Reflections from the field

Evidence Is a Verb: A Relational Approach to Knowledge and Mastery in Coaching

David B. Drake, Center for Narrative Coaching, 675 Robinson Rd. Sebastopol, CA 95472, USA
Contact Email: ddrake@narrativecoaching.com

Abstract

This article provides a fresh look at the evidential needs in coaching by outlining important principles for the bases of evidence-based practice, the nature of evidence itself, the links between research and practice, the uses of evidence, the politics of evidence and the implications of evidence as a basis for coaching. The aim is to enhance our understanding of the "black box" of coaching, the body of knowledge specific to and foundational for coaching, and the development of shared guidelines for the use of evidence in coaching. Two models are introduced to support a new and relational view of evidence: one that identifies four domains of knowledge as the basis for mastery in coaching and the other that articulates a need for artistry as a way to draw on these domains in working with clients. Examples are offered to illustrate many of the key points and the article concludes with a vision for the future of evidence in coaching.

Introduction

I begin with a provocative proposition: What if we were to think of evidence as a verb (Drake, 2008a)? By that I mean to look beyond the traditional notions of evidence as universal, static, objective, neutral and codified data to include the idea that it is also contextual, dynamic, subjective, political, and socially constructed. This view draws on a seasoned appreciation for the evidential value of relational and experiential wisdom in professional practice in addition to the traditional value ascribed to techniques and measures (Milton & Corrie, 2002). For coaches to become masterful, they need to move beyond thinking of evidence as only a tool or label to be brought from the outside into their practice. Instead, they can also see it as a way of thinking, a way of being, which is integral to how they work inside their practices. In doing so, coaches retain the important distinctions among science and practice as they relate to evidence but they are no longer bound by false dichotomies that do not serve them or their clients (Drake, 2008b).

I would make a second provocative case that every choice we make in coaching is already based on some type of evidence—even if it is just the latest book we read. Evidence only becomes significant when put into action in response to a question, in support of an outcome or in the creation of relevant knowledge. Therefore, what constitutes 'evidence' is determined in large part by the community in which it is used and that community's preferred paradigm, discourse, and norms (Lincoln, 2002). The key is to grow our capacity to deeply understand what evidence would best serve our development as practitioners and the outcomes for clients. For us to become masterful in coaching, we need to move beyond evidence as a tool or label—and see it more as a way of thinking, a way of being, as professionals in relation with others.

Coaching will benefit in three significant ways from thinking of evidence in this way. First, the "black box" of coaching can be explicated so that researchers can study what occurs in coaching (and how and why decisions are made), coaches can assess and adjust their theories-in-use (Argyris, 1994), and coach educators can understand mastery and how it is developed (Drake, 2007). Second, we can develop a body of knowledge and research specific to and foundational for coaching. Third, we can support the development of shared guidelines for the role of evidence in coaching. This article addresses six aspects of a relational view of evidence in coaching: (1) the bases of evidence-based practice, (2) the nature of evidence itself, (3) the links between research and practice, (4) the uses of evidence, (5) the politics of evidence, and (6) the implications of evidence as a basis for coaching. Each of these aspects is essential and integral to masterful coaching.

What Is Evidence-Based Practice?

Eddy (2005) traced the first published use of the term "evidence-based" to a series of articles on guidelines published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1990 (p. 13). The lead author of those guidelines later described evidence-based practice (EBP) as, "the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients, [which] means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research" (Sackett, Haynes, Guyatt, & Tugwell,1996, p. 71). Later, in applying the framework to the medical profession, the definition became, "Evidence-based medicine (EBM) is the integration of best research evidence with clinical expertise and patient values" (Sackett, Strauss, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000, p. 1).

In this article, I will argue that there are four domains of knowledge that are essential to foster such an approach to evidence in coaching: personal, contextual, professional, and foundational. In doing so, I make the case that relying too heavily on the medical approach to evidence may not be either appropriate or useful in coaching. Instead, I share the interest of Tanenbaum (2005) and others in aspiring to decision-making patterns in coaching that openly draw on valid research, personal reflexivity, professional experience, and contextual awareness on behalf of the client. I observe that there is a growing sophistication in the coaching community in making finer distinctions among the types and sources of knowledge and the implications of evidence (Corrie & Callahan, 2000) for an integrated and masterful approach to coaching.

The Nature of Evidence

What is evidence, anyway? As a word, it seems fairly straightforward. Yet there are important distinctions to be made in coaching about how to define it and the types of evidence that matter to us. As an example, coaching is often positioned as moving away from the problem-orientation of the scientific paradigm and the pathology-orientation of the medical model. At the same time, these historical orientations have certain features critical for the maturation of coaching as a profession and a discipline, and even the very notion of "evidence" borrows heavily from these traditions. We can see this in Scheidel's (1994) definition of evidence as "information, in any form, presented to support the inferences drawn and arguments made on some research question" (p. 66). In seeking a broader definition of and value for evidence in coaching, coaches would do well to heed the distinction between internal and external validity offered by Knotthaus and Dinant, who advocated for "medicine-based evidence" as well as "evidence-based medicine" (cited in Steinberg & Luce, 2005, p. 86).

This reciprocal relationship between science and practice supports the idea that evidence only becomes significant when put into action—in response to a question, in support of an outcome or in the creation of relevant knowledge. Therefore, what constitutes "evidence" is determined in large part by the community in which it is used and that community's preferred paradigm, discourse, and norms (Lincoln, 2002). As Fisher (1977) noted, evidence does not exist outside of a theoretical, paradigmatic, or metaphysical framework. Therefore, it is imperative for coaching as a nascent professional community to establish its norms and values regarding evidence. Doing so will help us clearly articulate to clients, sponsors and peers what we believe about evidence, its nature and its use. If indeed, evidence only takes on value when it is used well, we need to candidly ask ourselves as coaches: (1) How do I *really* use the various types of evidence right now in my practice? (2) What would I *actually* do differently with more and better evidence? (3) What evidence would I need to be more effective and wise in my practice?

The Links between Research and Practice

Coaches need evidence that informs their awareness, shapes their assessment, and guides their actions—not only a "science of discourse, but [also] a science of intervention" (Lane & Corrie, 2006, p. 83). It is a matter of understanding what you notice, what you think it means, and what you should do about it. Many coaches struggle in particular with the latter—how to use research and evidence effectively in taking action and reflecting on their results. As coaching evolves, there is a growing recognition of the need to establish a clearer canon and taxonomy of evidence that addresses core questions for the field such as: (1) what works; (2) how it works; (3) why it works; (4) how well it works; (5) how we know it works; (6) when and with whom it works; and (7) what might work better (cf. Linley, 2006; Tanenbaum, 2005). Furthermore, it will be important to maintain an understanding of evidence that serves all the stakeholders in coaching.

For example, we recognize that understanding and dealing with complex client issues is often best done through interactions with multiple theories, forms of knowledge and types of evidence (Safran & Messer, 1997). However, many coaches, particularly as they start out, are not even sure in which domain of knowledge to search (Margison, 2001) for the right ingredients to serve their clients or deconstruct their work. What they are missing are road maps that connect coaching-related research to clear principles for decision-making and action in coaching. I have proposed the following model (Figure 1) as a key element for such a road map. It offers research and evidence as a dynamic interaction among four knowledge domains and the relational process between a coach and a client (and their respective systems)—each of whom brings knowledge and evidence in co-creating the coaching process and its results.
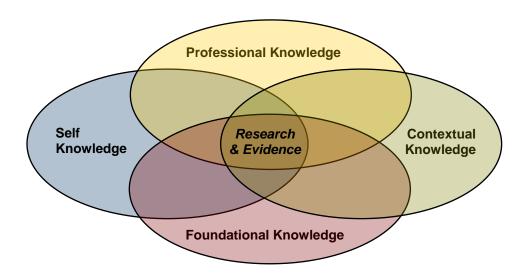
Figure 1: Four domains of knowledge for coaching mastery (Drake, 2007)

1. *Foundational Knowledge:* Theories, models, and guidelines based on research and scholarship from the basic and applied sciences that inform choices in coaching.
2. *Professional Knowledge:* Competencies and methods based on research and scholarship by practitioners as they engage in coaching and reflect on outcomes.
3. *Self Knowledge:* Awareness, maturity and wisdom based on the personal development of practitioners and clients as they participate in coaching.
4. *Contextual Knowledge:* Subject matter expertise, organizational savvy and strategies based on a systemic understanding of the client's issues and objectives in coaching.

In teaching this model, I use common coaching situations to identify evidence from each of the four knowledge domains that may be useful in helping the client achieve a successful outcome. I address both the expertise of the coach and the experience of the client in mapping options for engagement. For example, in coaching a client who is not sustaining the change she is seeking, the following evidence may be useful: (1) using the Trans-Theoretical Model (Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente, 1994) to track indicators as to her stage of readiness for change—*foundational knowledge*; (2) comparing her goal structures and agreements (cf Grant, 2006) with best practices and lessons learned about those at her stage—*professional knowledge*; (3) realizing one's tendency to be overly optimistic and, therefore, prone to missing clues as to her true readiness—*self knowledge*; and (4) analyzing the data from the 360-degree assessment which point to organizational conditions that are not conducive to the client sustaining the change—*contextual knowledge*. Each of these sources of evidence can be used, as necessary, by the coach and the client to design a more effective process and attain better results.

Multiple streams of evidence are important in translating science into practice, as no one type of data can give us a complete picture of what is effective. Most quantitative research strives for internal validity to allow for rigorous testing and is thus susceptible to a limited ability to generalize beyond the sample studied. Many qualitative methods give rich contextual and individual descriptions but generally do not enable us to explain or predict an individual's behavior change. In a blended approach, coaches draw on and evaluate multiple sources of evidence for use with each unique client, and they are encouraged to do

so in ways that are consistent with and contribute to the collective evidence about efficacy in coaching. Prospective clients can support this movement by asking coaches and schools to articulate the evidential processes that inform their coaching methods.

This approach requires that coaches recognize the strengths and limitations of the evidence obtained from each domain of knowledge and type of research, and to draw on them as needed to improve their work with each unique client situation. The key issue here is not that coaches should all accept the same theoretical foundations or evidential criteria. Rather, it is that we would be served well by using the same evidentiary discipline (Grant & Cavanaugh, 2003) across all forms of knowledge and elements in coaching. For example, the role of intuition in guiding our methods as coaches can be examined as vigorously as the outcomes for our clients.

As part of this process, coaches need to make more visible and validate the causal connections between the basic and applied sciences and the practices they use. The goal is to connect salient research evidence and coaching processes in a way that has both scientific integrity and practical utility. As Denmark and Krauss (2005) observed, however, there is often tension wherever a discipline contains both *basic* and *applied* interests because of competing pressures and requirements. The development of research-driven foundations and practice-driven tools for dealing with evidence will enable coaches to mitigate some of this tension by enabling them to integrate the two in their decision-making with clients and their reflections on the results.

Two factors would help coaching achieve a greater integration of research and practice: (1) more connections between traditional research and the issues important to practice, and (2) more understanding of the dynamics between empiricism and success in the practice context (Hayes, Barlow, & Nelson-Gray, 1999).

Unlike psychotherapists who draw on the science of psychology and contribute to its ongoing development, coaches intentionally need to make the connections to other disciplines in order to craft a unique and potent practice—complete with its own discourse, process, and values around evidence (Drake & Stober, 2005; Peterson & Hicks, 1996). Coaches have the opportunity to create a new stance on evidence that takes more seriously the historic scientific requirements of a profession as well as the dynamic contextual needs of a new type of practice. By respecting multiple types of knowledge and evidence, coaches can incorporate research guidance, practice experience, client experience, local context knowledge, (and professional knowledge) in making better decisions in working with their clients (Rycroft-Malone et al., 2004). Great coaches do this instinctively; the goal now is to be able to articulate and disseminate how this is done in order to increase the conscious competence within coaching. The benefits of doing so are contingent on an increased ability and a commitment from coaches to make use of evidence in guiding their practice decisions.

Uses of Evidence

In addition to understanding differences in the sources and types of evidence, it is also important to make distinctions about how evidence is used. In doing so, we can start with Kraiger's (2002) identification of three purposes for evaluation: marketing, decision-making, and improvement, as a hierarchy by which to measure the state of evidence within coaching. As an industry that began largely in the marketplace, a large portion of evidence was presented for promotional purposes—on behalf of programs, approaches, and individual coaches. We are now starting to see increases in the development of evidence that is legitimate in fulfilling the other two purposes in coaching—decisions and improvements. This is a welcome shift and demonstrates the early stages of a maturing professional practice. To continue

this shift, there is a need for greater critical thinking skills and a more explicit pedagogy to help coaches navigate the complex evidentiary culture in which they work (Trierweiler & Stricker, 1998).

As an example, one of the key arenas for the use of evidence in professional practice is in the act of diagnosis. While coaching does not share the problem orientation often found in the medical model and its expert-diagnosis orientation, the competencies around the selection and application of evidence in assessing the client remain essential. It may be useful here to think of evidence as a flow rather than an object and to emphasize the importance of helping coaches use evidence as well as produce evidence. As such, we need to look more closely at how coaches draw on the four domains of knowledge (Figure 1) in preparing for, conducting and reporting on their sessions and projects with clients. At any given point in the process, what evidence from these domains are they noticing, accessing, constructing and implementing? Overall, these issues are important as the coaching community debates the qualifications for evidence, the guidelines for decision rules, and the optimal levels of specificity in translating research evidence into coaching practice.

Working within the professional community of psychotherapists, Lane and Corrie (2006) recognized that practitioners must be rigorous in their analysis AND innovative in their design. They asked, "How can we legitimately lay claim to the status of scientist [as in scientist-practitioner] if a substantial component of our 'artistry' entails being unable to predict which ideas will emerge and how we will implement them?" (p. 58). Coaching, an arguably "artistic" practice in this sense, is well-suited to move beyond the historical science-practice dichotomy to create another way of thinking about this symbiotic relationship. For example, in my work I bring together the science of narrative psychology, the experience of the client's stories, the power of personal presence, and the wisdom from my professional practice in choosing how to artfully engage with a client. Each of these threads can be seen in the model I use in teaching the four domains of knowledge (Figure 2).

Artistry results from developing mastery in all four domains such that one can fluidly draw from and link to them as necessary to operate at high levels in the coaching session and for the broader profession. In the process of teaching coaching skills to over 2,500 professionals and leaders, I have found this model invaluable in determining what knowledge domains I need to focus on for a given group. For example, in teaching therapists with strong foundational knowledge and self knowledge, I tend to focus on the professional knowledge and contextual knowledge they will need to be effective in organizational settings. Conversely, in teaching managers with strong professional and contextual knowledge, I focus on the personal and foundational knowledge they will need to be effective in guiding individual change. Regardless of the starting point, masterful coaches are able to recognize, prioritize and operationalize evidence from each knowledge domain in guiding their practice. Less-developed coaches rely too heavily on one or more of the domains of knowledge and tend to have more sporadic results as a result. The ability to draw on an integrated and actionable repertoire of knowledge (and the evidence to ground it) in relating to clients and their systems is key to mastery in coaching.

For example, masterful coaches are aware of their somatic-emotive states as sources of evidence about the session (personal knowledge); they sort the stories, told and untold, to discern what to pay attention to in the client's environment (contextual knowledge); they appropriately apply relevant theoretical frames and the related evidence in developing plans with the client for their desired change (foundational knowledge); and they integrate these various streams of knowledge and evidence in ways more likely to be effective based on their experience as a practitioner (professional knowledge). The grid (Figure 2) above provides a way to map a coach's development towards mastery and artistry—the ability to rigorously apply relevant knowledge from all four domains as needed to achieve optimal results and

enhance shared learning. Groopman's (2007) work on decision-making among doctors is informative here in looking at how, in their best moments, they make judgments based on the gestalt of their first impressions—a gestalt combined with a deliberate analysis of available evidence.
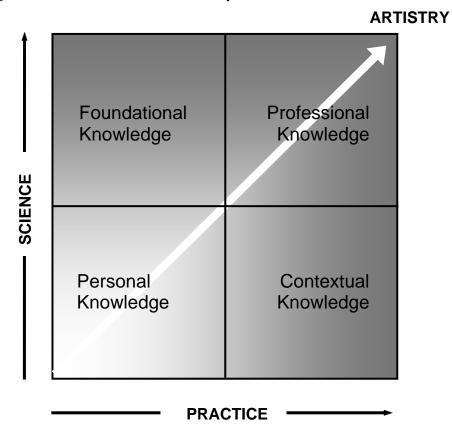

Figure 2: The path of the master coach to artistry

Politics of Evidence

Just as coaches make judgments in the moment as part of the iterative process in a coaching session, so prospective clients make judgments in selecting a coach. The latter offers an interesting example to illustrate the political nature of evidence. Clients want results, but few choose a coach because they use techniques with a demonstrated ability to achieve the client's outcome. It is more likely that clients choose an interpersonally competent coach who uses an approach they find compatible with their worldview (Messer, 2004). However, each approach requires and leads to the provision of different types of evidence. Clients and their sponsors also search by reputation and results related to their issues — though the two may not always go hand in hand—and once again different needs and offerings related to evidence arise. Evidence is political because clients, sponsors, coaches, scholars, and the larger coaching community each have needs and expectations for evidence—and vie to privilege their evidence and their norms. Therefore, it is incumbent for all involved in coaching to stay in dialogue about a path forward regarding evidence and for coaches to equip themselves to be able to fully participate.

As a local example of the benefit of these conversations, I worked with one organization, operating in a fairly regulated environment, to map the evidential needs and values of their stakeholders in order to develop reporting systems that provided meaningful evidence for each group they could then use for improving their performance. The regulating and governing bodies would still get their evidence around organizational performance, but the staff and management within a given program would also have relevant evidence they could use to guide how they coached their individual clients.

In order to grow in its relation to evidence, the coaching community will want to bridge science, with its proclivity to be public and generalized in the ways questions are framed and answered, and practice with its proclivity to be more private and localized in the ways solutions are crafted and applied (Trierweiler & Stricker, 1998). In the end, clearer ties between contexts, methods and results need to be articulated in thinking about evidence. Important questions are being raised across the professional community (Barlow, 2000; Lincoln, 2002; Stober, Wildflower, & Drake, 2006; Tanenbaum, 2005) to support this aim:

1. What types of evidence should be developed and how should they be weighted? How restrictive should the definition of "evidence" be?
2. Who gets to decide what counts as evidence? What is effective in examining the evidence?
3. What discourse and treatments are privileged by our evidence? Does the drive for standards put at risk the needs of individual clients and actions at the local level?
4. What are the implications of Evidence Based Practice (EBP)? What will be gained and lost?
5. Will an adoption of EBP methods be used by other stakeholders to increase the quality and credibility of coaching or to limit the choices available for coaches and clients? How do we balance the need for accountability with the need for further innovation and the exploration of potentially effective techniques and methods?

The debate about evidence will accelerate and external voices will become increasingly influential. As this happens, coaches must become more astute about the politics of the evidence they generate from and incorporate into their practices. In the end, coaches must decide how they will assign their allegiance in the midst of the growing demands to serve multiple masters. This can already be seen in managing the confidentiality issues around evidence in terms of negotiating the client's needs for privacy and candor, the sponsor's need for progress and value, and the organization's need for learning and results. It is my hope that the next generation of frameworks and guidelines for evidence will arise from within the profession and a place of intentionality rather than from external entities and a quest for accelerated legitimacy.

Implications of Evidence as a Basis for Coaching

I have advocated here for the role of artistry in coaching as a way to bring together four domains of knowledge and their related evidence as a path to mastery. I believe this overcomes one of the critical weaknesses in recognizing the fact that the unique and dynamic fields formed in coaching relationships require that coaching be a "radically unpredictable, almost iterative process in which the next step is informed, in large part, by the conditions immediately preceding it" (Lane & Corrie, 2006, p. 155). Artistry allows a coach to work elegantly and effectively with the knowledge that is present and informative within that field, consistent with the best available knowledge in those domains, and can be connected back to the larger professional community for future and broader use.

The latter may be more challenging in that coaches, as with Crane and Hafen's (2002) study of psychotherapists, tend to focus on integrating research into practice to sustain a distinct professional identity and an efficacious approach rather than becoming significant producers of research itself. Even so, a relational view of evidence that is based in both science and practice will enhance our understanding of how to develop mastery in coaches. The strength of what Stober and Grant (2006, p.6) called the *informed practitioner model* lies "not in developing prescriptive intervention models to be applied with unquestioning confidence but, rather, to provide theoretical frameworks, information, critical thinking, and methodological rigor that the practitioner can use to navigate the ever-changing waters of the coaching intervention". Lane and Corrie (2006, p.208) described it as "embarking upon a never-ending search for new stories that facilitate increasingly elegant and helpful ways of working with clients to make sense of the puzzles that we, and they, are attempting to solve. In addition to identifying these narratives, we search for ways through which they may be validated and refined which are grounded in . . . the discipline[s]". Viewing evidence as a subjective and dynamic process not just an objective and static commodity frees coaching to more candidly examine their level of awareness, assumptions and actions in how they coach—and thereby improve their skills, their outcomes and their contributions to the profession.

Rather than trying to 'prove' themselves as if engaged in an adolescent dare, coaches need to take up the mantle of evidence in addressing the questions above as part of their professional and collective maturation. In doing so, it would be naïve for coaches to turn their back on science or to be against a scientific methodology. At the same time, to present coaching as a hard science—anymore than can be said of psychotherapy—is merely an attempt to make it a credible competitor in a crowded marketplace. Rather than being handed off to either the coaching research community or the marketing people, evidence is everyone's responsibility in this era (Drake, 2008b). Coaches can no longer afford to wait for larger collectives to decide on evidentiary standards for everyone or skate ahead on their own thin ice in an unregulated environment (cf. Spence, Cavanagh, & Grant, 2006).

Conclusion

Evidence-based practice holds much promise as an approach to increasing the credibility and quality of coaching. By learning from the experience of those in other fields who have been down this road for nearly two decades, coaching can develop an integrated, comprehensive approach to effective interventions that serves the needs of both research and practice. In doing so, we can help ourselves by discerning how the EBP framework best fits and serves the coaching professional community, its members, and its clients. It will be important to make ample room for both *rigorous* research and *vigorous* practice as sources of evidence, and to respond to internal *and* external forces that are at play in shaping the evidence conversation and its outcome. Specifically, there is a need is to design opportunities, mechanisms, and technologies by which evidence can be effectively shared, accessed, and integrated in coaching. In the end, coaches need to become much clearer about how we think being "evidence-based" will benefit us individually and collectively.

The challenge for the coaching profession is to increase its stature and developmental capacity through better integration with traditional scientific strategies and bodies of work while remaining responsive to the demands of the marketplace, the goals of the clients, and the needs of practitioners. Rather than perpetuating the turf battles over the theoretical or practical bases for coaching, coaches and coach educators are encouraged to make explicit the evidential bases for their practices, the professional and foundational knowledge sets in which they are grounded (as contributors and benefactors), and the reflective activities they use to deepen their practice and contribute to the broader knowledge base. The

adoption of an appropriate evidential standard in coaching will be enhanced through an increased mastery among practitioners in the four domains of knowledge and the underlying bodies of evidence.

I believe we will achieve this goal by developing ourselves as artisans (Drake, 2008) who blend science and practice to meet client needs through the questions we form, the evidence we choose, and the reflexive evaluation of our performance. This echoes Keeney's (1990) vision for psychotherapy that it make a dramatic shift in "freeing itself from the tight embrace of medicalism and scientism [in order to] connecting to the creative wellsprings of the arts." It can also be seen in Phillips (2006) vision that psychotherapists inhabit the middle ground of the arts between religious truth and scientific truth, in which 'truth and usefulness have traditionally been allowed a certain latitude . . . In the so-called arts it has always been acknowledged that many of the things we value most—the gods and God, love and sexuality, mourning and amusement, character and inspiration, the past and the future—are neither measurable or predictable. Indeed, this may be one of the reasons they are so abidingly important to us.'

Is not coaching a quintessential art in this regard—helping clients get to the heart of their dilemmas, the core of their values, the essence of their life, the meaning of their legacies? If coaches thought of themselves as daring yet disciplined artists, it would free them to move more confidently in the direction of their dreams for their practice, their part of the profession, and what they can do in the world (Drake, 2008b). As coaching evolves, it is my vision that we will soon be linking evidence and the arts in new ways such that we are able to look back, as Norcross (2001) does on behalf of psychotherapy, and say, "Efforts to promulgate evidence-based [coaching] have been noble in intent and timely in distribution. They are praiseworthy efforts to distill scientific research into clinical applications and to guide practice and training. They wisely demonstrate that, in a climate of accountability, [coaching] stands up to empirical scrutiny with the best of [related] interventions" (p. 346). I welcome your participation in this quest to develop a deeper and more holistic integration of evidence as a verb to be experienced in the flow of coaching.

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