



## **Commentary on The Coaching Impact Study: Measuring the Value of Executive Coaching**

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and Barry Schlosser, PhD**

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In the few short months since we completed our article, we have begun to hear of its positive, enthusiastic reception by the coaching community. We were recently asked to lead a discussion of the article in a popular practitioner teleconference series, and we look forward to a continuing dialogue with the community in such interactive forums. It is the dialogue our research encourages that most interests us, and that we believe is most valuable to our field. And it is a dialogue that we feel needs to happen often, between practitioner and client, between coach and program manager, and, as we argue from the basis of our research, between participants and their stakeholders.

An area where our ongoing research is leading is in the examination of not only the experiences and perceptions of the coaching dyad, but of the coachee's manager as well. We have begun to call it the coaching triad because of (in our experience) the significant role the manager can play in the ultimate success or failure of an executive coaching engagement.

We have all heard the Zen meditation, "If a tree falls in the forest with no one to hear it, does it make a sound?" The implication for executive coaching is, if you and your coachee achieve significant, lasting change but your client's stakeholders are not primed to observe the change and therefore don't notice it, was it worth the company's money and time? Some would say: "Yes!" And in many ways, they would be right. In a perfectly objective world, the shift in behavior and incremental increases in long-term success of a coachee would speak for themselves, be recognized by colleagues and stakeholders, be valued by the organization, get linked to the coaching effort, and lead to widespread recognition of the positive impact of spending tens of thousands of dollars on a coach.

But we all know we don't practice in a perfect world. Even the most highly-regarded organizational executive coaching programs receive intense financial scrutiny, find themselves subject to budgetary cutbacks, and are at risk in the face of competing demands on financial resources.

These challenges underscore the importance of clearly and convincingly establishing the value of coaching with an audience wider than that of our immediate client, the coachee. In truth, our client is also the coachee's manager, his or her other primary stakeholders (peers, direct reports), the coaching program manager, and the broader organization—we are accountable for creating this 'coaching community' around our coachee so that he or she is primed for success. Because not only is the *change* we foster in our clients

important to the success of our coaching, but so is the *recognition* of that change by our clients' stakeholders. We must demonstrate the value of coaching to all of these stakeholder groups—enable them to link the coaching to behavior change as well as to the benefit back to the organization—if we are to see our field continue to grow and thrive, solidifying its place in the pantheon of leadership development options, and avoiding the unenviable fate of a waning management fad.

This brings us back to the “coaching triad”, which by our definition includes the coachee's manager. This core group is not the entire stakeholder community, but is the kernel of that community on which we chose to focus our research efforts. As you see in our article, among our research findings in this study was the observation that a large portion of managers responding to our survey (over one-third!) saw no value from the coaching engagement completed by their direct report. We know the risk this poses to a coach—negative or critical feedback, possible loss of future opportunity to coach in the organization; we also know the risk this poses to the coaching program—skepticism of the value of the program, scrutiny and possible restriction or reduction of program budgets. So what can be done to bring these managers around, change their perceptions, and help them to see the positive impact coaching has had on their direct report? We can share two recent examples of how this might be achieved.

We have only just begun to look for ways to address the ‘manager gap’ we have observed in the coaching engagement. But as we have said, the true value of our findings will result from the dialogue they stimulate among concerned practitioners. As we now embark upon the third year of the Coaching Impact Study, we continue to strive to expand the body of research underpinning our field, and we look forward to an ongoing dialogue with you of ideas and experiences in this important area.

***“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” – Albert Einstein***

Before we close, we would like to acknowledge the feedback we have received from many in the coaching community who are concerned that a study design such as the survey research presented here does not account for the full richness and depth of the value obtained through a coaching engagement. We wholeheartedly agree! The value of coaching is not something that can be fully described by any study design, and certainly not by a primarily quantitative survey design such as that represented here. And in recognition of that, we have built into the comprehensive design of our study a “part two”—a qualitative research design that will draw upon the survey data to inform a deliberate, interview-based data collection process. This interview process is designed to gather and probe the stories behind the more successful and the less successful engagements. We hope to launch this second part of the study with select participants this year.

## **Putting Our Findings to Work**

*One thing I have been very conscious of since reviewing the results of the study is to set up regular check in meetings with my coachee's manager. In contracting we make sure this is an agreed part of the engagement. In the past I met with the manager in the beginning of the engagement and at the end, but was not as diligent during the engagement to regularly check in with my client's manager. I coached my client to do this, but I realize that I can add value by keeping the manager aware of those things my client is working on and coaching the manager to assist in his/her development. In this way, my client's success is also their manager's success, and this all rolls up to additional reinforcement for the coaching initiatives in the organization.*

– Ellen Kumata

*The study's inquiry into managerial involvement as an issue has gotten me thinking about contextual factors and the related phenomena that arise. Here are a couple of my top-of-mind considerations:*

*(1) Getting managers routinely involved is a present-day challenge to the communities of coaches and HR professionals. It's part of the evolution of highest-impact coaching to pursue ways to more thoroughly engage managers. But not only do we want managers involved, we want the "coaching triad" to get together more and by various means. For instance, this involvement could be in the form of meetings or shared development plans that the triad drafts and executes upon.*

*(2) One phenomenon we ought to avoid is "shadow managing" whereby the coach ends up functioning as a surrogate manager. This may occur when the coachee is perceived to be in difficulty and so-called "fix-it" coaching is invoked. As a result, the "difficult" coachee may, in part, be handed off to the coach for repair and restoration, while the manager may, in the interim, take a vacation from some aspects of managerial responsibility and experience some degree of relief. When this occurs, the pull is for less involvement by the manager (as far as the manager is concerned). The challenge here is to prevent this from happening.*

*I'd love to hear more dialogue about these issues in the world of coaching.*

– Barry Schlosser

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