



Academic Paper

How do internal executive coaches make sense of organisational role boundaries? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study

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Abstract

This study explores internal executive coaches' sense-making of organisational role boundaries within a rail industry organisation. This cross-sectional qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with three coaches sourced from the organisation's internal executive coach pool, was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Findings showed that coaches made sense of role boundaries by reflecting on their organisational roles, relationships within coach-coachee and non-coaching organisational contexts, and the coaching contracting process. Future research focused on exploring role boundary management strategies, potential benefits of internal coaching relationships, and the link between confidentiality, contracting and the internal coaching relationship, is suggested.

Keywords

internal executive coaching, organisational role boundaries, multi-stakeholder contracting, internal coaching relationship

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Introduction

Coaching in organisational settings has witnessed rapid growth (Gettman, Edinger & Wouters, 2019). Within this setting, internal executive coaching comprises an increasingly important component (Feehily, 2018), as more organisations expand their use of internal coaches to support career development, increase career satisfaction, improve performance (Spaten, 2016), and grow leadership capabilities (The Global Executive Coaching Survey, 2018, p.10). Coincident with this development is a perceptible shift in organisational viewpoints to considering external and internal

coaching as complementary rather than competitive (Schalk & Landeta, 2017) and in evaluating the relative advantages and disadvantages of deploying each in particular contexts (St. John-Brooks, 2014, p. 90).

Meanwhile, research on coaching in organisational settings lags practice, with most research focussing on the coaching boundary with therapeutic counselling (Eniola, 2017) or coaching effectiveness (Jones, Woods & Guillaume, 2016). Research on internal executive coaching is even more limited, particularly from the perspective of the internal coach (Machin, 2010; St. John-Brooks, 2010). Given this deficit, calls have been made for further research and practitioner focus in the area (Grover & Furnham, 2016).

Defining coaching in organisations is challenging, with the term often used in the literature to denote a range of helping interventions including mentoring, training, counselling, consulting (Garvey, Stokes & Megginson, 2017), blended coaching in the same programme (Smith, 2017), or a variety of delivery modes and approaches (Mangion-Thornley, 2021). Frisch (2001), in a conceptual paper on the emerging role of the internal coach in the executive coaching context, defined internal executive coaching as ‘a one-on-one developmental intervention supported by the organisation and provided by a colleague of those coached who is trusted to shape and deliver a program yielding individual professional growth.’ This study uses Frisch (2001)’s definition of internal executive coaching.

The complexity of multi-stakeholder organisational settings (Turner & Hawkins, 2016), and suggested increasing fluidity of internal and external organisational boundaries (Huffington, 2006, p.56) highlight the need to clarify role boundaries and confidentiality when coaching in organisational contexts (Burger & Van Coller-Peter, 2019; Turner & Passmore, 2018). Hawkins and Smith (2006, p. 154) argue that coaches need to be clear about ‘What sort of information they might need to take over the boundary of the relationship; in what circumstances they would do this; and to whom they would take the information.’ From the perspective of the internal coach, the additional layers of relationship that exist when coaching within one’s own organisation require careful thought and consideration in the task of clarifying those unique internal coach role boundaries (St. John-Brooks, 2010; 2014, p. 34).

This study’s research question is: How do internal executive coaches make sense of organisational role boundaries?

Literature review

Internal coaching

Within the nascent internal coaching literature, a key thread identified is the comparison of internal and external coaching characteristics (McNally & Lukens, 2006). Historically, external coaching has been argued, in high-level comparisons, to provide greater coach credibility and breadth of experience, a ‘cleaner’ relationship, greater trust and confidentiality, and greater validity with more senior executives (McNally & Lukens, 2006; Rock & Donde, 2008). Conversely, internal coaching has been viewed as more cost-effective, predicting faster initial progress and more organisational impact, and the internal coach is perceived to have better knowledge of the organisation and its culture (Frisch, 2001; Wasylyshyn, 2003).

More recently, a qualitative study by Schalk & Landeta (2017) comparing the advantages and disadvantages of internal and external coaching derived propositions from a literature review followed by a two-stage Delphi process of interviews and questionnaires with a total of 13 external coaches, 10 internal coaches and 17 executive coachees. It found high levels of agreement in all three groups relating to benefits of internal and external coaching respectively, with more

disagreement at a granular level. Broad agreement existed on internal coaches knowing the organisation and its culture better than external coaches; on cleaner external coach relationships because they have no other contact with coachees, and confidentiality is better guaranteed; and on external coaches being preferred for senior management. Disagreement arose from internal coach knowledge not always being seen as beneficial. Internal coaches also argued that, whilst historically external coaches were preferred for senior management, the type of coaching should be chosen relative to the aims being sought and the culture of the organisation, rather than coachee group. There was consensus in all three groups that internal and external coaching should be seen as complementary, inferring a combination of the two could be the most efficient solution. External coaches and coachees agreed that there was more trust in external coaching; however, some internal coaches asserted that, whilst more difficult to gain trust, subsequently it is down to coach professionalism. The authors highlighted the scarcity of research comparing external coaches and internal coaches and the limitation that their study's convenience sample (40 experts in Spain) prevented generalisation of any results.

Mixed results on the relative benefits of internal coaching and external coaching were also found in two broader-based quantitative studies on the effectiveness of workplace coaching, where workplace coaching factors (e.g. type of coach, external or internal coach) were included. First, Jones *et al.* (2016)'s meta-analysis found that, although both external and internal coaching were beneficial to learning and performance, internal coaching had a stronger effect. The authors noted caution due to the low number of internal coach studies included in their meta-analysis. Second, Jones, Wood and Zhou (2018)'s survey study adopted a more granular approach and found that coaching affective outcomes were higher when coaching was provided by external coaches compared to internal coaches, and when coaching was provided by external coaches for individuals working in highly complex jobs. The authors noted confounds in their findings, including the possibility that affective outcomes may reflect autonomy over external coach selection; internal coach selection is generally unavailable. Collectively, these studies indicate a lack of clarity on the specific direct and indirect factors contributing to internal coaching process and effectiveness, and on the relative conditions conducive to employing internal coaching, external coaching, or a combination of the two.

Contracting in internal coaching

Whilst acknowledging the general consensus in the literature that contracting is an essential factor in the coaching process (e.g. Lee, 2013), two aspects are particularly germane here. First, the literature suggests that contracting clarifies the role of third parties, aligns the perceptions of coach and client, and alleviates confidentiality concerns that could otherwise negatively impact the coaching relationship (Gettman *et al.*, 2019; Turner & Hawkins, 2016). These impacts are arguably particularly relevant to the question of internal coach role boundaries. Gettman *et al.* (2019)'s mixed methods study explored the connection of contracting with the coaching relationship using a measure constructed and validated with a sample of executive coachees. The study was notable in its construal of contracting as a coach behaviour that impacts the coaching relationship; and its finding that coachees did not perceive contracting as critical, rather they viewed it as necessary to avoid negative outcomes. They recommended further studies to ascertain whether there are circumstances determining where certain aspects of contracting become critical.

Second, multi-stakeholder contracting would seem an obvious focus for internal coaching, given that the organisational stakeholder has an explicit interest in internal coaching outcomes and that multi-stakeholder contracting has the potential to seek shared agreement on outcomes and evaluation (Turner & Hawkins, 2016). Although there is a common perception that it might be useful, the key question of 'Who is the client?' (Burger & Van Coller-Peter, 2019) feasibly creates challenges such as boundary management and maintaining confidentiality for its stakeholders. Furthermore, a process for multi-stakeholder contracting and agreement on how it is conducted to best utilise its benefits in coaching is yet to be established (Turner & Hawkins, 2016).

Role boundaries in internal coaching

The only other study found covering internal coach role boundary management as part of its broader focus was that by St. John-Brooks (2010). This two-phase qualitative study aimed to examine the nature of ethical challenges occurring for internal coaches in their client work, drawing seven item areas from a thematic analysis of the research literature and interviews conducted with six internal coaches, followed by a questionnaire study. The author found the ten most common ethical dilemmas experienced by 123 internal coaches drawn from over 30 organisations in the public and private sector and what organisations did to support them. These dilemmas included third parties wanting information about the coachee, role conflict, and the coachee wanting to discuss an issue involving someone the coach knows well. St. John-Brooks (2010) argued that her study supported the hypothesis that the number and variety of dilemmas involved make the internal coaching world a complex one, which employers need to understand (p. 61). Her further publication expanding on this study asserted that internal coaches and their coachees would potentially benefit from better understanding, and developing more effective ways of managing, their role boundaries (St. John-Brooks, 2014).

In summary, despite the increasing deployment of internal coaching in organisational settings, the complexity and fluidity of internal and external organisational boundaries, and the greater complexity potentially involved in internal over external executive coaching, research on internal executive coaching remains sparse. This study, to the best of our knowledge the first focussing on exploring the sense-making of internal executive coaches on the role boundaries they experience when coaching from within their organisation, therefore feels timely and important. It also supports needs identified by the participating rail organisation for internal executive coaches “to carefully manage role boundaries, to engage in multi-stakeholder contracting and attend regular supervision”.

Methods

This study adopted a phenomenological research methodology, using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), argued to be particularly appropriate to developing a deeper subjective understanding in coaching research methodology (Rajasinghe, 2020). IPA is particularly relevant to this study in recognising the dual roles (researcher and practitioner) of the researcher (Willig, 2013). Yardley (2008)’s four principles of *sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance* for assessing the quality of a qualitative research study were employed in conducting this research study. An expert source on IPA (Smith *et al.*, 2009) was used as guidance and was consistently and faithfully applied in the approach to participant selection, data collection (including development of interview questions) and data analysis by the first author (who was the researcher).

As the researcher, the first author was uniquely positioned to obtain organisational and participant permission and access for this research because they were (before retiring) an employee of the organisation (undertaking trade union duties alongside internal executive coaching activities) whilst undertaking the research. Being an internal executive coach and trade union representative, the researcher was accustomed to hearing potentially privileged, conflicting or contentious information in confidence, and had an awareness and experience of boundary management. As an ‘insider researcher’, the researcher used reflexivity as a resource throughout the research process to acknowledge and create awareness of how their own biases, perspectives and experience may affect data collection and analysis (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Further, the researcher immersed themselves in their researcher role; committed to being open, honest and fully engaged in each participants’ experience and give authentic voice to their experience (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). The focus for this study was on internal executive coaches and their sense-making of role boundaries rather than on other stakeholders or the organisation.

Participants

Participants were sourced from the organisations' 100-member internal executive coach pool, all of whom received regular supervision and held, or were working towards holding, an accredited coaching qualification. The researcher and their coaching supervisor were part of this pool and were excluded from the sampling frame. A sample size of three was selected based on the requirement for quality over quantity, reflecting IPA's concentration in detail on a small number of cases (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p. 51). Four participants responded, one of whom was excluded due to an unforeseen close work connection, leaving the sample of three participants. Semi-structured virtual IPA interviews were conducted with the three participants, two of whom were female, and one male.

Data collection

An information sheet was provided and written informed consent obtained from each participant, prior to data collection, which made it clear that interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed, and that anonymised verbatim extracts would be used to maintain confidentiality (Gray, 2014, p. 61; Smith, 2008, p. 64-66).

The researcher conducted a one-to-one semi-structured interview, of 50-55 minutes' duration, with each participant. Participants were asked to explain their organisational roles, what sense they made of organisational role boundaries, and how they felt about and experienced them within the context of being an internal executive coach. Time for preparation and reflection was set aside before and after each interview to enable the researcher to remain mindful of their researcher role. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted virtually using the confidential virtual space of the organisation's Microsoft Teams application.

Mindful of conducting this research within their own (now former) organisation, and being a trade union representative and internal executive coach, the researcher re-emphasised their researcher role at each interview. Each participant was offered the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview, prior to any data analysis, and reject any parts, which no participants took up. Participants were reminded of their right to terminate the interview or refuse to talk about certain issues, encouraged to utilise supervision, and provided with debrief information.

The first interview was conducted before undertaking the remaining interviews on different days (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p. 77). This, and the researcher's reflexive diary, provided space for reflection before, between and after interviews and helped the researcher to remain in their research role more effectively.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, who chose the pseudonyms, Amy, Jack and Sarah reflecting each participant's gender, and redacted identifying information to enable data analysis. These accounts were the starting point for the researcher's analysis, and interpreting them required immersive attention to each account (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p. 82). The analysis approach used in this IPA study differs from that taken by other qualitative research analysis approaches, in that it actively involves the researcher in interpreting each participant's sense-making of their lived experience. Each transcript was annotated with descriptive, linguistic, and interpretative exploratory notes (Smith *et al.*, 2009, pp. 83-91); whilst identifying and discarding any non-relevant data. Using their own thoughts, feelings and experiences to help them make sense of the participants' sense-making, (part of a double-hermeneutic process) (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p. 90), the researcher undertook this in-depth analysis over several days, completing the interpretative exploratory comments for one case before moving onto the next, thereby providing a critical distance for reflection to enable them to do justice to each participant's voice.

Next emergent themes were identified for each case, with some overlapping or related both within and across cases (Smith *et al.*, 2009, pp. 91-106); from which three superordinate themes: roles, relationships and contracting were identified.

In presenting the findings, anonymised interview extracts are included to provide meaning-rich descriptions and highlight convergences and divergences across the cases.

Findings

Three superordinate themes of roles, relationships and contracting were produced which expressed the sense-making of participants' experience of organisational role boundaries. These superordinate themes, common to all participants and indicating high-level sense-making convergence, were further divided into sub-themes to better interpret and express participant sense-making convergences and divergences at sub-theme level, (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of findings

Superordinate themes	Sub-themes
Roles	Awareness of different organisational roles
	Being in the same organisation
Relationships	Positive aspects
	Experiencing relationship boundaries
Contracting	Importance of contracting
	Managing confidentiality boundaries
	Multi-stakeholder contracting

The findings are presented by case within each of the three superordinate themes of roles, relationships and contracting.

Roles

All participants described their awareness of different organisational roles within the organisation and of their experience of being part of the same organisation.

Amy's sense-making about coaching illustrates her awareness of the internal role boundaries of shared organisational interests and purpose. Her 'box' metaphor may also be symbolic of how she experiences such boundaries:

...if they're talking to you about a railway item that is their box, sometimes you want to get in it. [...it's that picture, isn't it, of that person focussing on the box and you focussing on the person.

For Amy, there is a sense of the separation of coaching role from other organisational roles, whilst being complimentary in terms of skillset application:

I feel like they're very separate, but complimentary.

On encountering coachees outside the coaching space, there is a sense of having different perspectives and being able to apply different lenses and 'seeing' according to the organisational role at the time. For Amy, it is:

...about seeing the coachee, not their job role; but then when they're in their job role, you do see the job role.

For Jack, the importance of role boundary crossovers was evident from his sense-making about his experience of a case where those crossovers could have jeopardised his reputation and credibility

as a coach, and impacted the wider team:

I think the boundaries of, of my own, erm, credibility as a coach and my own reputation ...there was a little bit of a crossover between working and personal relationships.

Jack's sense-making is expressed as a vivid mental picture of his working environment using language that is practical and has a physicality about it that is clear and relatable:

...we walk the same floorboards as our customers and we breathe the same air, so we are part of the same culture.

There is a sense that the role boundary between coachee and internal customer is, perhaps, imperceptible - or at least intertwined - because they are part of the same organisational culture with a pre-existing level of trust and rapport.

For Jack, there is also a sense of potential for post-coaching interactions as a result of being in the same organisation:

You know, it's not like a coaching relationship ends and then you never see that person again.

The importance of confidentiality is implied in Sarah's sense-making of her roles and the boundaries between them. Her 'box' metaphor may represent a safe container for coaching conversations and a boundary between her coaching and other organisational roles:

...coach them on the terms that what we do in the box of coaching tries not to go anywhere else.

Sarah's sense-making about roles and boundaries appears situated within the context of the confidentiality boundary of the coaching space. Her language switches from the 'box' metaphor to using 'space' to describe coaching conversations within the organisation. Perhaps 'space' sounds less of a constraint to Sarah, and more of a safe and appropriate environment or context for the conversation. Perhaps identifying different spaces enables Sarah to make sense of her organisational roles and how they can be best and most appropriately performed:

...what's really, really important in the coaching context is confidentiality. I don't want the leakage...of the confidentiality...of what she tells me in the, the confidential space to go into the other space.

In making sense of her encounters with coachees outside the coaching space, Sarah uses the metaphor of a 'hat' for the different organisational roles held by both herself and her coachee:

So that I've now got my work hat on. And, she knows that I've got, we've got our role hats on. ... it's a role conversation. []. Not a coaching conversation.

There is no sense of conflict or difficulty with the idea of Sarah having different organisational roles with different people in different contexts.

However, where role boundary conflicts relating to confidentiality arise, Sarah appears to make sense of them by re-framing the level of detail she shares with others, perhaps satisfying the requirements of both her organisational roles and honouring the boundary between them.

Relationships

All participants described both positive aspects of being an internal executive coach and the complex relationships that exist for them in terms of their coaching and non-coaching relationships with coachees and others within the organisation. The participants described their experience of being part of the same organisation with a pre-existing level of rapport (Amy and Jack) and trust (Jack and Sarah) as an enabler to the coaching relationship.

For Amy, sense-making about organisational role boundaries appears linked to how she feels about her effectiveness and relationships with others.

I would say for me...when I don't feel like I'm being effective in any one of the things that I've been asked to do, I would suggest that's a boundary to the role.

Positive aspects of a pre-existing relationship on enabling effective coaching outcomes are suggested by Amy's reflection and sense-making:

I don't feel it was any less effective because we had that pre-existing working relationship, and we get really good rapport.

Positive aspects of Jack's sense-making relate to being in the same working environment:

I think that, that is a huge advantage because as a result, a lot of the trust and rapport is already there

and to his awareness of how building trust and rapport enables coachees to be open about their working relationships and environment; whilst also acknowledging that this will 'inevitably' lead to the sharing of privileged information that may impact role boundaries:

If the trust and the rapport is built, erm, and built well then, which is ideal and that's what you want so the coach[ee] can really open up... [] at some point, inevitably, their manager and colleagues may well come into the conversation.

Jack's sense-making about organisational role boundaries prioritises being open, honest, and transparent – a pattern of language that flowed throughout Jack's sense-making during the interview. Jack shares the potential impact on his relationship role boundaries of coaching line managers and their direct reports concurrently:

I had to be open and honest and say, "Now I also have another coaching relationship with your manager erm, and if you're happy to proceed with this coaching relationship erm that's absolutely fine..."

Jack reflects on shared expectations from the coaching relationship, and how his experience of pressing 'the pause button' when coaching executives was a difficult conversation. There is a sense of relief, being 'glad', that this had paid off in the success of the coaching relationship:

So, I had to press the pause button and say; you know, we need to be honest here, erm, and, and we need to sort of understand what our, what each of our expectations are. Erm, and that was a little bit of a difficult conversation to have because they were an executive. But I'm glad I did because it did allow us to sort of realign and refocus, erm, and, and the coaching relationship was successful.

Sarah's sense-making about organisational role boundaries appears situated within the context of a relationship of trust; with the words 'obviously' and 'all' indicating its unequivocal importance for her:

Erm, So, a lot of, obviously, this is all about trust.

Like Jack, trust is an important element of the relationship and appears especially valued by Sarah when multiple organisational role boundaries exist:

That person knew me in a work context. And has decided they can trust me, and, on that basis, they have come to me as a coach.

Again, Sarah's repeated use of 'trust me' to not 'spill the beans' emphasises the trust she perceives the coachee had placed in her. This feels important for Sarah and that she was chosen by the coachee:

And they have decided they trust me, and they trust me implicitly and I'm not about to spill the beans.

Contracting

All participants described their experience and the importance of contracting as a basis for setting organisational role boundaries both at the start of, and throughout, a coaching relationship. Participants' sense-making highlighted the importance of contracting and managing confidentiality boundaries (all participants) and multi-stakeholder contracting (Jack and Sarah).

Amy makes sense of organisational role boundaries through the process of contracting. A struggle is apparent in her various hesitations of 'not sure' and 'erm' and in how contracting feels a 'bit stiff' and a 'bit formal'. There is a sense of an internal struggle between preferring an informal approach and the need to formalise contracting to set out boundaries for the coaching work:

I'm not sure about this, erm...feels a bit stiff and formal.

However, her use of 'non-negotiable' to describe contracting reveals a clear sense of the need for contracting and her rationalisation that it will help the coachee:

It's non-negotiable...and I think it helps people be more open as well.

Amy then explores how she has experienced contracting and speaks about not wanting to 'broadcast' which, with her later reference to a 'script', creates an image of a formal performance. Again, there is a sense of Amy's internal struggle with the formality of contracting that appears to stem from her relative lack of experience. Amy expresses her struggle using the metaphor of a 'robot':

Erm, again it's about, I think, not being a robot reading a script. It felt really hard at the start.

In relation to encountering coachees outside of the coaching space and managing this situation, Amy, again, makes sense of this through contracting:

I think as well, yeah, about, you know, "How do you see this if we were to meet in the office ...are you comfortable with people knowing? Would you like me never to mention it?" Again, it's, set that up. Ask people how they want it to work.

Jack's sense-making of role boundaries is expressed through contracting conversations. A vivid mental picture of 'red flags' is created and then, there is a mental picture of proactive action being taken in the form of 'pressing the pause button' to understand whether or not the coaching can proceed safely. There is a sense of Jack needing to be aware of 'red flags' as they 'pop up' in the

same way that a train driver would need to remain alert to red signals whilst driving on the railway infrastructure:

And if, at any stage, the conversation does start to erm, cause a few red flags to pop up, then I need to consider having that conversation. I need to consider maybe pressing the pause button erm, on the coaching conversation maybe for a, a period of time just to share my thoughts or share my concerns...

When reflecting on role boundary conflicts that arose with one coachee where, ultimately, the coaching relationship did not proceed, there was a felt sense from Jack of unease. Several hesitations and repeated use of 'didn't' occurred whilst Jack was recalling and making sense of this experience; he appeared to be thinking out loud, and reflecting anew, whilst relating his experience:

Erm, and I didn't expect this and certainly didn't, didn't contract for this erm, at the time, erm. [] what happened shortly after that I did then refer him to somebody else because I felt the compromise was, was perhaps too, too; it was too great a compromise. Erm, so, we decided not to proceed in our relationship.

Contracting helped Jack make sense of, and manage, organisational role boundaries outside of the coaching session by prioritising the coachee's level of control:

And so, the client is in complete control about what is shared beyond the relationship, either between me and their manager or themselves and their manager.

There is a sense that the organisational role boundary involving line managers is experienced positively by Jack because the contracting process is coachee-led.

Sarah, like Amy and Jack, emphasises the importance of contracting. The use of 'of course' and 'appropriate' perhaps revealing the importance to her of maintaining the coaching contract with her coachees:

Because, of course, there is a contract that we sign. So, I, we keep the contract up to date. We do all of those appropriate edges.

Sarah's sense-making about organisational role boundaries through contracting considers the importance of ethics in managing confidentiality boundaries through contracting. Her mis-spoken reference to 'biblical' when meaning 'business' and clear 'I' statement perhaps reveal the importance to Sarah of ethical practice based on her personal and professional values:

And those edges are really that biblical, sorry biblical, business ethics definition of confidentiality...is something I really hold firm.

Sarah, like Jack, prioritises coachees in multi-stakeholder contracting situations, albeit expressed in stronger language, including 'really forced'. Sarah's reference is always back to her coachee which may indicate that the coach-coachee psychological contract, for Sarah, must eclipse all others:

And I'm going to really not want to say anything unless it's the agreed words if, if it's really forced on me to say something, I will want to agree with you what we're saying.

In summary, the participants' sense-making about organisational role boundaries unfolded from their reflections on roles, relationships and contracting.

Discussion

This section places the superordinate themes within the context of the academic literature. It highlights the heightened awareness of roles and the need for contracting; the existence of potentially positive role and coaching relationship aspects.

Roles

The findings indicated an awareness of different roles within the organisation, as well as the need for maintenance of clear boundaries between, and strategies for managing them. This heightened coach role awareness is unsurprising, given the emphasis in the literature of the “...*unique operating environment involving many stakeholders and a complex set of relationships*” (Wilson, 2008) that characterises internal coaching. Feehily (2018) found that internal coaches were respected by coachees because they understand and were known within the organisation; and there was a sense of this in practice from Jack where they ‘breathe the same air’ and ‘walk the same floorboards.’ For Amy the separation of roles was ‘about seeing the coachee, not their job role.’ Equally, Sarah is clear that she wears different ‘hats’ at different times.

The double hermeneutic approach used for this study identified ‘being part of the same system’ and ‘knowing the same people’ as role aspects raised by participants, as they were by St. John-Brooks (2010), who offered factors to consider in addressing potential role boundary dilemmas in these and other areas (2014, p.60). Similarly, this study provided examples of coach awareness of the need for maintenance of role boundaries, and the use of strategies for handling them, such as Sarah’s ‘box of coaching’ and Amy’s self-regulation around wanting to ‘get in’ the coachee’s box.

In contrast to the challenges emphasised by St. John-Brooks (2010), the findings also refer to the benefits of being in same organisation, with Amy feeling that her roles are ‘very separate, but complimentary.’ However, Jack’s ‘boundary crossovers’ and Sarah not wanting ‘leakage...of the confidentiality’ indicate role boundaries and the challenges to managing confidentiality also identified by St. John-Brooks (2010).

Relationships

Whilst this study’s findings highlighted the complexity of participants’ internal executive coach and non-coaching relationships with coachees and others in the organisation, simultaneously and more emphatically it highlighted positive aspects of their internal executive coach relationships in role boundary management and in enabling aspects of coaching process. These aspects included the ability to gain trust and build trusting coaching relationships, and generate rapport with coachees. This position is an important divergence from the majority of the extant literature, particularly at the high level of investigation which questions the ability of internal coaches to build and maintain trusting relationships due to concerns over confidentiality and possibly greater contact with coachees outside the coaching space.

There is sparse mention of building trust in the internal coach relationship in the research, however Machin (2010) suggests that trust emerges strongly as a condition of “paramount importance” within the internal coach relationship possibly “over and above that required even for an external coach” (p. 43). Trust is also seen as developing partly through the person of the coach, and with coachee readiness and openness as additional developmental contributors; all of these trust factors resonate strongly with findings of the current study (see also Alvey & Barclay, 2007 on developmental trust factors). Schalk & Landeta (2017)’s findings also speak on this issue whereby some internal coaches proposed that, whilst more difficult for internal coaches to initially gain their coachee’s trust, subsequently it was down to individual coach professionalism.

The broader coaching relationship literature discusses the importance of creating and maintaining a working alliance, as both necessary and universally applicable within a professional helping relationship (O'Broin & Palmer, 2010a). Reflecting this, the findings conveyed a sense of the critical importance of rapport and linked it to being, in Jack's frequently stated words; 'open and honest' and 'a huge advantage' of sharing the same culture, whereas Amy considers a pre-existing relationship enables rapport within a coaching relationship. This emphasis on the importance of trust and its linkages to rapport, openness and transparency, are echoed in the broader coaching relationship research in a qualitative study by O'Broin & Palmer, (2010b; p.136).

This questioning over trust and confidentiality in internal coach relationships is often seen as an important consideration for choice of external coaches over internal coaches for executive coaching in organisations, particularly for senior executives. The study by Jones et. al. (2018) for instance which examined coaching practice factors on affective and skills-based outcomes and the association of outcomes with coaching practice moderators including whether coaching is conducted by internal coaches or external coaches is an example. These authors' findings of higher affective outcomes for coachees receiving external coaching compared to internal coaching, and in those coachees in highly complex roles, were attributed to the perceived greater likelihood of coachee sharing of sensitive information with external coaches due to increased assurances of confidentiality.

In their study's limitations however, Jones *et al.* (2018) confirmed potential confounds to these findings which they stated could reflect the importance of autonomy over the selection of an external coach which was a choice less likely for a coachee when working with internal coaches. It is noteworthy that coachees coached by internal executive coaches in the current study chose their own coach from the organisation's coaching pool in addition to having an initial meeting with their potential coach before deciding whether to proceed with them. Also, of relevance is the testing of boundaries and confidentiality of external coaches who know an organisation well, which can also occur (St. John-Brooks, 2010).

This study's findings are noteworthy too in highlighting potential additive benefits of an internal coaching relationship, for instance:

- the advantages of commonality of organisational culture as a relationship-building factor
- that a pre-existing relationship may engender rapport
- that former knowledge of coach outlook may encourage trust for coachees in a later coaching relationship
- the virtue of coach openness and honesty about dual relationships

Contracting

All participants recognised and described their experience of contracting as necessary throughout a coaching relationship; a view supported by the literature (Frisch, 2001; Turner & Hawkins, 2016). Amy, despite initially feeling like 'a robot reading a script' recognised the 'non-negotiable' importance of contracting.

The literature emphasises the need to negotiate and renegotiate the contract (Kidd, 2006, pp. 90-93; O'Broin & Palmer, 2009); supported by the findings where Sarah confirms: '...we keep the contract up-to-date.'

The literature states that multi-stakeholder contracting is essential to maximise positive outcomes for all stakeholders (Burger & Van Coller-Peter, 2019; Turner & Hawkins, 2016). One aspect of multi-stakeholder contracting that may impact on boundaries is the question of who is the client, and associated issue of whether a systemically integrated agreement is in place. St. John-Brooks (2010) found 70% of participants felt primarily responsible to individual coachees; similarly, the

findings suggest that this is problematic in practice with Jack giving the coachee ‘...complete control about what is shared beyond the relationship’ and Sarah initially rejecting multi-stakeholder contracting before acknowledging ‘...if it’s really forced on me to say something, I will want to agree with you [the coachee] what we’re saying.’

The importance of contracting and its relation to confidentiality is also referenced in the literature. The examples of participants managing confidentiality boundaries through contracting echo Gettman *et al.* (2019)’s assertion that contracting alleviates confidentiality concerns that could otherwise negatively impact the coaching relationship, and could explain how coachees might not perceive contracting as critical (possibly until a problem arises involving transgression of role boundaries). Eniola (2017) highlights the importance of including confidentiality in contracting, supported by the almost ‘biblical’ in nature findings from Sarah where confidentiality ‘is something I really hold firm.’ Turner and Passmore (2018) highlight the importance of contracting in managing arising ethical dilemmas, as was the case with Jack’s ‘red flags,’ whilst St. John-Brooks, (2010), found that more experienced coaches considered appropriate contracting with clients was responsible for the lack of dilemmas in internal coaching.

Practice implications

This study’s findings suggest certain practice implications for internal executive coaches’ competencies and self-management, and for organisations providing internal coaching; including practice implications for contracting.

Managing a spectrum of role and relationship experiences

The findings of heightened awareness of coaching and non-coaching roles for internal executive coaches highlights the need to consider and review the role boundaries germane to internal coaching more broadly, and within the specific culture and setting of their own organisation. The assumption of dealing only with negative ethical dilemmas inherent in multiple roles is incomplete. There may be a spectrum of role experiences, including more positive benefits of internal executive coach relationships, needing to be managed and utilised both during coaching and in post-coaching contacts. Robust contracting, both dyadically and organisationally, particularly around multiple roles, coupled with proactively managing confidentiality, (St. John-Brooks, 2014; p. 49; Schalk & Landeta, 2017) and proactive discussion and consideration of strategies for managing role boundaries seem particularly important in internal executive coach interactions with coachees.

Key role of building trust in the internal coaching relationship

This study’s findings support the particular importance of forging a trusting internal coaching relationship. The additional layers of relationship and management of possible contact post-coaching, coupled with the broader perception of greater guarantee of confidentiality in external coaching suggests that trust and confidentiality may be more important combined factors in internal than in external coaching. This may place added emphasis on the person of the coach and use of self (see Bachkirova, 2016). Building such a relationship requires advanced interpersonal and intra-personal coach skills, levels of self- and other-awareness, and self-management combined with authenticity as well as a clear, consistent contracting process in which the coachee can trust. These more intangible skills can largely be developed through coach training, supervision, and coach personal practice (see Bennett-Levy, 2019).

The coachee also plays a part in forging a trusting relationship, needing to be open and engaged in the coaching process; and an opportunity exists for negotiating and normalising the relational conditions for the individual coachee and the organisational internal coaching relationship. It is also a vehicle for careful and explicit articulation of confidentiality and its limits. The organisational

cultural setting, and multi-stakeholder contracting approach and process, may play their part in enabling a trusting relationship to be forged (see Burger & Van Coller-Peter, 2019, for possible multi-stakeholder elements in contracting guidelines).

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, it was based on three internal executive coaches within one rail industry organisation. Whilst providing meaning-rich descriptions of their experience, the findings do not seek to generalise to other internal executive coaches in this or other organisations or industries. Second, this study did not seek to understand how participants' sense-making might unfold over time. Third, whilst all participants were internal executive coaches who had undergone training and were receiving regular supervision, the impact of training, development and supervision of internal executive coaches was beyond the scope of this study.

Finally, IPA research is interpretative and therefore findings inevitably represent the researcher's interpretation of participants' interpretation of their own sense-making. Whilst the researcher emphasised and remained focussed on their researcher role, it is possible that their interpretations may reflect their bias from being (whilst undertaking the research and data analysis) an internal executive coach and trade union representative in the same organisation. Additionally, findings could be subject to interpretations of participants' sense-making that may differ from those of the participants themselves, the researcher's or other researchers and readers.

Future research

Given the study's potential for both role boundary dilemmas and certain positive role aspects, further empirical studies examining the benefits and challenges in internal coaching of coach and coachee being part of the same organisation; how the coach and coachee manage role boundaries temporally, and strategies used, are argued to be necessary.

Collectively, the study's findings on trust in internal coach relationships and their apparent link to multiple factors such as role boundaries, contracting and confidentiality argue for further research studies on internal coach relationship interactions with associated variables in comparison with coaching practice factors, including external coaching relationships, and in terms of the objectives of the coaching provided.

Given the potential for possible challenges *and benefits* of internal executive coach relationships, further research studies examining the spectrum of direct and indirect impacts temporally and across organisations and coaching cultures are suggested.

Conclusion

In exploring how internal executive coaches make sense of organisational role boundaries, roles, relationships and contracting were the key themes. Several conclusions may be drawn from these findings. First, the heightened awareness by internal executive coaches of role boundaries encouraged their maintenance, and active development of strategies for maintaining them. Second, the emphasis on positive internal coaching relationship and role aspects suggested a spectrum ranging from benefits to challenges in role boundaries that require examination at a finer level of detail in the empirical research. Third, contracting, and the development of multi-stakeholder contracting, and avoiding threats to confidentiality by the way in which contracting takes place may have an important part to play in both role boundary maintenance and in engendering trust in the

internal coaching relationship. These themes have potential implications for future research and internal coaching practice.

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