**Academic Paper**

# From "blind elation" to "oh my goodness, what have I gotten into"… Exploring the experience of executive coaching during leadership transitions into C-suite roles

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## Abstract

A promotion to a more senior role brings an exciting yet challenging period in a leader's career. Using an interpretative phenomenological methodology, this study explores the experiences of six leaders who received coaching during recent transitions into C-suite roles (Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and direct reports) within global corporate organisations. Leaders experienced significant change, challenge and emotional turmoil. They valued the coaching, which led to lasting benefits in terms of confidence, capabilities and strengthened identity. In a nascent research landscape, results advocate the benefits of coaching, highlighting aspects of value, success factors and areas where further research is needed.

# Introduction

Leadership transitions bring significant challenges, opportunities and consequences for business performance and individual success (Bond & Naughton, 2011). Leadership transitions are not new: "as long as there have been leaders, there have been leadership transitions" (Watkins, 2003, page xi). Yet in today's increasingly unpredictable, complex, world, transitions are becoming more common, difficult and prone to failure (Seymour, 2008). Researchers estimate that 30% to 50% of newly transitioned leaders fail within the first eighteen months (Burke, 2006; Watkins, 2013). The financial costs of failed transitions are estimated to range between eight to twenty-three times the annual salary of the transitioning leader (Institute of Executive Development & Alexcel Group, 2013). In parallel, executive coaching is growing in popularity as a support to transitioning leaders

(Terblanche, Albertyn & Van Coller-Peter, 2017). However, there is a lack of empirical research into leadership transitions and transition coaching (Terblanche, Albertyn & Van Coller-Peter, 2018). When designing effective support, it is imperative to understand the leader's experience of transition. Martin (2015) revealed that 27% of new leaders felt their organisations were not doing enough to support a successful transition to senior management. The study will explore leaders' experiences of transitions and coaching, with two objectives. It will seek to understand the transitions, what was involved and how the leaders' experiences changed through the process. Second, it will explore the experience and perceived impact of coaching and the aspects of greatest value. This qualitative study will include leaders who recently transitioned into the C-suite (that is the senior leadership team or executive committee, made up of the Chief Executive Officer (CEOs), Chief Finance Officers (CFOs) (Svejenova, et al., 2017)), within global corporate organisations. This sample represents leaders at the highest level within the largest and most complex organisations in the world, where the transitions, risks and costs of failure are acute. The study drew on insights from relevant psychology and business literature which related to transitions themselves and executive coaching.

## Understanding transitions

High failure rates during leader transitions, raises several questions, including: what happens? what are the key challenges? and why are they so difficult? A number of theoretical models have represented the stages of transitions (e.g., Bridges, 2009; Gabarro, 1987). Of particular note, Bridges (2009) proposes a model that emphasises that the environment and new role title may change quickly, but psychological transition occurs more slowly and is characterised by emotional ups and downs, including denial, shock, anger, frustration/stress, depression, ambivalence, acceptance, hope and enthusiasm. Understanding the individual's psychological experience may help coaches accelerate and facilitate the transition. He highlights the transformational impact that transitions can have on individuals on a personal level, with significant implications for confidence, emotions and identity. Metzger et al. (2013) highlight the importance of embracing change when transitioning to the role of director of pharmacy. The study explores the emotions leaders experience and how these change through the transition.

Research emphasises the shift in capabilities demanded by promotion to more senior roles (Paese & Wellins, 2007). Leaders are required to demonstrate a range of new skills and may need to relinquish the capabilities that led to their promotion (Neff & Citrin, 2007). Groysberg, Kelly and MacDonald (2011) highlight specific capabilities required of leaders transitioning into C-suite positions, including communication, collaboration, strategic skills and ability to cope with increased public scrutiny. A reliance on old mind-sets and skillsets, failure to adjust to a new culture or forge the necessary relationships are highlighted as causal factors for failure (Butterfield, 2008). Accordingly, the present study aims to explore the new capabilities and characteristics that leaders felt they needed to successfully transition into C-suite roles.

## Executive coaching

Executive coaching is growing in popularity as an intervention to support leaders during times of transition (Weinstock, 2011), yet there is little distinction in the literature between coaching and transition coaching (Bond & Naughton, 2011). Executive coaching is defined as a re-packaging of various activities and techniques from other disciplines including counselling, psychology, learning and consulting (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). There is increasing psychological and business research describing the positive outcomes of executive coaching; leaders report heightened self-efficacy, resilience and increased goal attainment whilst reducing feelings of depression and anxiety (Sonesh et al., 2015; Theeboom, Beersma & van Vianen, 2014; Terblanche et al., 2017). Given its demonstrated value, researchers are interested in what makes a successful executive coaching experience (Bozer & Joo, 2015). Five features which moderate the efficacy of coaching have been identified: coach-coachee relationship, coach behaviour and skills, coach background,

coachee motivation and coaching methodology (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Sonesh et al., 2015; Theeboom, et al., 2014). The coach-coachee relationship has been observed as the most significant moderator of coaching outcomes (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). The critical behaviours of an effective coach include listening, reflecting back and challenge (Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 2000). The study will provide insight into transition coaching and what makes a successful coaching experience specifically during a transition.

## Executive coaching during a transition

Although there is growing interest in the topic (Bond & Naughton, 2011), only three empirical research papers have explored transition coaching in a business context (Reynolds, 2011; Terblanche et al., 2017; 2018). Reynolds (2011) explored the experience of six leaders who had recently been appointed into more senior leadership positions. The leaders attributed particular significance to coaching helping them to overcome a deep sense of vulnerability, in developing a new purpose and motivation, and in developing new personal, social and cognitive capabilities. In both Terblanche et al.'s (2017, 2018) studies, leadership transitions presented a range of unexpected challenges that impacted the inadequately supported leaders on a personal and organisational performance level (cf. Martin, 2015). However, senior managers who were not exclusively from the C-suite (Reynolds, 2011) or from global companies (Terblanche et al., 2017; 2018) were recruited. The study includes a more homogenous C-suite sample from global companies and provides an insight into transitions and coaching where the risks, stakes and costs of failure are arguably highest. Reynolds' objectives centred on the experience of coaching rather than the transition itself, while Terblanche et al.'s (2017; 2018) studies focused on how a transition coaching intervention should be created rather than the experience of it. The present study provides an examination of leaders' experiences of transition as well as the enabling role of the coaching to contextualise the role of coaching within the real-world transition experience. This enabled leaders' experiences to be interpreted against existing transition theories (Bridges, 2009). Lastly, Reynolds noted that her participants only included successful leaders, while the status of the participants in the Terblanche studies were unclear. One of the key challenges here was to determine an objective definition of "success" and "failure", particularly given the inherent biases associated with self-report data (MacKie, 2015). In the present study, leaders were asked to describe their experiences of success and failure in the recent transition and in previous role transitions. This enabled an examination of the important learning and success factors for transitions and coaching. The study aims to build on prior research using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to explore the experiences of six leaders who transitioned into C-suite roles within global corporate organisations. This methodology was chosen given its dedication to interpreting how people make sense of life experiences in their own words (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) and in light of the sparsity of transition coaching research (Bond & Naughton, 2011). The interviews explore how leaders experience the transition, including challenges, emotions, capabilities and identity in line with Bridges' (2009) transition model, as well as their experience of coaching.

# Method

## Design

The study involved semi-structured interviews with leaders who had recently transitioned into C-suite roles (CEO and Executive Team Members). IPA, with theoretical foundations in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, was selected as a suitable epistemological position and analytical approach that would generate the deepest and broadest understanding of the leaders' perspectives (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenology is concerned with obtaining a rich and detailed understanding of lived human experience of significant real-world events.

Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, is concerned with meaning-making, seeking to uncover the intentions and connotations of individuals' words. Finally, idiography concerns the study of the particular. The method therefore involved analysis and interpretation of each case systematically, in rich detail and from each individual's unique perspective before looking for common themes across cases. This method enabled an in-depth understanding of each case whilst allowing for generalisability of the findings by comparison with previous research and theories. The development of rich yet generalisable insights was considered highly desirable given the nascence of the research landscape.

## Study participants

Participants included six leaders (four males; two females; age range 40 to 49 years) who received coaching during transitions into C-suite roles in global corporate organisations within the prior six to twenty-four months. The sample was purposefully selected through opportunity sampling. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms (Table 1).

**Table 1 - Study Participants**

| Participant | Job | Industry | Nationality | Gender | Coaching sessions (number) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dan | Chief Customer Excellence Officer (CCO) | Financial Services | American | male | 6 |
| Mike | Chief Executive Officer (CEO) | Media | Danish | male | 3 |
| Omar | Chief Financial Officer (CFO) | Financial Services | British | male | 4 |
| Jake | Director of Non-Food Trading | Retail | British | male | 9 |
| Alison | Group Chief Risk Officer (CRO) | Insurance | British | female | 2 |
| Jen | President, Speciality Food | Food and Beverage | American | female | 8 |

## Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed which focussed on leaders' experiences of the transition itself and of the coaching. Questions were informed by a review of the literature and particularly Reynolds (2011). The interview schedule had four main sections: section 1 covered basic information about the role transition, what was the new role, how and when had it come about; section 2 covered the experience of the transition, how easy or difficult it was and what emotions were felt at different stages; section 3 concerned the experience of the coaching and the coach, including what coaching involved and how it helped. The final section covered overall reflections on the experience, the differences between success and failure, and advice for transitioning leaders.

## Procedure

The study received ethical approval from the University ethics board. Participants consented to take part in a semi-structured telephone interview which lasted approximately one hour. Next, participants were verbally debriefed and had an opportunity to ask questions. Following the interviews, a written debrief was sent to the participants, which explained the right to withdraw and the procedure to do so, as well as thanking them for their time.

## Data preparation, analysis, quality and rigour

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the lead author. IPA was conducted (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009); for each case, transcripts were read and re-read, initial notes were made, and emergent themes identified and grouped. Finally, emergent themes were combined and grouped in order to identify patterns across the cases. The analysis was conducted by the lead author and was followed by a dialogue with the second author, who played the role of "critical friend" (Smith and McGannon, 2018). This offered a sounding board and challenge, as well as the opportunity to explore alternative explanations and interpretations. This process involved re-labelling and re-grouping, until a final set of superordinate themes for the whole data-set was generated. The third author assisted in reviewing the final themes, the links with existing theories and the development of conclusions.

# Findings

Three superordinate themes were found: periods of significant change, challenge and emotional turmoil; the value of coaching; and success factors for coaching and transitions (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 - Themes Map, Coaching through Leadership Transitions**
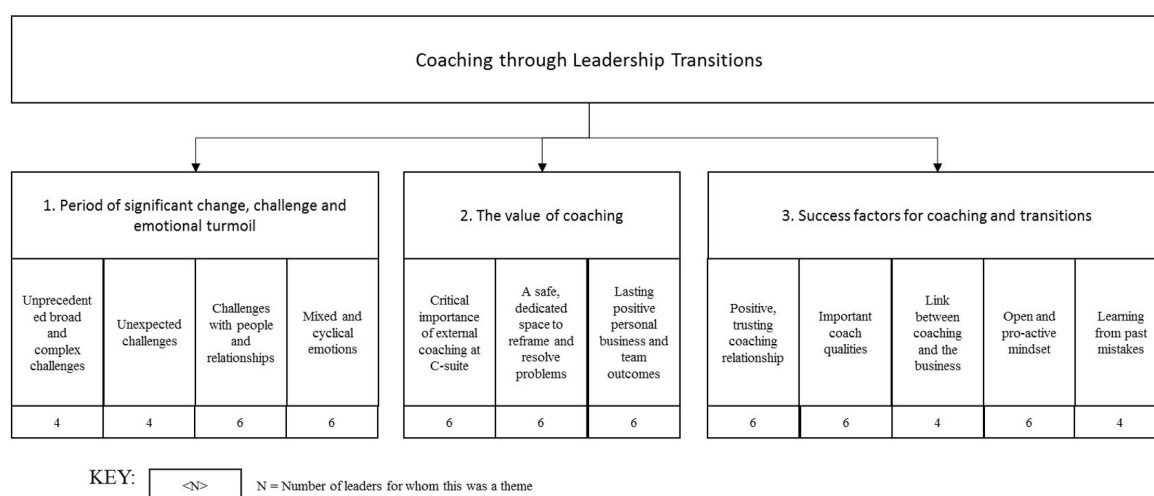


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## Period of significant change, challenge and emotional turmoil

All participants highlighted the difficulty they experienced with career transitions, particularly due to the period of significant change in their professional life and the challenge and emotional turmoil which ensued.

### Unprecedented broad and complex challenges

All leaders spoke emphatically about the broad and varied challenges they faced, stressing the complex and multi-dimensional nature of their transitions. Dan, whose transition involved a move from the US to the UK, described a long list of challenges he faced:

> "[...] there are so many things to deal with in a transition… not just in the workplace but also things happening, especially for me, moving internationally, changing schools, selling houses, selling cars…We had so much to deal with".

This suggests this transition was taxing on his personal and professional life, something that was highlighted by other leaders. Multiple, competing challenges were seen as a core hallmark of C-suite transitions, with four leaders stating that these transitions were distinctive and much more difficult than previous career transitions. For example, Jen said, "This has by far been the hardest one…The proportion of 'I can rely on what I'm good at' is lower here, and probably by a significant factor".

Likewise, Alison commented on the specific challenges of working within the Group Executive Team:

> "Group Exec is notoriously a much, much harder place to be than some of the sub-Execs…, so I had a coach this time because I anticipated that that would be a much, much harder transition"

In Alison's case the difficulty of the transition was anticipated, and she was able to put in place appropriate support mechanisms, such as a coach. The difficulty experienced accords with previous literature (Groysberg, Kelly & MacDonald, 2011); however, there was a clear sense from the leaders in this study that the volume and complexity of challenge was significantly greater at the C-suite, compared to previous career transitions. In turn, this required leaders to demonstrate a larger shift in their own capabilities and cope with an unprecedented level of complexity.

## Unexpected challenges

While most leaders expected the transition to be difficult, none accurately predicted the specific challenges they faced. Rather, they described the gradual realisation of issues which took them by surprise. Mike states below:

> "[…] all of a sudden you realise that maybe you couldn't swim so fast or maybe you couldn't actually touch the bottom of the ocean in the way you thought you could because you, all of a sudden, see all of what is demanded to take the position".

Drawing on the analogy of swimming, the quote above suggests Mike feels panicked and out of his depth. It also highlighted the contrast between feelings of certainty in one moment, and potential anxiety in the next. This sudden realisation of the extent of the challenges was noted by the other leaders. Alison commented, "… we've had to be more flexible, I think, when you're transitioning cause you really just don't know what the issues are that you're going to face".

Similarly, Alison felt unaware of the challenges she would face prior to her transition. This idea of unpredictability is an important concept within transition theories, with Bridges (2009) emphasising that, although transitions can be modelled on a set of common phases, each leader's experience is unique. Weinstock (2011) also emphasised the surprising and often hidden nature of challenges faced by nurses transitioning into senior leadership positions, including issues of self-esteem, assertiveness and changing identities. This level of unpredictability and the deep, emotional and psychological nature of the issues faced adds to the complexity of change the leaders have to manage (Terblanche et al., 2018) and there is a threshold to how much complexity an individual can manage. Support is key to take that step to the next level (Keegan, 1994), which is evident in the study.

## Challenges with people and relationships

The most commonly cited challenge related to people and relationships. In Jake's words, "I think some of the real challenges were around the people piece and the restructuring".

Similarly, when asked what he would have done differently in the transition, Omar said "I would have invested more time up front with key stakeholders". This suggests that the challenge of dealing with people can be time-consuming.

Mike, who was promoted to CEO, discussed the impacts on team dynamics:

"[…] so the difficulties in terms of the transition was for me a result of primarily two things, it was the dynamics in the management team and the differences it makes that my management style differs from the one of my predecessor".

He later adds that his promotion caused "some friction" between him and his direct reports, who were previously peers. This implies that he was aware of how his previous relationships and differing style contributed to difficulties in transitioning. Conversely, leaders highlighted the enabling role that relationships played as a means of support and in generating alignment and team coherence. The risk of neglecting relationships, which are time-consuming and complex, aligns with guidance commonly offered to transitioning leaders to foster relationships (Watkins, 2013).

Dan, who was the only externally appointed leader, experienced challenges in his relationship with his new boss and fitting into the team:

"[…] the bumpy parts for me actually turned out to be that my hiring manager… one was sort of his style…so that was challenging for me… It just felt like I wasn't part of his team … I was the first outsider to come in to this mix".

Dan went onto describe his feelings of being on the "outside" and difficulties with fitting into the "tight knit" team. He described the difficulties of learning the "back stories" within the team which "created some real tensions". He needed to learn on multiple fronts: about the role, the history and culture of the organisation and about relationships, whilst lacking the supportive connections he used to have in his previous company. This supports that a different kind of support may be required for leaders promoted within the organisation compared to leaders recruited externally (Terblanche et al., 2018). For external appointees, the challenges relate to learning the history of the stakeholder landscape, forging new relationships and influencing without trusted relationships. Martin (2015) revealed that for external leaders the most important, yet most difficult task was understanding the organisational culture, and was a pivotal task in the success of the new leaders. In contrast, for internal appointments there was a need to re-shape existing dynamics; for example, being respected as a more senior leader by peers. The implication for coaching is that differentiated strategies may be of benefit for external appointees, whereby the coach may provide a unique source of trusted counsel in the absence of internal relationships. This distinction between internal and external transitions is sparse in the literature and warrants further investigation (Charan, Drotter & Noel, 2011).

**Mixed and cyclical emotions**

All leaders reported contrasting highs and lows at different stages. After a period of initial elation and optimism, feelings of self-doubt emerged. Jake initially observed, "I was deep down delighted but there was an element of bam, they've really called my bluff here".

A similar sentiment of initial elation followed by a dip, was expressed by Jen:

"You're always excited to get the job, so it starts there with blind optimism and enthusiasm. Then… when I got into it, I remember at certain moments thinking 'oh my God, what have I gotten into? This is a lot worse than I ever thought'".

Both quotes showcase the contrasting emotions experienced at the initial stage of the transition. As the transition progressed, all leaders reported growing feelings of self-doubt, isolation, lack of confidence and in Alison's case, feelings of "being an imposter". This was echoed by Mike, who said:

"I won't call it depressed because that sounds like I was ill or something, but it was of course, when you start to question your own competence within a position that you have been waiting for… and you lack the ability to be swift and direct in taking decisions".

Although reluctant to use the word "depressed", Mike provides an insight into the deeply troubling nature of his feelings. A lack of confidence impacted his ability to make decisions, which re-enforced his self-doubt. Other leaders highlighted the contrast between internal feelings of self-doubt and the need to appear outwardly confident. For instance, leaders felt as C-suite roles, they should be able to provide answers and solutions, thus could not show their vulnerability. This highlighted a key paradox of transitions: leaders must demonstrate public confidence and capability at the very time when they are feeling most exposed. This meant that coaching held a special significance since it provided a much-needed confidential space where leaders could be honest without fear of reprisal. Jen summed up her stress levels by saying, "I probably aged 5 years in 18 months", highlighting the emotional suffering experienced which can be intensified without support (Keegan, 1994). These feelings of stress, depression, isolation and self-doubt during transitions align with previous accounts of career transition (Reynolds, 2011).

Omar commented that emotions changed during the later stage of the transition:

"I was reassured; it felt different because I was doing a new job and although some areas were uncomfortable, people seemed to like what I was doing so that made me feel good".

This suggests that the negative emotions may eventually become positive from delivering in a challenging time. This supports Bridges' (2009) assertion that periods of discomfort must be embraced, not avoided, in order to arrive in a more positive psychological state. The characteristic emotional turbulence parallels the grieving process and other life transitions (Gabarro, 1987).

## The Value of Coaching

### Critical importance of external coaching for C-suite

All leaders attributed value to the coaching, which helped them to manage frustrations, solve problems and avoid pitfalls. Omar attributed his transition success, in part, to the coaching, "I certainly ascribe, you know, success of the transition to having the coaching in the way I did… it clearly helped".

Likewise, Dan noted "I think I'm going to be a poster child for 'coaching is important and valuable'. I really relied on it actually".

Both quotes highlight the importance the leaders attribute to coaching in their transition success. The value of this seems particularly significant for transitions into C-suite roles. Mike described transitions as "the most helpful situation in which to receive coaching" and having experienced coaching before, he noted "it's the type of coaching that has been most valuable for me". Although this supports previous research (Sonesh et al. 2015), this is the first study to explore C-suite transitions exclusively.

Talking about the coach, Jen noted "The challenge is the higher in the company, the more it needs to be someone outside". This suggests the importance of an external coach to aid senior roles and the lack of internal sources of counsel the higher up the company the position is. This links with a key question that businesses often grapple with: whether to invest in external coaches or to use internal staff which may be cheaper (Terblanche et al. 2017). These findings suggest that the independence of the coach is perceived as especially important in C-suite transitions.

**A safe, dedicated space to reframe and resolve problems**

All leaders described the safe, confidential space within coaching, which enabled them to talk openly and gain new perspectives on problems and people. This helped them to work through problems and to come up with solutions. Dan noted:

> "Having the opportunity to go talk to someone who was completely neutral and, you know, that I could talk completely confidentially about really everything that was happening in my transition, at work and at home, personally, with my family too. It was just sort of… uplifting... it just allowed me to get everything out without any kind of fear of anything".

His description of the coaching as "uplifting" emphasises the value of a safe space to release fears and be open and honest. Jake reflected on the quality of thinking space that coaching allowed for:

> "[…] what the coaching did was allow me to have time to really work through the questions in my head… And so it put a level of discipline into it and I suspect if I hadn't have had that, I'm not sure I would have done that on my own".

This suggests that coaching brought a rigour he could not achieve on his own, while Mike felt coaching allowed him to develop "direct tips and skills". Alison described how the coaching led to shifts in her mind-set and enabled her to behave differently:

> "It was a real crystal clear moment of acceptance. And then when we had the second meeting, it seemed really clear that I had completely ditched of all of that stuff and I was just being me and not comparing myself to other people".

Coaching allowed Alison to recognise and reframe her internal dialogue to be more positive. The coaching created a safe, neutral space for the leaders to think through and solve problems. The safe space enabled them to be open-minded and accepting of challenge, which led to new ways of thinking and behaviours. These findings support previous research suggesting coaching allowed leaders see a wider perspective (Lawton-Smith, 2015) and allowed them to be more creative with their thinking (Reynolds, 2011). This study adds insight into how coaching is effective by pinpointing the parts of perceived value to coachees (Theeboom, Beersma & van Vianen, 2014). It is interesting to note the flexibility that is valued in coaching; coaches engaged in various ways, as coach, counsellor or consultant depending on the need of the coachee.

**Lasting positive change**

All leaders perceived that coaching resulted in lasting positive change, in terms of personal, business and team outcomes. They commented on their own development of new capabilities and mind-sets, improvements in wellbeing, confidence and motivation and strengthened leadership identity. Jake observed:

> "I definitely feel I've got more stretch in me even compared to what I'm doing now… it's given me a level of confidence that I could do more and I want to do more...something that will stick with me throughout my career".

Whilst Jen observed, "I feel like I've made a big enough leap in terms of… I have the confidence to deal with the Board. I have much more confidence to deal with the Ex-Co".

These quotes suggest the leaders felt coaching aided their personal growth and transformation in terms of confidence and ambition for the future. These findings align with research suggesting coaching helps leaders to reclaim their self-belief (Lawton-Smith, 2015), self-efficacy, resilience (Sherlock-Storey, Moss & Timson, 2013), and personal and professional growth (Terblanche et al., 2018).

The leaders also commented on the impact of the experience on their leadership identity. Dan noted,

> "You've changed drastically, like you're not the same person. You're a different kind of leader. Your actual approach to challenges, you handle things in a different way to you had in the past...more patience and more empathy and more consideration...that lots of people have things to offer"

in contrast with his previous "attacking" style. This suggests he prefers his new leaderships style compared to the old "attacking style" he once had. This perceived strengthened identity aligns with the Reynolds' (2011) ideas that coaching helped leaders to find new identities and purpose. This supports other IPA research, where, given the nature of the epistemology, identity is a common theme across studies (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). What is interesting is the perceived sustainable nature of the changes, which links to a key gap in the research landscape since there are few long-term impact studies in coaching.

## Success factors for coaching and transitions

Having explored the nature of transitions and the notable perceived value of coaching, the final theme explores the key success factors which were highlighted as important in the coaching and the transitions themselves. This has immediate and practical relevance for transitioning leaders, coaches, line managers and HR professionals seeking to install effective transition support for leaders (Terblanche et al. 2017).

### Positive, trusting coaching relationship

Leaders universally described the coaching relationship as positive, trusting and open. There was discernible respect from the coachee towards the coach, as well as a chemistry that, in Dan's words "clicked really early on". All leaders felt that the coach understood them, was on their side and was trustworthy. Mike observed about his coach, "It actually felt that he was trying to do a difference and that he cared. I think it was based on a very high level of trust and openness".

Similarly, Dan said of his coach "she seems to really care". Jake observed,

> "I'd say she's very authentic. I think she was very honest…It very much felt like we were on the same wavelength. She got to understand me very quickly".

Likewise, Jen noted, "I think he's got my best interests at heart. There's no doubt in my mind… I trust him intrinsically".

These quotes suggest the importance of the coach creating a positive and supportive bond with participants, which in turn fosters trust between the two. This aligns with previous research into executive coaching, which demonstrated that the coach-coachee relationship is the most important factor in predicting coaching outcomes (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). It follows that the coach-coachee relationship should also be important and positive within transition coaching, and that the selection of the right coach as being a key factor in initiating a successful coaching intervention (Terblanche et al., 2017).

### Important coach qualities

Leaders highlighted various important coach qualities, with individuals emphasising different qualities. Among the most important qualities were business and coaching experience, coaching skills including knowledge of psychology, insight, calmness, listening and ability to challenge and work at pace. Business and coaching experience was valued since leaders felt understood; they did not have to spend too much time explaining their problems since the coach could share real-life

examples and experiences. As Omar put it, describing his coach, "She's got a good basic domain knowledge, she knows enough about what being a CFO means …which I think means you can accelerate through some of that".

Whilst Dan felt:

"She would bring in the psychology and the science and say well you're not alone that or here's some techniques that have worked before when I've talked to people about those sorts of topics".

These quotes suggest that existing knowledge of their environment and position, combined with a psychological underpinning were key qualities that were appreciated within the coaches.

The leaders also suggested a number of other key skills of effective coaches. For instance, Jen described her coach as "quite calm and long term in his thinking… He's incredibly professional". Whilst Alison noted the insight of her coach and his ability to frame issues in a new light, remarking, "He's very insightful and picks his time to sort of point out a different way of thinking".

Jake and Omar valued the pace and challenge that their coach brought. The leaders wanted a balance of support alongside direct challenge, so it was important that the coach could be tough and play the role of holding the leader to account. In Jake's words,

"She's probably tougher than I thought, in a good way. So what I liked about her was that she kept the pace going as much as me, so it felt as though it was a joint effort and I think that was really important. She knew when to dig in and when to work through something in more detail, so she was very perceptive".

These findings align with and build on previous research into executive coaching, where the critical behaviours of an effective coach were cited as listening, reflecting back and challenge (Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999). This suggests that there are fundamental coach qualities which apply across all types of coaching and some additional coach qualities that are specific to C-suite transitions, namely, business and coaching experience, independence, insight and pace. This suggests an interesting avenue for future research, with implications to improve the efficacy of transition coaching and the relationship between leader and coach.

**Link between coaching and the business**

The leaders highlighted the value of a link between coaching and the business. Dan's coach gathered explicit feedback from business stakeholders, which he described as "super helpful" and which allowed them to refocus the last stage of the coaching. Dan noted:

"Getting that feedback so I could make some course-corrections along the way, that was really helpful. If we'd just gone through all of the coaching and not had those feedback mechanisms then I may have ended up in a very different place".

Alison too valued her coach's business insight gleaned from his relationships with her peers which helped her to gain new perspectives; she noted:

"Pete also had conversations with a lot of the other GE members so could bring, not obviously the confidential stuff, into that conversation but could bring that, you know, you're not alone in that".

These quotes suggest the coach's ability to link feedback from internal staff within the coaching process provided additional clarity and calmness. This is further highlighted when a link with the business was missing with the coach, where Jake commented:

"The only bit that I felt was missing was the relationship Kate having with the Operating Board so I think if I was going to have another set of coaching I would want it in a way that there is a link, a much bigger link, into the business".

This highlights the importance of the coach immersing themselves within the leader's environment. Sutton (2008) emphasises that the coach needs to play a role in helping the transitioning leader to understand the organisational realities they face. It appears that a link with the business provides a useful perspective to the coachee, and an opportunity to demonstrate the impact of coaching on personal development (Lawrence & Whyte, 2014). Terblanche et al.'s studies (2017; 2018) revealed that feedback between key stakeholders (e.g. line manager) to the leaders were vital for both personal and organisational transition process and warrants further research (Grover & Furnham, 2016).

**Open and pro-active mind-set**

All leaders highlighted the importance of having an open, proactive and learning mind-set as a key success factor in their transition, being honest about the challenges and seeking support. Jen commented:

"I think you've got to be willing to listen and learn…I think, where people really go wrong, you don't put the right people around you cause 1) you don't really realise the need or 2) you put people around you who are like you so you're so exposed".

This highlights the importance of surrounding themselves with the right people and truly listening to them. Omar's advice to other transitioning leaders was to "consciously think about it as a transition" and take a "step back" in order to "recognise its something new and take the time to think". Similarly, for Alison, "… being very open and doing more listening than telling in the first little while".

These quotes reveal the importance for transitioning leaders to fully immerse themselves within the process to achieve a successful transition. These findings align well with previous research into the characteristics associated with successful CEOs, where learning and self-awareness were identified as important (Wood & Vilkinas, 2007). Recent research by Sirén, Patel and Wincent (2016) showed that CEOs who were open to feedback outperformed those with a more closed mind-set. Similarly, other research identified factors associated with senior leader derailment include arrogance, failure to listen to others' views and failure to admit mistakes (Burke, 2006).

**Learning from past mistakes**

The leaders reflected on the role of previous failed transitions and learning opportunities from mistakes as being helpful in preparing them for their recent C-suite transition. In Omar's words:

"I do think I learned quite a lot from that in terms of what not to do, or how to do things differently… I do think having a somewhat problematic transition beforehand helped me have a better transition".

While Jake recalled:

"I sort of went into that role pretty much knowing that I wasn't going to get it. I didn't find it that difficult this time because I think I was ready for it".

These quotes highlight the importance of learning from negative experiences in their pasts to help prepare them for successful transitions to C-suite roles. Alison discussed her ongoing experiences of stepping up and how each experience has helped her to improve on the next so that she is "getting faster at them". These findings highlight the benefits associated with early transition

experiences and mistakes throughout leaders' careers in helping them to prepare for the eventual transition to C-suite. Combined with these experiences, it appears that leaders must bring an openness and learning mind-set to reap the benefits.

# Discussion

The present study explored the experience of leaders who received coaching during transitions into C-suite roles in global corporate organisations and the meaning they held. The research builds on the limited but growing evidence base about transition coaching in senior management (Reynolds, 2011; Terblanche et al., 2017; 2018). Through in-depth interviews, multiple issues were examined including challenges, emotions, capabilities and identity. The analysis revealed three superordinate themes: a period of significant change, challenge and emotional turmoil; the value of coaching; and success factors for coaching and transitions.

The study revealed several novel perspectives specific to coaching during C-suite transitions. Leaders perceived that C-suite transitions were the hardest of their careers, resulting in unexpected challenges, emotional turmoil and stress. Leaders experienced cyclical emotions, starting with initial elation, periods of difficulty and self-doubt and finally giving way to satisfaction having succeeded. This description, particularly the unexpected, emotional nature of the challenges aligns with Bridges' (2009) theory of transitions. The unexpected and emotional nature of challenges meant that leaders placed value on the flexibility and neutrality of the coaching. There was a contrast between underlying feelings of self-doubt and a need to appear outwardly confident. As a result, coaching held special importance, as they could be open and honest, without fear of negative implications that was not possible with colleagues. As well as providing practical support, the coaching helped leaders process, rather than avoid, their negative emotions, helping them to psychologically transition more quickly. This advocates for the efficacy of confidential, one-to-one coaching as an effective, supportive intervention, as opposed to alternative internal or group-based interventions. This accords with Huggler's (2012) description of the importance of therapeutic alliance in CEOs who sought psychoanalytic therapy. The findings highlighted the unique challenges of internal versus external transitions, a differentiation lacking in previous research (cf. Chiu et al., 2016). This is an avenue for future research, with implications for the efficacy of transition coaching and the relationship between leader and coach. Several implications for important coach qualities during C-suite transition coaching were highlighted; the combination of business and coaching experience, independence, insight and pace. Leaders placed value on the coach being external to the business whilst understanding the business context and holding relationships with key stakeholders. A clearer understanding of these qualities has immediate and practical implications for coaches, leaders and buyers of coaching. Addressing Reynolds' (2011) suggestion for future research, our findings pinpoint leaders' definitions of success and failure, as well as exploring their experiences of prior unsuccessful transitions, highlighting the importance of openness, willingness to ask for help and the learning opportunities provided by previous mistakes.

## Strengths and limitations

The study had strengths and limitations. The investigation is one of the first studies on transition coaching at this level, C-suite exclusively, where transitions are arguably complex, highest risk and highest stakes (Watkins, 2003). The IPA methodology proved to be relevant to the research aims, resulting in rich, descriptive accounts for individual leaders, as well as insights into common themes (Yardley, 2000). Where there was alignment with prior research findings, this study provided richer detail from the perspective of the transitioning leader themselves. For instance, leaders emphasised the value of coaching and in particular the provision of a safe and confidential space for working through problems, which aligns well with research on positive coaching

outcomes (Sherlock-Storey et al., 2013; Sonesh et al., 2015; Theeboom, Beersma & van Vianen, 2014).

The sample included only leaders who were deemed as successful in their transition. While this study explored leaders' perceptions of failures and previous failed transitions, future research could include a leader who derailed in a C-suite transition, which would provide insights into any noteworthy differences in the coaching and transition experiences. Furthermore, it would have been beneficial to include the perspectives of the leaders' respective coaches and line managers to ensure variety and richness of the data (cf. Terblanche et al. 2018). Additionally, research should look to expand this further with the inclusion of employees who work under or with the newly transitioned leader.

## Reflexivity

There is subjectivity in the IPA method, which is reliant on participant accounts and researcher interpretation. The results therefore may be subject to the individual biases of the researcher, the lead author being a coach, and may fail to show the whole picture, although this was mitigated to some extent through a triangulation review and academic co-authors. Future research that compares detailed accounts from leaders and stakeholders; for example, the coach, line manager and a direct report, may provide a richer picture. It would be helpful to combine these findings with longitudinal studies that could provide quantitative evidence for changes in leader states following transition coaching.

# Conclusion

This research has provided new insights into the experience of coaching through leadership transitions, focussing on a sample of C-suite leaders in global corporate organisations. Results highlighted the complex, multi-dimensional challenges faced, such as a tangential shift in capabilities, difficulties with relationships and emotional turmoil. It highlighted the vital role that executive coaching can play in facilitating transitions. As this is one of few empirical research studies into transition coaching, further research is needed. In particular, researchers should focus on developing a theoretical framework for transition coaching which demonstrates the causal processes through which it is effective (Terblanche et al. 2018). The study provides support for the continued application of coaching as a helpful tool in facilitating and de-risking transitions at the highest levels of leadership.

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