanced their ability to self-analyse, be accountable for their decisions and to take informed developmental decisions. Taking ownership of the decisions has also helped them to be action-orientated, meaning that they continue to work on their development.

Perspectives of Coaches

Sarah supports the idea of creating independent learners through executive coaching regarding it as part of her job. According to Sarah, if the results were otherwise, coaching has gone wrong:

"I have seen coaches who are in and out of some relationships, same organisation, same people, because they do not make people… they do not help people be resourceful, they build the dependency".

Sarah considers that creating capable, self-learners should be part of her coaching practice and failing to do so is a fundamental mistake. She believes that developing independent learners is inbuilt into coaching, whilst acknowledging that it is a gradual process:

"It will still unfamiliar and new, then more likely to hearing me asking it, then it becomes theirs. And that is just the way that they do".

Having progressed through the process, the coachees started to believe in themselves more and Sarah recognised a shift of responsibilities from coach to coachee. First, it would appear as:

"I [Sarah] would ask them more and they (…) would do it" and then it becomes "something that they ask themselves".

This extract reveals that Sarah facilitates her coachees to be independent. Thus, creating individual learners is a planned act within her practice. Due to their engagement with Sarah, coachees continue to create space, value, and resources for their development. This strategy helps Sarah to withdraw from the process and let individual leaders continue by themselves. She emphasises this:

"It is about the time and space they valued and how they create more effect, resources for themselves, I am no longer aware of, because you do not want to build the dependency".

John also acknowledges this view of shifting roles. He believes that the focus of coaching should be to create self-sustaining individuals. However, he notes the importance of supporting the coachees through a gradual process by saying:

"Support[in] through the process of getting through the ups and downs, experimentations, and with the view towards the end of the relationship, working out the ways in which they can [be] self-sustained.

John agrees with Sarah's view that creating independent learners is a gradual process, offering assurance that he attempts to create sustainable learners through his coaching practice:

"You know we want to develop leaders as learners, so it is to be sustainable".

John confidently expresses that coachees do become independent learners during the process:

"Kind of continue their learning beyond [the] coaching intervention and have no reliance elsewhere".

These extracts show that the coaches in this study acknowledge the importance of not creating dependency but rather work towards a sustainable mode of development through coaching.

Theme: Leaders (Coachees) becoming coaches

Perspectives of Coachees

This study reveals that executive coaching helps the coachee to become more coaching in style as leaders. The findings suggest that coachees develop a coaching habit due to their positive coaching experience. Daniel acknowledges that coaching supported him in developing opportunities. He highlights that understanding the power of coaching made him continuously engage with it:

"I think probably one thing it does do, it helps you, it helps you re-enforce value and power of coaching, so it encourages me to coach more, I think that is really helpful".

This demonstrates that Daniel was encouraged to coach, and the evidence suggests that his positive coaching experience influenced him to act. He claims that he started coaching himself and became more self-evaluative and self-questioning by saying:

"We did not spend enough time, look for help and support and understanding why something is happening and it is getting that [11.23, not clear] depth which you got to be really disciplined person to sit and really do that".

Daniel acknowledges the benefit of having space to think, and positive influence of coaching for his development influencing him to coach the self and others by saying:

"*Ultimately you learned to self-coach to an extent";* there is evidence to suggest that Daniel has become more reflective and open to change. Furthermore, he continues to explore his actions and take decisions to improve things, thereby ensuring the learning readiness.

Mark emphasises that the techniques he learned, and the concepts that consequently informed his actions, are invaluable. He started employing these techniques with his team and believes that they work effectively, emphasising that:

"These are proportions of what I discussed with Maggie (Coach) or some of the styles, some of the concepts I have used with my guys".

The study shows that Mark continues to conduct an internal self-questioning dialogue. Thus, "self-coaching", the idea brought forward by Daniel is confirmed by Mark. Additionally, Mark developed his self-critique and self-questioning and became more reflective, resulting in forward-thinking and actions. During interviews, he role-played with himself:

"Why do you enjoy what you do, how do you get better at it but also what do you want to do in future" and suggest to himself "take a bit more time, [...] be more reflective, but also take time out for yourself ".

Mark considers that making space and time for himself are important elements that supported his development. His continuous focus on these techniques enhanced skills and motives in becoming a coach for himself and others.

David directly acknowledges that coaching encouraged him to adopt a more coaching style, saying:

"I think it encourages you to be bit more coaching in style".

Thus, David supports the notion of coachee becoming a coach, describing the changes that happened to his practice:

"In terms of being more coaching [in] style, made me to think about delegation, things like that, more giving, letting people make their own choices and discussion and take more responsibility, so it gets some kind of links to that".

He believes that his positive experience of coaching has helped him to develop a coaching in style of leadership. David's views show that he has developed trust among his colleagues and created space for them to be responsible in what they do.

Perspectives of Coaches

The notion that "coachees becomes coaches" is also reflected within the coaches' interpretation, acknowledging that, whilst there was a plan to develop learners' independence, the phenomenon of 'coachees becoming coaches' was unexpectedly observed during the process. Sarah describes her experience of seeing this happen:

"Sometimes they will say they imagine the questions that I would be asking. So certain questions that if they resonate, they end up asking number of times, so what about that, what assumptions did you have, and they find themselves asking those questions but hearing me".

This phenomenon echoes the gradual process of 'becoming individual learners'. At the initial stage of becoming self-coaches and the coaches of others, coachees were asking questions of themselves but hearing the coach. However, Sarah notices that, as coachees gain confidence and independence, they begin to assume complete control, taking over her role. She notes that:

"Some of them noticing how they are being and noticing how they are being almost playing, taking my role".

Sharing some of her observations about coachees coaching both themselves and others, Sarah mentions that the leaders who have experienced executive coaching have taken it a step forward:

"I hear sometimes from leaders how they experience coaching (…) that they use those techniques with their own people and with their stakeholders, so they sort of learn".

John concurs with Sarah, stating that when coachees have had a coach for a period of time, they develop the ability to ask themselves questions. He is quite direct in emphasising that his coachees self-coach:

"I do find that when people work with someone for a while, they do not need the coach for a while. Because they think, they think about questions themselves, they coach, self-coach. It is kind of developing the habit of asking the right question".

Diverging from Sarah's view, John argues that a coachee becoming a coach is a temporary phenomenon. Although coachees do not need a coach for a period of time once the process has ceased, it is unclear for how long they continue to self-coach. This argument did not present with any other coachee or coach (Sarah) participants. However, John did not disagree with the notion of 'coachees becoming coaches. Therefore, the interpretations of both the coachee and the coach participants confirm that, as part of the executive coaching process, coachees become coaches of themselves and others, thereby ensuring a comparatively effective mode of development.

Discussion

Coachees becoming independent Learners

The coachee participants appreciate the authority and independence they have within the executive coaching process and the role that the coach plays as a facilitator. This indicates that the coachee has the decision-making authority, whilst the coach facilitates them to understand the options and challenges.

This is possible only if the coachees are ready for the challenges and are intrinsically motivated (see Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019). In this study, this appears to be the case. The personal authority they hold seems to facilitate them to become independent learners which in turn, influences them to be motivated to act (Grant, 2014; Smith & Brummel, 2013). This evidences that the pre-coaching motivation and readiness (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019) has an effect on the development of the coachee (Knowles et al., 2015).

However, if coaching is seen through the lens of the 'Psy expert' or managerialist discourses (see Western, 2012), creating such authority and independence for coachees can be a challenging exercise as these discourses encourage conformity rather than innovation and autonomy (see Fatien and Lovelace, 2015). These discourses encourage the view that the problem of performance originate with the individual (see Hurlow, 2022). Therefore, in some organisations, measurements, controls, and hierarchy may be prioritised over the independence of the coachees. This result is likely, given the potential power dynamics within the coaching relationship (Louise & Fatien, 2014; Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015; Fatien & Lovelace, 2015) and the performance driven nature of organisations with a strong focus on return on investments (Grant, 2012). In contrast, the 'Network' and 'Soul Guide' discourses (Western, 2012) appreciate more fluid structures with reduced power and hierarchical structures thereby providing support for individuals to seek a better self and life for both their own and the organisational benefit.

The findings suggests that, within the case organisation, coaching practices closely linked with the Network and Soul Guide discourses, appearing to facilitate independence and authority for the coachees to thrive in their respective fields. The coaching culture within the organisation seems to play an active role in such facilitation. David, for example, acknowledges that executive coaching facilitated him to be a self-governing learner and helped him to act on his development through his enhanced understanding, commitment, and responsibility (Ely et al., 2010). Sarah concurs with David saying that she enjoys seeing the enhanced resourcefulness of her coachees.

Therefore, developing coachees' authority appears to be an intentional act performed by coaches within the case study organisation. Thus, this study establishes that the process of developing an independent learner is embedded into the executive process (see Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006) which is closely linked with andragogy (Knowles et al., 2015) and Network and Soul Guide discourses of coaching (Western, 2012).

The independence and confidence encouraged by coaching seems to influence business leaders to continuously act on their own development (see Du Toit, 2014; Bachkirova et al., 2014; Rajasinghe and Allen, 2020) suggesting a more effective approach to learning and development. This is due to the self-motivation, independence, and responsible nature of coachees, which resulted from their positive experience of coaching (see Bachkirova & Borrington, 2019) within a context of supportive power dynamics (Louis and Fatien, 2014; Western, 2012) and the facilitated calm and safe reflective space and enablement of critical thinking (Nadeem & Garvey, 2020). The coaches' ability to facilitate independence, offer an appropriate balance of support, challenge and assessment during the coaching process is also influential. Therefore, when readers attempt to

make sense of these findings and their application it is important to consider the culture, context, relationship, and the purpose of coaching (Garvey, et al., 2018).

Coachees becoming coaches of self and others

Throughout this study, participants highlight the positive aspect of coaching. These positives aspects of coaching are discussed in the literature (Western, 2012; Garvey et al., 2018). Despite the success of communicating the positives of coaching both in literature and in practice, the concept of a coachee becoming a coach is not fully represented in the current body of knowledge. For example, Giglio et al. (1998) discuss the importance of developing coachees' self-monitoring skills to make the development sustainable learning. Similarly, Redshaw (2000) argues that coachees become coaches if the coaching is done right. Knights and Poppleton (2008) and McCarthy and Milner (2013) believe that having a positive experience of executive coaching encourages coachees to enhance their coaching skills.

All these claims are not supported with empirical evidence. However, this study indicates that executive coaching helps the participants to reinforce the values and powers of coaching that encourage them to continue to coach themselves and others (see McCarthy and Milner, 2013; Knights and Poppleton, 2008; Redshaw, 2000). It is evident that the coachees started self-coaching as a result of their executive coaching engagement. The positive experience of executive coaching connects the coachees with the techniques that the coach employs and influences them to coach themselves and others. For example, John observes from his practice that coachees think about the questions themselves, as they begin to coach and self-coach and develop a habit of asking good questions. However, there is not sufficient evidence to understand how long that the coachees could sustain self-coaching or becoming coaches themselves. One participant emphasised that this possibility maybe temporary More research is needed here. Our study also revealed that the coaches intentionally help coachees to develop these abilities in a Vygotskian sense (1978) of 'scaffolding' which can be interpreted as a temporary facilitation of learning and developing a learners' autonomy.

The findings can be interpreted as a restatement of social learning theory and andragogy informed development. However, from a coaching perspective, coachees becoming coaches of themselves and others is a novel finding in this study. Therefore, this study reveals insights of coaching's potential to promote andragogy informed social learning within the context of the case study (see Fatien et al., 2019; Garvey et al., 2018).

As Brockbank and McGill (2012) suggest, the potential for continuous learning is reflected in the phenomenon of coachees becoming coaches of themselves. This also manifests in this study as participants start to self-analyse, criticise, and self-reflect in order to explore new or better ways of doing things (Du Toit, 2014) and to develop new understanding (Bachkirova and Borrington, 2019). This reiterates Lucan and Turner's (2023) notion that reflection has a multiplier effect on learning and development. During the interviews, the coachee participants employed some reflective exercises to engage with themselves, thereby demonstrating the development of these skills. These self-conversations and reflections helped them to be more self-aware, responsible, and informed learners (Mezirow, 1991). The study evidences the shift of roles 'andragogically' as learners gain more autonomy and responsibility during the process (Knowles, 1984). This helps us to argue for executive coaching as an effective (Du Toit, 2014; Boyatzis et al., 2006) and contagious mode of learning and development. However, readiness of the coachees, their openness, motivation, and positive attitude towards coaching within a supportive context seem to influence the positive outcomes of this study.

Practical Implications

The empirical evidence presented here may influence coach practitioners and organisations to deepen their understanding of how executive coaching may facilitate leadership learning and development. The findings encourage practitioners to be more reflective on their practice and do more to encourage independence and continuous learning. Coachees becoming independent learners and 'coaches of themselves, and others' can help practitioners to justify their practice (see Grant, 2014). However, these findings may not be appealing to scholars and institutions whose ontological and epistemological positions are influenced by positivist philosophy.

This study emphasised the importance of culture, power dynamics, relationships, support offered by coaches (see Garvey et al., 2018) to achieve such positive realities in coaching. Therefore, we encourage readers to understand the context of the study as they engage in hermeneutic dialogue with our participants and the findings. The study also emphasises the importance of the appropriate balance between support, challenge, and assessment to create a positive coaching experience to facilitate independence and self-directed continuous learning.

We hope this study generates curiosity among coaching scholars to explore the possibilities of coaching by employing a wider variety of methodologies. It is also important to explore the phenomenon from different perspectives (organisational, professional bodies, coachee, coaches, coach educators) to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the possibilities presented within this paper.

Conclusion

This paper presents research findings of an interpretative phenomenological exploration into business leaders' interpretations of their executive coaching experience in a case organisation. The study reveals that executive coaching supports coaches to become independent learners and coaches of themselves and others due to their positive engagement with the coaching process. These findings add to the current knowledge and understanding of coaching's potential as a learning and development process. Therefore, the study provides some subjective evidence to support coaching as a more effective leadership learning and development intervention and presents some empirical evidence to support the business case for coach practitioners. Further research is needed to explore the coaching phenomenon from a diversity of perspectives and methodologies. We conclude by reminding readers that the participant interpretations are informed by the organisational, social, and contextual factors. The constructed knowledge is subjective (see Burrell and Morgan, 1979) and does not possess a universal truth that is independent from our participants. The discussion continues!

References

Athanasopoulou, A. & Dopson, S. (2015). *Developing leaders by executive coaching: practice and evidence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bachkirova, T. & Kauffman, C. (2008). Many ways of knowing: How to make sense of different research perspectives in studies of coaching, *Coaching: an international journal of theory, research, and practice*, 1(2), 107-113. DOI: 10.1080/17521880802328186.

Bachkirova, T., Cox, E. & Clutterbuck, D. (2014). Introduction. In Cox, E., Bachkirova, T. & Clutterbuck, D. (eds.), *The complete handbook of coaching*, 2nd ed, London: Sage.

Bachkirova, T., & Borrington, S. (2019). Old wine in new bottles: Exploring pragmatism as a philosophical framework for the discipline of coaching, *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 1, 337–360.

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioural change, *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191-215. DOI: 10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191.

Brockbank, A. & McGill, I. (2012). *Facilitating reflective learning: coaching, mentoring and supervision*, 2nd ed., London: Kogan Page.

Boyatzis, R.E., Smith, M.L. & Blaize, N. (2006). Developing sustainable leaders through coaching and compassion, *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 5(1), 8-24. DOI: 10.5465/amle.2006.20388381.

Cox, E. (2006). An adult learning approach to coaching. In: Stober, G. and Grant, A.M. *Evidence base coaching handbook*, Hoboken: Wiley.

Cox, E. (2013). *Coaching understood: A pragmatic inquiry into the coaching process*. London: Sage.

Cox, E., Bachkirova, T., & Clutterbuck, D. (2014). *The complete handbook of coaching*, 2nd ed, London: Sage.

Day, D. V., Fleenor, J. W., Atwater, L. E., Sturm, R. E., & McKee, R. A. (2014). Advances in leader and leadership development: a review of 25 years of research and theory, *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(1), 63-82. DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.11.004.

Drake, D. B. (2011). What do coaches need to know? Using the mastery window to assess and develop expertise, *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 4(2), 138-155. DOI: 10.1080/17521882.2011.596486.

Du Toit, A. (2014). *Making sense of coaching*, London: Sage.

Ely, K., Boyce, L. A., Nelson, J. K., Zaccaro, S. J., Hernez-Broome, G. & Whyman, W. (2010). "Evaluating leadership coaching: a review and integrated framework". *The Leadership Quarterly*, 21(4), 585-599. DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2010.06.003.

Fatien, P. & Lovelace, K.J. (2015). The coaching continuum: power dynamics in the change process, *International Journal of Work Innovation*, 1(3), 305–322. DOI: 10.1504/IJWI.2015.074171.

Fatien, P., Otter, K., Stokes, P. & Van Hove, L. (2019). Let's Sculpt It! Experiencing the Role of Organizational Context in Coaching, Management Teaching Review, 00(0), 1-15. DOI: 10.1177/2379298119833692.

Fatien, P., Louis, D. & Islam, G., 2022. Neutral In-Tensions: Navigating Neutrality in Coaching. *Journal of Management Studies*. DOI: 10.1111/joms.12883.

Fillery-Travis, A. & Lane, D. (2006). Does coaching work or are we asking the wrong question? *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 1(1), 24-36.

Fisher, R. H. (2023). Been there, done that: Can executive coaches prior experience be helpful in coaching? *Coaching at Work*, 18(3), 48-51.

Garvey, B. (2011). *A very short, fairly interesting, and reasonably cheap book about coaching and mentoring*, London: Sage.

Garvey, B. (2017). Issues of assessment and accreditation of coaches. In Bachkirova, T., Spence, G. & Drake, D. (eds.). *Sage handbook of coaching*, London: Sage.

Garvey, R., Stokes, P. & Megginson, D. (2018). *Coaching and mentoring: theory and practice*. 3rd ed, London: Sage.

Garvey, R. & Stokes, P. (2022). *Coaching and mentoring: theory and practice*. 4th ed, London: Sage.

Giglio, L., Diamante, T. & Urban, J.M. (1998). "Coaching a leader: leveraging change at the to", *Journal of Management Development and Learning in Organizations*, 17(2), 93 - 105. DOI: 10.1108/02621719810205998.

Grant, A. M. (2014). The efficacy of executive coaching in times of organisational change". *Journal of Change Management*, 14(2), 258-280. DOI: 10.1080/14697017.2013.805159.

Gray, D. E. (2014). *Doing Research in the Real World*, 3rd ed, London: Sage.

Gray, D. E., Garvey, B. & Lane, D. A. (2016). *A critical introduction to coaching and mentoring: debates, dialogues and discourses*, London: Sage.

Hurlow, S. (2022). Revisiting the Relationship between Executive Coaching and Learning: The Problems and Possibilities, Academy of Management Learning & Education, 21 (1): 121-138. DOI: 10.5465/amle.2019.0345.

Knights, A. & Poppleton, A. (2008). *Developing coaching capability in organisations*, London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Knowles, M.S. (1984). *Andragogy in action: Applying modern principles of adult education*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F. & Swanson, R.A. (2015). *The adult learner: the definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*, 8th ed Oxon: Routledge.

Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Korotov, K. (2017). Coaching for leadership development. In Bachkirova, T., Spence, G. & Drake, D. (Eds.), *Sage handbook of coaching* (pp. 139-158). London: Sage.

Ladegard, G. & Gjerde, S. (2014). Leadership coaching, leader role-efficacy, and trust in subordinates: a mixed methods study assessing leadership coaching as a leadership development tool, *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25 (4), 631-646. DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2014.02.002.

Lave J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Louis, D. & Fatien, P., (2014). Educating coaches to power dynamics: Managing multiple agendas within the triangular relationship, *Journal of Psychological Issues in Organizational Culture*, 5(2), 31-47. DOI: 10.1002/jpoc.21140.

Maltbia, T. E., Marsick, V. J. & Ghosh, R. (2014). Executive and organizational coaching a review of insights drawn from literature to inform HRD practice, *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 16 (2), 61-183. DOI: 10.1177/1523422313520474.

McCarthy, G. & Milner, J. (2013). "Managerial coaching: challenges, opportunities & training" Journal of Management Development, 32(7), 768-779. DOI: 10.1108/JMD-11-2011-0113.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Myers, A. (2017). Researching the coaching process. In Bachkirova, T., Spence, G. and Drake, D. (Eds.), *Sage handbook of coaching* (pp.589-609). London: Sage.

Nadeem, I. & Garvey, B., (2020). Learning Experiences for Academic Deans: Implications for Leadership Coaching, *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 18(2), 133-151. DOI: 10.24384/6s7r-q077.

Nadeem, I., Garvey, B., & Down, M., (2021). The Adequacy of Competency Frameworks for Coaching Academic Deans: A Critical Review, *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*. 2021, 19(2), 3-23. DOI: 10.24384/ntr0-xf66.

Rajasinghe, D. (2020). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a coaching research methodology, *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 13(2), 176-190. DOI: 10.1080/17521882.2019.1694554.

Rajasinghe, D.R. & Mansour H.F. (2019). Coaching as an entrepreneurship learning and development tool In Mulholland G. Turner J. (Eds.), *Enterprising Education in UK Higher Education: Challenges for Theory and Practice* (pp.52-61). London: Routledge.

Rajasinghe D., C. Allen C. (2020). Coaching for Workplace Learning and Development. In Loon M., Stewart, J. S. Nachmias (Eds.), *The Future of HRD, Volume II* (pp. 147-175). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-52459-3_6.

Rajasinghe, D. Aluthgama-Baduge, C. &G. Mulholland, G. (2021). Researching entrepreneurship: an approach to develop subjective understanding, *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*. 27(4), 866-883. DOI: 10.1108/IJEBR-10-2019-0601.

Rajasinghe, D, Garvey, B. Smith, W-A., Burt, S., Barosa-Pereira, A., Clutterbuck, D., & Csigas, Z. (2022), On becoming a coach: Narratives of learning and development, *Coaching psychologist*, 18(2), 4-19.

Redshaw, B. (2000). Do we really understand coaching? How can we make it work better? *Industrial and Commercial Training*. 32 (3), 106-109. DOI: 10.1108/00197850010371693.

Ricoeur, P. (1970). *Freud and philosophy: an essay on interpretation*. (Trans.). Denise Savage, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Shoukry, H., & Cox, E. (2018). Coaching as a social process, *Management Learning*, 49(4), 413-428. DOI: 10.1177/1350507618762600.

Schulz, F. (2010). The politics of work coaching – Between impairing vision and creating visions, *28th Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism*, Lille, France.

Smith, J.A. (2019). Participants and researchers searching for meaning: Conceptual developments for interpretative phenomenological analysis, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(2), 166-181. DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2018.1540648.

Smith, I. M. & Brummel, B. J. (2013). Investigating the role of the active ingredients in executive coaching, *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 6(1), 57-71. DOI: 10.1080/17521882.2012.758649.

Smith, J.A., Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, methods and research*, London: Sage.

Smith, J.A., Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. (2022). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, methods and research*, 2nd ed, London: Sage.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological process*. (eds). Cole, M., John-Steiner, V., Scribner, S. & Souberman, E., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Western, S. (2012). *Coaching and mentoring: a critical text*, London: Sage.

Yardley, L. (2000). Dilemmas in qualitative health research, *Psychology and Health*, 15(2), 215-228. DOI: 10.1080/08870440008400302.

About the authors

Duminda Rajasinghe, PhD is a Senior Lecturer in HRM, and OB at Nottingham Business school. He specialises in leadership development, coaching, and learning and development.

Professor Bob Garvey is one of Europe's leading academic practitioners of coaching and mentoring and an experienced coach/mentor.