

Evaluation of Leadership Development Coaching: The Impact of Personality

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THE SCIENCE OF PERSONALITY

Abstract

Leadership development coaching has become commonplace in organizations as a strategic tool to maintain competitive advantage. However, there is limited research examining the factors that impact coaching effectiveness. The current study seeks to fill this gap. We find that, overall, participant reactions to coaching were favorable. Further, personality characteristics and values of the participant relate to their perceptions of effectiveness. Lastly, we find that overall participant-coach profile match on “dark side” personality characteristics relate to participant perceptions of the value and usefulness of the coaching session. These results provide recommendations for coaches and for those selecting a coach.

Evaluation of Leadership Development Coaching: The Impact of Personality

From hunter-gatherer agricultural civilizations and pre-industrial labor to modern social, political, and organizational structures, leadership has largely determined the fate of groups (Hogan, 2007; Wren, 1994). There are many examples of the large positive impact leaders have on organizations. For instance, Katharine Graham led the Washington Post to publish the Pentagon Papers and break the Watergate story; leading the newspaper’s stock prices to increase eleven-fold by her retirement. Herb Kelleher’s reign at Southwest Airlines saw the highest shareholder return of any company in the S&P 500. As head of Amazon, Jeff Bezos offered free shipping at the expense of profits to increase market share, and more recently introduced the Kindle e-reader (Portfolio, 2013a), further driving company profits.

There are just as many examples of ineffective leadership negatively impacting organizations. For example, Hewlett-Packard stock lost half its value during the tenure of Carly Fiorina, who lavished herself in personal bonuses and perks while terminating thousands to cut costs. Former WorldCom head Bernie Ebbers is serving a 25-year prison term after hiding massive corporate debt through fraudulent accounting. Ken Lay combined dishonest and inept leadership, sounding the death knell for Enron. Dick Fuld’s leadership led to the collapse of Lehman Brothers and triggered a nationwide financial panic (Portfolio, 2013b). Thus, it is not surprising that leadership development coaching has become commonplace in organizations as a strategic tool to maintain competitive advantage. As a testament to this fact, the current global leadership development and coaching industry exceeds \$2 billion annually (Hoagland-Smith, 2013).

While this is a wise and prevalent practice, it is also common for leadership development programs to go un-evaluated. Indeed, a 2007 survey reported that only one-third of coaching initiatives are actually evaluated (McDermott, Levenson, & Newton, 2007). We argue that in order for leadership development coaches to improve their practice and expand the impact they can have on coaching participants, continuous evaluation of coaching success is imperative.

The coaching literature is ripe with case studies reporting on coaching success (e.g., Kilburg & Diedrich, 2008). However, few empirical studies have been conducted investigating coaching success. Those that have been conducted, however, provide support for the effectiveness of leadership development coaching. For example, in a yearlong longitudinal field study, Peterson (1993) found that the average change score for coaching items was substantially larger than the

average change score for control items. Further, degree of change ratings had a strong, positive relationship with ratings of effectiveness across raters. Olivero, Bane, Kopelman (1997) found an 88% increase in productivity attributed to eight weeks of coaching. In a nonrandomized control group design, Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas, & Kucine (2003) found that managers who received coaching (2 to 3 sessions) were more likely to set specific goals, solicit ideas for improvement, and had improved performance ratings than those who did not receive coaching.

Overall, however, the literature is lacking in regards to systematic evaluation of coaching effectiveness and the factors that lead to effectiveness. A review of the literature led de Haan, Duckworth, Birch, and Jones (2013) to estimate that there are less than 20 robust quantitative assessments of coaching effectiveness in the coaching literature. Further, they argue that this evaluation should focus on the factors that impact effectiveness. Specifically, they contend that identifying the “active ingredients” in coaching effectiveness, such as personality match between the participant and coach, should be the new way of studying leadership development coaching effectiveness (de Haan et al., 2013).

Predictors of Coaching Effectiveness

Based on the assumption that coaching is effective, an emerging body of coaching outcome research looks at the characteristics of the coaching session, the coach, and the participant that impact coaching effectiveness. For instance, Scoular and Linley (2006) examined the impact of goal setting and personality on perceived coaching effectiveness. Goal setting did not appear to impact effectiveness; however, differences in temperament did impact effectiveness. In a similar study, Stewart, Palmer, Wilkin, and Kerrin (2008) examined the impact of personality and coachee self-efficacy on coaching success. They found positive correlations between coaching success and conscientiousness, openness to experience, emotional stability and general self-efficacy.

In a study examining the client-coach relationship and matching criteria (i.e., demographic similarity, behavioral compatibility, and coach credibility), Boyce, Jackson, and Neal (2010) found that matching was not related to several coaching outcomes including: client reactions, coach reactions, behavioral change, or coaching program results. However, the client-coach relationship mediated the matching criteria compatibility and credibility with coaching program outcomes.

In a recent study, de Haan et al. (2013) examined the impact of a) working alliance between coach and client, b) the self-efficacy of the client, c) the personality of the client, and d) the “personality match” between client and coach on coaching effectiveness. They found that client perceptions of coaching effectiveness were significantly related to their perceptions of the working alliance, client self-efficacy, and client perceptions of the range of techniques of the coach. However, personality did not appear to impact any aspect of coaching success.

Overall, this research suggests two things. First, there is a lack of research in this area. Second, the limited findings are unclear and often conflict between studies. This is likely due to the limitations, such as the use of convenience samples, volunteer coaches rather than professionals, and measures lacking validation evidence.

The Current Study

The focus of the present effort is to fill this research gap and address this call for research by: a) developing and implementing an evaluation tool for leadership development coaching sessions and b) exploring the active ingredients of coaching effectiveness. Specifically we explore the relationship between normal personality, “dark side” personality characteristics, values, and participant-coach personality match with perceptions of leadership development coaching effectiveness.

Method

Sample

Our sample consisted of 37 coaches from the Hogan Coaching Network (HCN; Hogan Assessment Systems, 2013). The HCN is comprised of independent experts in the leadership development industry. All coaches have: a) an advanced degree (e.g., Ph.d., MBA), b) completed advanced certification in Hogan instruments, and c) executive-level leadership development and coaching experience. We included an average of six of their developmental coaching participants for a total of 214 participants, averaging 43 years of age. Of those participants who reported their job level ($N = 100$), the majority of the participants were middle- ($N = 39$) or executive-level managers ($N = 64$).

Procedure

We collected personality data from both participants and coaches prior to participating in the one hour developmental coaching session. Once the session was complete, participants responded to a survey assessing perceptions of coaching effectiveness.

Measures

Personality. We used the Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI; R. Hogan & J. Hogan, 2007) to assess normal personality characteristics. The HPI is a FFM assessment specifically designed to measure personality in a work-related context. It contains 206 true/false items, is written at a 4th grade reading level, and typically takes 15-20 minutes to complete. It is comprised of 7 primary scales and 41 Homogeneous Item Composites (HICs) or personality facets.

Dark-side personality was assessed with the Hogan Development Survey (HDS; R. Hogan & J. Hogan, 1997). The HDS is a 168-item self-report assessment that contains 11 primary scales assessed on a true/false measurement scale. The HDS scales index behavioral tendencies that can emerge and negatively impact performance, particularly when an individual is fatigued, ill, stressed, bored, or lacking social vigilance.

Values. Values were assessed using the Motives, Values, Preferences Inventory (MVPI; J. Hogan & R. Hogan, 1996). The MVPI contains 200 items representing 10 scales with response options of agree, uncertain, and disagree. The MVPI is an indicator to what serves as a motivator for individuals.

Effectiveness. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of coaching within the HCN, we created a feedback measure for participants to respond to after the completion of development sessions. Participants responded to items using a 5-point Likert scale with anchors of 1(*strongly disagree*) to 5(*strongly agree*). We conducted a principal components analysis with a promax rotation on these items which supported a three factor structure of the evaluation measure consisting of perceptions of a) the feedback report generated from the personality assessments ($\alpha = .83$), b) the feedback session ($\alpha = .91$), and c) the relationship with the coach ($\alpha = .91$, Table 1).

Table 1

Factor Structure of Coaching Effectiveness

Item	Factor Loadings		
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
<i>The information on my assessment report was.....</i>			
Accurate and Specific			.73
Helpful in enhancing my understanding of how others see me			.76
Helpful in giving me ideas about how to improve my performance			.75
Clear about the impact of my strengths and challenges on my career			.80
Useful in providing feedback I will try to become more effective at work			.81
<i>The coach who reviewed my assessment report with me was.....</i>			
An informed expert who provided information beyond the report	.87		
A good match for me, by developing rapport and trust	.86		
Effective in helping me understand how I can leverage my strengths and/or improve some of my counterproductive tendencies	.89		
Explicit about how I could apply the feedback to become a more effective employee	.85		
Effective in providing ideas for development goals that are reasonable for me in the future	.78		
<i>The overall assessment feedback session was.....</i>			
A valuable experience		.82	
Helpful in making me more aware of how I could achieve greater success at work		.87	
Useful for understanding specific areas for me to develop		.88	
Useful in motivating me to change some of my behavior at work		.88	
Worth my time and effort		.79	
Eigenvalue	7.96	1.56	.96
% Variance Explained = 69.83			

Results

Perceptions of Coaching Effectiveness

Overall, participants reacted positively to leadership development coaching (see Table 2). Specifically, participants perceived the feedback report generated from the personality assessments ($M = 4.27$, $SD = .50$), the feedback session ($M = 4.42$, $SD = .54$), and the relationship with the coach ($M = 4.38$, $SD = .61$) positively.

Table 2

Perceptions of Coaching Effectiveness Descriptives

Reactions	<i>N</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Report	214	2.80-5.00	4.27	.50
Coach	215	2.25-5.00	4.38	.61
Session	215	2.60-5.00	4.42	.54

Note. *N* = Sample Size; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation.

Participant Personality Relationships with Reactions to Coaching

HPI. Participant Ambition, Sociability, and Prudence were all significantly related to perceptions of coaching effectiveness (Table 3). Specifically, more driven and self-confident (Ambition) participants had more favorable perceptions of the relationship with their coach. Participants that enjoy social interaction (Sociability) rated the effectiveness of their coach as more favorable and were more likely to perceive the feedback session as useful and worthwhile. Lastly, participants that are dependable and rule-following (Prudence) were more likely to perceive the information in their feedback report to be accurate and clear on the impact of strengths and challenges on their career.

Table 3

HPI Relationships with Coaching Effectiveness

Reactions	ADJ	AMB	SOC	INT	PRU	INQ	LRN
Report	.11	.12	.12	.11	.15*	.07	.10
Coach	.11	.15*	.20**	.13	.03	-.05	.08
Session	.05	.12	.18**	.07	.08	.02	.07

Note. $N = 214$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; ADJ = Adjustment; AMB = Ambition; SOC = Sociability; INT = Interpersonal Sensitivity; PRU = Prudence; INQ = Inquisitive; LRN = Learning Approach.

HDS. Participant Reserved, Colorful and Diligent were all significantly related to perceptions of coaching effectiveness (Table 4). Participants that tend to keep to themselves and are unconcerned with the impression they make on others (Reserved) were less likely to perceive that the assessment report, coaching session, or their coach were effective and useful. Conversely, more attention seeking and dramatic participants (Colorful) rated the coaching session more favorably. Lastly, perfectionistic and critical participants (Diligent) had more favorable reactions to the assessment report.

Table 4

HDS Relationships with Coaching Effectiveness Relationships

Reactions	EXC	SKE	CAU	RES	LEI	BOL	MIS	COL	IMA	DIL	DUT
Report	-.13	.02	-.12	-.16*	.03	.09	.08	.14	.13	.21**	-.02
Coach	-.06	-.13	-.07	-.21**	-.06	-.13	.03	.13	-.03	.08	-.05
Session	-.05	-.03	-.06	-.19**	-.04	-.02	-.00	.16*	.11	.12	-.03

Note. $N = 187$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; EXC = Excitable; SKE = Skeptical; CAU = Cautious; RES = Reserved; LEI = Leisurely; BOL = Bold; MIS = Mischievous; COL = Colorful; IMA = Imaginative; DIL = Diligent; DUT = Dutiful.

MVPI. Participant Altruism and Hedonism related significantly to perceptions of coaching effectiveness (Table 5). Participants that value helping others (Altruistic) rated the relationship with their coach as well as the usefulness of the coaching session more favorably. Participants that value fun and open-minded environments (Hedonistic) were more likely to perceive their assessment report as useful for performance improvement.

Table 5

MVPI Relationships with Coaching Effectiveness Relationships

Reactions	AES	AFF	ALT	COM	HED	POW	REC	SCI	SEC	TRA
Report	.12	.12	.13	.07	.16*	.10	.02	.11	.04	.09
Coach	.08	.10	.17*	.10	.07	.06	.03	-.03	-.01	.07
Session	.14	.10	.20**	.07	.09	.07	.02	.08	.05	.12

Note. $N = 187$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; AES = Aesthetic; AFF = Affiliation; ALT = Altruistic; COM = Commercial; HED = Hedonism; POW = Power; REC = Recognition; SCI = Scientific; SEC = Security; TRA = Tradition.

Personality Match Relationships with Reactions to Coaching

Coach-participant difference scores were calculated using an absolute difference (i.e., |Participant Adjustment – Coach Adjustment|). Overall profile differences were calculated with a double-scaled Euclidean distance (DSE-D) coefficient (see Figure 1; Barrett, 2005). The DSE-D coefficient rescales the overall difference between two personality profiles to a 0-1 metric and takes into account differences in the maximum possible distances between personality scales within a profile.

$$DSE-D = \frac{\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^v \left(\frac{p_{1i} - p_{2i}}{md_i} \right)^2}}{\sqrt{v}}$$

Where:

v = the number of variables

p_{1i} = person 1 scale i

p_{2i} = person 2 scale i

md_i = the maximum possible squared discrepancy per variable i of v variables

Figure 1. Equation used to calculate the double-scaled Euclidean distance coefficient

HPI. The greater the degree of coach-participant difference regarding competitiveness and drive (Ambition) and creativity (Inquisitive), the less likely the participant was to perceive their feedback session as effective and useful (Table 6).

Table 6

HPI Match Relationships with Coaching Effectiveness

Reactions	ADJ	AMB	SOC	INT	PRU	INQ	LRN	Overall
Report	.03	-.10	-.04	-.04	.09	-.11	-.01	-.05
Coach	.01	-.11	.07	-.01	.01	-.07	.04	.01
Session	.07	-.14*	-.05	.02	.04	-.14*	.07	-.02

Note. $N = 214$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; ADJ = Adjustment; AMB = Ambition; SOC = Sociability; INT = Interpersonal Sensitivity; PRU = Prudence; INQ = Inquisitive; LRN = Learning Approach; Overall = Double-scaled Euclidean distance profile difference.

HDS. The greater the difference on perfectionism and conscientiousness (Diligent) the more likely the participant was to report favorable reactions to their coach (Table 7). Further, overall difference on the HDS, assessed with a double scaled Euclidean distance coefficient, showed that the greater the difference on the HDS profile relates to less favorable perceptions of the coaching session. Specifically, when the coach-participant pair had larger overall HDS discrepancies, participants thought the session was a) less valuable, b) not as useful for development, and c) less worth their time and effort.

Table 7

HDS Match Relationships with Coaching Effectiveness

Reactions	EXC	SKE	CAU	RES	LEI	BOL	MIS	COL	IMA	DIL	DUT	Overall
Report	-.06	.00	-.03	-.12	-.07	-.04	.08	-.02	-.08	.10	.05	-.06
Coach	-.09	-.13	.09	-.01	-.03	-.14	.05	-.03	.02	.16*	.01	-.05
Session	-.10	-.02	-.05	-.09	-.01	-.07	-.06	-.12	-.08	.06	-.07	-.17*

Note. $N = 187$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; EXC = Excitable; SKE = Skeptical; CAU = Cautious; RES = Reserved; LEI = Leisurely; BOL = Bold; MIS = Mischievous; COL = Colorful; IMA = Imaginative; DIL = Diligent; DUT = Dutiful; Overall = Double-scaled Euclidian distance profile difference.

MVPI. The greater the difference on assertiveness and achievement orientation (Power), the more likely the participant was to have favorable reactions to the assessment report (Table 8). The greater the difference on valuing helping others (Altruism), the less likely the participant was to react positively to the coach. Lastly, the greater the difference on valuing analytical problem solving (Scientific), the less likely the participant was to have favorable reactions to the report and the feedback session.

Table 8

MVPI Match Relationships with Coaching Effectiveness

Reactions	AES	AFF	ALT	COM	HED	POW	REC	SCI	SEC	TRA	Overall
Report	-.08	.04	-.13	-.09	.03	.15*	.02	-.17*	.08	.14	-.06
Coach	.03	.08	-.15*	-.10	.09	-.09	-.00	-.09	.09	.09	-.05
Session	-.02	.06	-.14	-.07	.04	.06	.08	-.16*	.05	.08	-.06

Note. $N = 187$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; AES = Aesthetic; AFF = Affiliation; ALT = Altruistic; COM = Commercial; HED = Hedonism; POW = Power; REC = Recognition; SCI = Scientific; SEC = Security; TRA = Tradition.

Discussion

Given the tremendous impact leaders have on organizational outcomes, leadership development coaching is an important practice. While many organizations have taken advantage of this strategic tool, little research has examined the effectiveness of these coaching sessions. Further, there is a paucity of research exploring the factors that impact coaching effectiveness. The current study fills this gap in the literature.

Overall, we find that participant reactions to leadership development coaching were favorable. Further, personality characteristics and values of the participant relate to coaching participant perceptions of effectiveness. Lastly, we find that overall participant-coach profile match on “dark side” personality characteristics relate to participant perceptions of the value and usefulness of the coaching session.

We also found several specific results that highlight the importance of personality to the effectiveness of leadership development coaching. For example, we found that participants that are high in Sociability and low in Reserved have a more positive view of coaching. This is not surprising given that these social individuals will have a greater appreciation for social interaction while reserved individuals do not want to be bothered and are indifferent to what

others think. One surprising finding was that Diligent participants had more favorable reactions to the assessment reports. This is likely due to a desire to use the report to guide their drive for perfectionism.

These results highlight the benefits of using personality assessment to improve leadership development coaching. Specifically, the participant's personality profile and the participant-coach profile match can serve as a guide for the coaching session (e.g., pinpoint potential difficulties). For instance, our results indicate that participants who are low on Sociability and more Reserved might be challenging. It may be necessary for the coach to tailor their approach for that particular participant to feel comfortable and have a positive experience during coaching. Further, if the coach identifies a mismatch in Diligence, the coach can be aware that certain methods might cause the coaching relationship to be a difficult one and therefore, tailor their approach to minimize potential conflict. It must be noted, however, that these results do not tell coaches exactly how to tailor their approach. Rather, they serve as recommendations regarding potential things to be aware of when going into a coaching session.

Considering personality and value fit may be of particular importance for those consulting organizations with a coaching network similar to the HCN, this provides useful information for the selection and matching of coaches to participants. For instance, our results could be used to suggest that when matching coaches to participants, pairs that value helping others and objective decision making similarly may lead to positive outcomes. Further, results suggest that selecting coach-participant pairs with overall HDS match leads to more effective coaching sessions.

This research assesses factors that contribute to coaching effectiveness for a single coaching session, which could be considered a limitation of the current study. While this limitation restricts the ability to assess effectiveness factors such as change over time or coaching transfer, we contend that it can also be viewed as a strength. The reality is that many leadership development coaching occurs in a single session in which a coach facilitates a discussion with a participant about their strengths and developmental areas as a leader. Therefore, it is valuable to consider factors that will impact the effectiveness of all coaching leadership sessions. This will allow for coaches to be prepared to have maximum impact during these single session, development programs. Nonetheless, future research focusing on the impact of personality on long-term behavioral change would provide a richer evaluation of effectiveness and provide a benefit to the coaching literature and leadership development practice.

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