Academic Paper

Executive coaches' backgrounds – Yes, they can make a difference

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Abstract

In 2009 Kauffman & Bachkirova posed the question "Does the coaches' background make a difference..?" (p.3). This paper outlines research conducted to explore how coaches' prior career experiences can affect their relationships with clients. Data from reflections of four experienced executive coaches, all with senior executive prior careers, and of a client of each of the coaches was examined using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings indicate that coaches' backgrounds can make a difference with coaches feeling more confident and better able to question, probe and challenge and clients feeling better understood and greater confidence in their coaches and their coaching.

Keywords

Coaching, coaches' backgrounds, credibility, confidence, IPA

Article history

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Introduction

This paper outlines recent research that seeks to narrow a gap in the extant literature and to enlighten the discussion of a sometimes controversial issue in the executive coaching industry. One question and two observations made by other researchers are addressed. In 2009 Kauffman and Bachkirova (p.3) posed the question "Does the coaches' background make a difference..?". In 2015 Athanasopoulou and Dopson (p.31) suggested that "it would be valuable to obtain better understanding of the role that a coach's background plays in the outcome and quality of the coaching intervention". Most recently, Pandolfi (2020, p.13) suggested that "more research is needed to understand the influence of coaches' background on outcomes".

Research was conducted to explore how one particular aspect of some executive coaches' backgrounds, namely their own prior experience in senior executive roles within organisations, can affect their relationships with clients. The research examined data from two separate but related cohorts of participants. The reflections of four experienced executive coaches, all of whom who had

prior career experience at CEO, executive team or managing partner level within major commercial organisations were complemented by reflections of a client of each of the coaches, all of whom were working in senior executive roles themselves.

Literature review

A comprehensive critical review of the extant literature on executive coaching was undertaken with over 240 sources reviewed. Two observations on how coaches' backgrounds can affect their relationships with clients emerged from this review. First, the importance ascribed to coaches' prior experience has changed markedly over the past fifty years (Ives, 2008) as coaching burgeoned as an industry and certain vested interests influenced its development (Gray et al., 2016); Second, although the currently dominant discourse in coaching suggests that prior experience or expertise in clients' contexts is not important, there is a notable lack of understanding of "the role that a coach's background plays on the outcome and quality of the coaching intervention" (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015, p.30). Furthermore, there is evidence in the outcome and case study research that suggests coaches' backgrounds can have noticeable effects on coaching relationships (Rekalde et al., 2015; Dean & Meyer, 2002).

Up until the late 1970s, coaching was regarded as "a process in which a manager, through direct discussion and guided activity, helps a colleague to solve a problem, or to do a task better than would otherwise have been the case" (Gray et al., 2016, p.15). This confirms Eggers and Clark's (2000, p.67) observation that prior to the mid-1970s, "coaching was seen as an employee job-development tool that managers used to foster greater productivity". In this earlier manifestation of coaching the coach's experience and understanding of the client's tasks in hand were prerequisites of the role.

This changed materially in the 1980s and 1990s. "As coaching emerged as a distinct discipline, it was regarded as a form of facilitation or people-management style, and strictly non-directive" (Ives, 2008, p.103) with the possibly most influential commentator suggesting that "Coaching requires expertise in coaching but not in the subject at hand" (Whitmore, 2012, p.14).

Multiple factors contributed to this metamorphosis. These included the influence of the motivational movement in the US in the 1930s; the development of the humanist movement within psychology in the 1960s; the globalisation of key industries, greater market competition and the rise in importance of human capital intensive industries; the explosion of psychologists seeking new sources of income following the decimation of their profession caused by changes in the healthcare system in the US (Filipczak, 1998, p.87); and, lastly, the emergence of a number of entrepreneurs with little or no prior business experience (including John Whitmore, Graham Alexander and Miles Downey) who saw opportunities to build successful businesses in coaching.

The combination of these factors resulted in the role of the coach in the dominant discourse moving from being a sharer of experience and expertise to being an expert in the process of coaching. The view that prior experience or knowledge of clients' contexts is unnecessary, possibly even positively unhelpful, in coaching contributed to the prodigious growth, and some would suggest the 'democratisation', of the industry. However, it has also arguably contributed to a myopic discourse that focusses on the tools and techniques of coaching but that largely ignores the contribution to coaching of the characteristics of coaches themselves (Fillery-Travis & Cox, 2014; Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015; Rajasinghe, 2019).

Although the coach as process expert dominates the discourse around coaching, the industry is "populated by coaches from a range of backgrounds" and there is "no commonly accepted body of knowledge from which coaches draw their practice" (Cavanagh & Grant, 2006, p.148). Moreover, Blackman et al. (2016, p.459) contend that "there has been little published systematic empirical

research into business coaching" but suggest that "effective coach characteristics and skills….can be summarised into four consistent themes – integrity, support for the coachee, communication skills and behaviours, and credibility" (p.471). The same authors (p.473) also suggest that credibility is linked to coaches' prior experience:

> "Although there is agreement that coaches must be seen as credible to be effective, there is debate around how this credibility can be established….The evidence available in the 111 studies reviewed here tends towards the latter conclusion, that skills or expertise in the sector or in executive management are preferable".

Some research reflects the view that prior experience can be important. Meuse et al. (2009, p.130) note that "a more useful measure of validity may be one that is associated with the coach rather than with the coaching process in general". Bush (2004, p.100) observes that "…coach's background…engendered trust, credibility and rapport" with Mosteo et al. (2021, p.1245) highlighting "the importance of trust or the 'connection' generated between coach and the executive" as factors influencing coaching's effectiveness. Moreover, Augustijnen et al. (2011, p.159) suggest that that coaches' with relevant prior experience may be "more able to put themselves in the coachee's shoes and facilitate dialogue" and Cox (2013, p.13) suggests that it is not sufficient for coaches "to remain at superficial or meta level of challenge, with no accurate or specific knowledge or experience". The practitioner literature, perhaps inevitably, is often more categoric with, for instance, Axmith (2004, p.5) suggesting that "the coach must have the right background…CEOs want to work with a 'peer'…someone who brings real-word business credentials".

Nevertheless, the topics covered in the bulk of the literature on coaching reflect the dominant discourse. First, its processes and outcomes in efforts to promote its growth and commercial success (Fillery-Travis & Cox, 2014). Second, "most empirical research into executive coaching is concerned with the value of coaching from the perspective of the client" (de Haan et al., 2011, p.26). More recently, calls for 'evidence-based' approaches (Grant, 2016) have pointed research towards the efficacy of coaching. These factors have resulted in the paucity of coverage of coaches themselves that led Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2015, p.31) to suggest that "it would be valuable to obtain better understanding of the role that a coach's background plays in the outcome and quality of the coaching intervention".

The research outlined here seeks to address Athanasopoulou and Dopson's observation by inquiring into how coaches' prior career experience can affect their relationships with their clients. The methods outlined below were used to consider two variants of the same research question. A cohort of coaches were asked: *How does your prior career experience affect or influence your experience of coaching?* and a cohort of clients were asked: *How does your coach's prior career experience affect or influence your experience of coaching?* Our research also seeks to explore the validity of one of Whitmore's less often cited comments (2012, p.42): "…ideal would seem to be an expert coach with a wealth of technical knowledge too. It is, however, very hard for experts to withhold their expertise sufficiently to coach well".

Research methodology

Whilst suggesting that it would be valuable to develop improved understanding of the role played in coaching by coaches' backgrounds, Athanasopoulou & Dopson also note (2015, p.31) that "this cannot easily be assessed". The generally dyadic and confidential nature of coaching make observation difficult. A methodological approach that captured the lived experiences of the members of coaching dyads was designed and implemented to reflect these features of coaching.

Definition of the coaching studied

One particular subset of the highly heterogeneous coaching industry was studied. It is variously termed executive, business or workplace coaching and is still described well by Kilburg's 1996 definition (p.142):

> "… a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction".

All of the coaches interviewed were formally trained and accredited and had twenty year plus prior careers that included senior leadership roles. All of the clients interviewed were in senior executive positions and their coaching was undertaken on a commercial basis with fees paid by their employers. All of the coaching undertaken was subject to strict confidentiality between the individual clients and coaches.

Role of the primary researcher

The primary researcher is an experienced coach who worked at CEO, executive team and managing director levels in substantial organisations prior to training as an executive coach. All of the exercises, interviews and analysis referred to in this article were undertaken by the primary researcher and reviewed by the whole research team. Particular attention was paid to managing the potential of influence on the research of the researchers' own views and biases (see below).

Philosophical perspectives

Our research can be described as 'critical realist' as it acknowledges that "there is a reality but that it is usually difficult to apprehend" (Easton, 2009, p.119-120) and that "different valid perspectives on reality" (Maxwell, 2012, p.9) can exist; as 'pragmatic-critical realist' because it reflects a view that "a means of evaluating the veracity of cognitive systems and theories…is through the practical success or failure" (Johnson & Duberley, 2000, p.162); and as 'phenomenological', 'interpretative', and 'idiographic' (Smith et al., 2009).

A critical realist perspective was deemed to be particularly appropriate for research into coaching relationships. Its "integration of realist ontology (there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions, theories, and constructions) with a constructivist epistemology (our understanding of the world is inevitably a construction built from our own perspectives and standpoint" (Creswell and Piano Clark, 2017, as cited by Leonard & Willig, 2021, p.55) reflected the highly individual nature of dyadic coaching.

Research approach

A qualitative approach that explored "subjectivity and experience" and sought to "understand better what their (*our*) research participants' experiences are like, what they mean to them, how they talk about them, and how they make sense of them" (Willig, 2012, p.5) was used. More specifically, a phenomenological approach that viewed "an experience as the main object of investigation and not the story of an experience" (Gill, 2014, p.120) was applied. This approach provided opportunities to bring the primary researcher's own experience as a coach to bear as in phenomenology "the researcher is fully involved" and "Researcher subjectivity is prized and intersubjectivity is embraced…" (Finlay, 2008, p.3).

Our phenomenological approach reflected the contributions of Heidegger and Gadamer. We were avowedly interpretative throughout believing that "nothing can be encountered without reference to

a person's background understanding" (Laverty, 2003, p.24). Indeed, we sought to undertake a 'dialectical dance' that utilised the primary researcher's experience as a coach by moving "between bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight; between naïve openness and sophisticated criticality" (Finlay, 2008, p.3).

Research methods

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was our overarching research method as it "offers an established, systematic, and phenomenologically focussed approach, which is committed to understanding the first person perspective from the third-person position, so far as possible, through intersubjective inquiry and analysis" (Larkin et al., 2011, p.321). IPA was consistent with our philosophical perspectives as it is theoretically rooted in critical realism. The differences in the meanings individuals attach to experiences that IPA honours are considered possible because of critical realism's stance that they experience different parts of reality (Fade, 2004).

IPA is informed by concepts from three areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. It is phenomenological in that it "values the participants' own perspectives" and "is concerned with how the person binds and integrates discrete elements of perceptions, memories, judgements, assumptions, and beliefs" (Jeong & Othman, 2016, p.559). It is hermeneutic since it is in the interpretative rather than descriptive tradition and uses a 'double hermeneutic' whereby the "participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world" (Smith, 2004, p.40). It is very specifically idiographic in that it "refers to an in-depth analysis of single cases and examines individual perspectives of study participants in their unique contexts" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p.8).

Five factors contributed to our view that IPA was a particularly appropriate method for research on coaching. First, since "coaching takes many forms" (Brunner, 1998, p.516), it was important to focus research on how individual clients in individual contexts experienced it. Thus, "IPA studies, first and foremost, as offering detailed, nuanced analysis of particular instances of lived experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p.37) made it well suited.

Second, IPA's use of interviews, exploration, interpretation and inductive reasoning and because it "goes beyond description…generating an insider's perspective – but states no single, a priori, theoretical assumption about how that insider's perspective may be interpreted" (Larkin et al., 2006, p.113-4) reflected the nature of coaching.

Third, the opportunity provided by IPA to perform the 'dialectic dance' referred to above allowed the experience of the researchers to be brought to bear, albeit with a requirement for it to be used cautiously and appropriately.

The fourth reason was Larkin and Thompson's (2012, p.101) comment that the "outcome of a successful IPA study is likely to include an element of 'giving voice' (capturing and reflecting upon the principal aims and concerns of the research participants)". This resonated with our view that the particular characteristics that coaches with relevant prior experience can bring to coaching relationships are generally under-understood. This subset of the coaching community is particularly heterogeneous and lacks the highly articulate 'voice' that the psychologist subset enjoys. We believed that giving such coaches a clearer message in the discourse on coaching will improve understanding of the industry.

The final reason was IPA's flexibility. We concur with the view that IPA is "more of a craft than a technique or scientific method" (Gill, 2014, p.126) and embraced Wagstaff & Williams's (2014, p.11) idea of employing a "bolder research design". We collected data from both parties in dyadic coaching relationships – an innovation on the convention of "collecting qualitative data from a

reasonably homogenous group who share a certain contextual perspective on a given experience" (Larkin et al., 2019, p.184).

Employing multiple perspectives "of data collection or analysis in order to establish a rounded, multi-layered understanding of the research topic" (Yardley, 2000, p.222) has a well-established role in qualitative research generally, but has only more recently been adopted in IPA studies. Larkin, Shaw and Flowers (2019) have promoted the inclusion of multiple perspectives in IPA studies and asserted that "multiperspectival designs retain IPA's strong connection to phenomenological and hermeneutic concepts".

We contend that the value of including multiple perspectives to "address relational, systemic, or other socially nuanced research questions" (Larkin et al., 2019, p.185) made this approach uniquely well suited to research on dyadic relationships. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that our inclusion of coaches and clients in our research was not undertaken with any aim of identifying causality. It was used to enhance "persuasiveness" and to allow "both author and audience begin to feel more confident the analysis is telling them something substantive" (p.195).

Ethical considerations and approval

All interviews, exercises and analysis undertaken were approved by the host institution's ethical committee. Both oral and written participant consent were sought and obtained in all cases with confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any stage guaranteed.

The innovative approach of interviewing both coaches and clients added to the research's ethical complexity. The power dynamic between coaches and their clients and the possibility of the clients being inclined to respond in ways their coaches might desire were explored fully in the researcher's briefing of both cohorts. The nature of the topic being explored and the backgrounds of the clients were deemed to mitigate the associated risks to the findings.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection and analysis for this research were undertaken by the primary researcher between May and August 2021. Before this, an extensive self-reflection exercise was conducted. There were two principal reasons for this being undertaken. First, it acknowledged the "inevitability of biases, preoccupations and assumptions" (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p.196) in the researcher's "fore-structure" (Smith et al., 2009, p.25). Second, the centrality of subjectivity, experience and interpretation to the process suggested that the "interpretative researchers critically reflect on what their biases and blind spots might be and why they think the questions that they are asking are relevant" (Benner, 1994b, p.108)

The exercise focussed on how the researcher experienced, understood and made sense of how his own prior career experience affects him and his coaching relationships. Notes from multiple coaching sessions and from semi-structured discussions with a selection of clients were used as data.

An approach to self-reflection that "leads to making sense of that experience in a new way, leading to deeper understanding" (Chapman et al., 2003, p.108) was applied. In the absence of established methodologies for reflective exercises, a model informed by two frameworks – Moon's (1999, p.32-36) "process of writing reflectively" and John's (1994) series of guiding questions – was developed to provide structure to multiple cycles of reflection. In total, eleven cycles of reflection were undertaken over five months.

The self-reflection exercise gave the researcher a clearer understanding of his own experience of the phenomenon. It indicated that having had prior career experience that was similar to clients' contexts heightened his awareness of, and sensitivity to, the demands of organisational life; enabled him to highlight potential pitfalls in clients' plans; encouraged him to make interventions that he might have otherwise avoided; and may have boosted his own and his clients' confidence in him as a coach.

The insights gained from the exercise provided the researcher with "appropriate reflections on their role in the dynamic process of analysis where this might be argued to have had a significant impact" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.92). They also enabled preconceptions and biases to be both "bracketed out" (Callary et al., 2015, p.67) in the analysis phase covered below and bracketed in when "our experiences might enrich the interpretations" (p.67).

Interviews with coaches

Four experienced executive coaches (two men, two women) were recruited from the primary researcher's network to be interviewed on how their prior careers influence their coaching and their relationships with clients. The homogeneity of this cohort, as suggested in IPA, was achieved by reference to their prior careers (all had held roles at CEO, partner or managing director level), their training, and the nature of their practices (all focus on senior executives in commercial organisations).

Mixed purposeful sampling was used to select participants with six considerations taken into account. First, we set out to create a cohort of coaches that would illuminate the particular research question, and allow us to develop a full and interesting interpretation of the data (Brocki & Wearden, 2006); second, we identified participants who we believed would represent a perspective, rather than a population (Smith et al., 2009); third, coaches for whom the research question would be significant (Smith & Osborn, 2015) were identified; fourth, coaches for whom coaching was deemed to an important part of their working lives (Wagstaff & Williams, 2014) were sought; fifth, each coach was selected because it was felt they would be willing and able to offer us a view of the phenomena under review (Smith et al., 2009); lastly, pragmatic considerations (ease or difficulty of contacting potential participants, relative rarity of the phenomenon) (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) were addressed.

The resultant sample size of four coaches and four clients (one per coach, see below) was larger than suggested by Smith et al, but within that indicated by Turpin et al. (1997) of six to eight. This slightly higher than average number was deemed to be manageable and was offset to some degree by the narrow focus of the topic being researched. As outlined above, full consideration was given to ethical issues, ethical approval was sought and granted, confidentiality and the right to withdraw were guaranteed and consent was sought and given by all participants.

Each of the coaches was interviewed in May 2021. An interview schedule was used to guide semi-structured dialogues with questions (Smith et al., 2009). Questions asked were a mix of "structural" (Smith et al., 2009, p.60): *What characteristics, qualities, behaviours or expertise would you say are important in a coach?*; "descriptive" (p.60): *How would you describe your credentials to be a coach?*; and "evaluative" (p.60): *How would you say your prior career experience influences you and your work with clients?*

The interviews started with wide ranging, open-ended questions and became more specific as they progressed. The interviews were intended to be conversations with purpose (Smith et al., 2009) with the researcher acting as an enabler who helped the participants evoke their lived experience of coaching with prior business experience (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Typed transcripts were subsequently produced.

Smith et al's (2009) framework was used to analyse the transcripts with the aim of following an iterative and inductive cycle (Smith, 2007). Each transcript was first read separately and corrected in conjunction with listening to the recordings. Each was subsequently begun "afresh, allowing the material to speak on its own terms" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.74) and close, line-by-line analysis of the transcripts was undertaken, looking for the understandings of each participant. Notes were made on content, language, "context, and initial interpretative comments" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p.12).

Effort was made throughout to achieve a 'dialectical dance' (Finlay, 2008, p.3) that involved moving "between bracketing pre-understandings and exploiting them as a source of insight; between naïve openness and sophisticated criticality". This meant seeking to use the insights gained from the self-reflective exercise to inform the analysis, but not to shape it.

An example of initial noting follows:

Transcript	Initial notes
Researcher: *How do you feel your experience, the fact that you have 'been there, done that', effects your coaching?*	
Coach: *I think you can see the pitfalls quicker. I think you can join the dots quicker. I think you can go through a mental checklist of things that leaders ought to be considering, and you can see the practical impacts, rather than just the theory. And I think you can empathise with clients when they get into trouble, when they are suffering from high stress......I think there are some risks, but I also think there are some advantages.*	Experience of problems / mistakes / failures? Quicker to understand / 'get it' / credibility? Experiential learning an advantage? Practical understanding / credibility / feeling understood? His confidence heightened?

'Emergent themes' (Smith et al., 2009) were identified after further analysis of each transcript and corresponding notes, first for each coach individually, then for the cohort of coaches. This was done by identifying connections across notes and fit among them. In total, twelve emergent themes were identified and these were clustered into five super-ordinate themes.

An example of emergent themes from the same coach as above follows:

Transcript	Emergent themes
Researcher: *How do you feel your experience, the fact that you have 'been there, done that', affects your coaching?*	
Coach: *I think you can see the pitfalls quicker. I think you can join the dots quicker. I think you can go through a mental checklist of things that leaders ought to be considering, and you can see the practical impacts, rather than just the theory. And I think you can empathise with clients when they get into trouble, when they are suffering from high stress......I think there are some risks, but I also think there are some advantages.*	Cautionary tales Practical experience Confidence Shared problems Risks

The five 'super-ordinate themes' (Smith et al., 2009) from the data from the coaches were created either by 'abstraction' or 'subsumption' (Smith et al., 2009) of the emergent themes. The super-ordinate themes were as below:

Super-ordinate themes - Coaches
Credibility
Confidence
Learning from mistakes
Risks
Important but not sufficient

The findings from these super-ordinate themes are discussed later below.

Interviews with four clients

Each of the coaches was asked to nominate a client to be interviewed by the researcher about their experience of being coached by them. The background and aims of the project were explained to the coaches and subsequently by the coaches to their clients. Pragmatic considerations were thus especially important in the sampling and selection of the clients. It was clearly stated in all of the briefings (and subsequently in the interviews with clients) that there were no 'right answers' or desired outcomes and that the research was exploratory. The risks of sample, participant and social desirability bias were fully acknowledged. These were deemed to be low and mitigated by the clients' professional backgrounds and the additive, rather than qualifying, nature of coaches' prior career experience in coaching.

All four participants were men and worked in senior leadership roles in commercial organisations. Full consideration was given to ethical issues, confidentiality and the right to withdraw were guaranteed and full consent was sought and given.

Each client was interviewed in June 2021. An interview schedule based on that used for the coaches was used to guide semi-structured dialogues. Questions included: *What characteristics, qualities, behaviours or expertise do you feel are important in a coach; How would you describe your coach's credentials to work with you;* and *How would you say your coach's non-coaching experience has influenced your coaching and your relationship?* The interviews were conducted in ways similar to those with the coaches and typed transcripts were produced.

The same framework of analysis as outlined above was applied. Emergent themes were identified for each transcript after initial noting and analysis. Seven emergent themes were identified and further analysis using abstraction and subsumption produced three super-ordinate themes:

Super-ordinate themes – Clients
Credibility
Confidence
Important but not sufficient

The findings of the super-ordinate themes from both cohorts are discussed below.

Findings

Three of the five super-ordinate themes that emerged from analysis of the data from the coaches and two of the three from the clients indicate that coaches' prior career backgrounds can have a tangible effect on coaching and coaching relationships. These findings were qualified by two super-ordinate themes from the coaches and one from the clients. Each super-ordinate theme is explored below.

Credibility (a super-ordinate theme from the coach and client data)

Enhanced credibility was a clear theme from the reflections of both the coach and client cohorts. The coaches felt their prior experience made them more credible to potential clients. One commented:

> *I certainly think it gets me in the door to start with….because that person feels that I have been in the sort of place they're in.*

More importantly, the coaches felt their prior experience encouraged feelings of peer to peer relationships. One commented:

> *... it contributes to being adult to adult…it's so important for that to be a relationship of equals"* and "*I think it's made them more equal relationships, if you like, than a teacher - pupil.*

The coaches also felt their prior experience influenced how they undertook three critical aspects of coaching - questioning, probing and challenging clients. One observed:

> *I understand the practicalities of it in a way that you don't if you just know about the theory, I understand the sort of compromises people have to make.*

Another was more tentative:

> *I do think it is important…to be able to drill down and show that you have an understanding of the corporate environment that they're in.*

But another was more explicit:

> *I think if you've been there yourself, I think it enhances the credibility of you coaching them through a scenario that you've been in.*

The clients concurred with the view that their coaches' prior experience enhanced credibility. One commented:

> *I think the fact that s/he's been in my shoes is extremely important, s/he comes with opinions from a place of experience.*

The importance and, by interpretation, the credibility of practical business experience versus that of coaches' understanding garnered from their coaching experience alone emerged as a theme. Another commented:

> *I like the learning from experience and think it is very valuable.* [My coach's] *way of working is very much at the same level and says 'let me embrace you in my energy'...*

Another expressed it differently:

I felt like s/he was much more immersed in the challenge, rather than just trying to pick the right framework.

Another was more explicit when comparing his previous experiences with other coaches:

My more positive experiences have been with people who've been in the world, the same boardrooms, the same type of intense moments. And some of my less positive experiences have been with the more academic coaches.

Confidence (coach and client data)

Data from both the coaches and clients highlighted confidence as a theme. The coaches felt their prior experience underpinned their own confidence. One commented:

I think having been there and experienced something, you're more likely to speak with confidence…I think if you've done it yourself, you know, rather than you think you know, that may be the distinction

Another reiterated a point similar to above related to questioning:

I personally think that a knowledge of the environment, the business environment the client is working in, is important … because I think it informs the questions that you ask the client.

All of the coaches felt their prior experience contributed to their confidence to be bolder with their coaching interventions. One expressed this explicitly:

...confidence manifests itself in, maybe, I will try things out that I wouldn't otherwise try out.

Confidence manifested itself differently in the clients. At one level, they felt their coaches' prior experience boosted their trust in their coach and their coaching. One commented:

... it gives me a lot of confidence, a lot of trust.

Whilst another used an unflattering analogy to describe how he felt about what he described as "*career coaches*", i.e., those with little or no business experience:

… it's a bit like a politician who's only ever been a politician, you just sort of think 'you don't really know what it's like

'Knowing what it is like' and the experience of feeling understood were important aspects of the clients' confidence. In response to a question about desired qualities in a coach, one client replied:

… someone who gives you instant reassurance, they understand what it's like to be where you are.

Another commented:

… I just think the fact the s/he'd been there and seen that, and done it, was helpful…it just felt like s/he understood the challenge, and therefore, understood how to unpick it.

Enhanced confidence in the clients' 'sense checking' of their ideas was a powerful finding related to confidence. One client commented:

> *… I do think I've got a lot of confidence from knowing that someone's been there, lived it and breathed it and therefore can be a sense check of the answers that you're coming up with.*

Another client felt his coach's understanding of his situation affected the pace and depth of his coaching. In reply to a question about how his coach's business experience might have affected how he received his coaching, he noted:

> *Much more openly, and 'wholly', if I can use that word…I think it* (his coach's experience) *builds trust and accelerates the process…I want a real thinking partner who's on the pitch, part of that lived experience.*

Learning from mistakes (coach data only)

A clear theme of the coaches' reflections was that their prior experience allowed them to utilise 'cautionary tales' and normalise their clients' concerns. One coach commented that *"…wisdom comes from having made a lot of mistakes…"* and felt they could be very effective in coaching. They explained that they had *"either consciously or unconsciously chose to ignore"* some feedback on their own executive style but that they had highlighted it to a client because *"I just don't want him to make that mistake".* They went on to reflect that:

> *… as an executive I wasn't so great at that actually, with the benefit of hindsight, but I am brilliant at coaching other people at it".*

Similar to above, was the opportunity for coaches to use of their own mistakes or *"failures"* as a way of normalising weakness and thus encouraging clients to share their vulnerabilities. One commented:

> *… I think being able to say to someone 'This is normal, how you're feeling is not unusual, this is typical for someone in your situation'.*

Risks (coach data only)

The coaches were all cognisant of risks of misusing their prior experience. A consistent concern was the risk of providing answers too readily rather than helping clients find their own solutions. One highlighted this issue:

> *… the very, very best coaching is helping people find the answers themselves, and there is a risk if you know the answer that you tell them too early.*

Another recognised the same risk when they commented that:

> *… it's very important for me as a business experienced coach not to jump to conclusions and say 'Oh, I know what that is' and jump to the solution.*

Other risks highlighted included being chosen for the wrong reasons – for advice or mentoring rather than coaching – particularly when working with less experienced clients, and a potentially heightened risk of collusion.

Important but not sufficient (coach and client data)

A striking finding of the research was the complete unanimity across and among both cohorts that the advantages to be gained in credibility and confidence and from learning from mistakes highlighted above were qualified by the need for coaches to have the appropriate personal characteristics and coaching skills.

The ability to develop effective coaching relationships dominated the coaches' responses to questioning around the skills and expertise required in coaches, and the ability to listen predominated. One coach's comment illustrated this and all coaches highlighted it:

> *I think the ability to listen is really important and I think to really listen to what someone is actually saying, rather than making assumption.*

Responses we interpreted as 'personal characteristics' included "*curiosity*", "*humble*", "*presence*", being "*genial, outgoing, friendly and approachable*", and building "*trust and rapport*".

The clients' responses echoed those of the coaches. Personal characteristics and coaching skills dominated their responses to the equivalent question about skills and expertise and the ability to listen predominated again. One commented that *"…you want a very good listener";* another that *"…you want a good listener, listening is absolutely important";* another that their coach *"…waits for me to kind of get everything out";* and another mentioned *"The ability to listen, really actively, and interpret without reframing".*

Discussion

The aim of our research was to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of executive coaching by addressing Kauffman and Bachkirova's (2009, p.3) question: "Does the coach's background make a difference…?" Our exploration and analysis of the lived experiences of four coaches with one particular type of background, and that of a cohort of their clients, indicate that the answer to that question should be: Yes, coaches' backgrounds can indeed make a difference.

Our research contributes to the knowledge and understanding of coaching in two ways. First, by elucidating, corroborating or substantiating multiple observations referred to in the extant literature. Second, by providing new insights into how the prior experience of coaches with certain backgrounds can influence them and their clients.

By exploring how one aspect of coaches themselves can influence both the coaches and their clients, our research addresses Meuse et al's (2009) view that the coaching process is not the only active ingredient in executive coaching. More specifically, our findings substantiate Bush's (2004) observation that coaches' backgrounds can engender trust and credibility. This finding is particularly important when Blackman et al's (2016) and Mosteo et al's (2021) assertions that the credibility of coaches and their clients' trust in them are factors influencing the assessment of coaching.

That executive coaching is a highly personal craft and that the 'chemistry' between client and coach is important are widely accepted features of the industry. By corroborating Augustijen et al's (2011) observation that coaches' prior experience can help coaches build peer-to-peer relationships and Cox's (2003) view that specific knowledge or experience can be beneficial in questioning, probing and challenging, our research demonstrates that coaches' backgrounds can play a significant role in coaching relationships.

Our findings also substantiate an observation from the practitioner literature. The research suggests that Axmith's (2004) contention that CEOs want to work with coaches who have real world business credentials maybe valid in certain contexts and may be a relevant factor in coach selection.

Three of our findings were not identified in the extant literature. First, although the possibility of coaches' prior experience enhancing their clients' confidence in them is covered elsewhere, that it affects their own confidence and encourages them to make bolder interventions is not. Whilst not

suggesting that confidence is in any way limited to coaches with particular career backgrounds, we believe this may also be a useful contributor to coach selection processes.

Second, coaches' being able to refer to their own 'mistakes' in business and using such interventions as empathetic prompts to encourage clients' to reveal their own vulnerabilities are new observations. Third, the converse – clients feeling able to 'sense check' their ideas with heightened confidence due to their coaches' prior experience – also emerged as an important component of the clients' lived experience of being coached.

All of the findings discussed above were caveated in the research by the clear message that prior experience was important but not sufficient in coaching – it needs to be combined with coaching skills and techniques to be most effective – and by there being risks to coaches who have experience similar to their clients'. Nevertheless, we contend that *an* ideal, but not necessarily *the* ideal, in coaching might be, as Whitmore (2012) highlighted, a style that combines the knowledge gained from experience with expert coaching.

Limitations

In keeping with its use of IPA, our research made no effort to achieve a representative sample of participants but instead sought to illuminate a particular phenomenon and to develop a comprehensive and interesting interpretation of the data (Smith et al., 2009). It is suggested therefore that the analysis and findings might be useful in providing insights to other practitioners with similar backgrounds working with similar clients in similar contexts.

Further research

We suggest that further research that builds on our qualitative analysis here is justified. In particular, we believe it would be especially interesting to explore how the coaching training sector prepares coaches to use their prior experience appropriately in their coaching.

Conclusions

We believe the findings of our research demonstrate that coaches' prior career experience can have tangible and additive effects on their relationships with their clients and on how coaching is experienced by their clients. We suggest that coaches combining and integrating their learning from their practical experience in business with learned or innate coaching skills and techniques can result in an attractive and differentiated style of executive coaching that is generally poorly articulated and under-understood.

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