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RESPONSE

What Is the Active Ingredients Equation for Success in Executive Coaching?

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Abstract

In this response, we address commentator concerns about the generalizability of the active ingredients of psychotherapy to the science and practice of executive coaching. We discuss four ingredient that may make a difference: (a) client characteristics, (b) goals or success criteria, (c) role of the organization, and (d) contextual knowledge of the executive coach. We explore how each of these differences is likely to affect the weighting of the four active ingredients in the equation for predicting executive coaching outcomes. From this analysis, we re-affirm our hypotheses that the active ingredients are generalizable to coaching and hold promise for strengthening research and practice. We conclude by highlighting the efforts of several commentators to extend and deepen our hypotheses to other areas of leadership development.

In our focal article (2009), we propose that industrial–organizational (I–O) psychologists who coach executives have overlooked psychotherapy outcome research. We bring it forward as a source of information and ideas that can be used to improve our executive coaching practices. This research literature, based on thousands of studies and many meta-analyses, has converged on the conclusion that four ''active ingredients'' account for most of the variance in psychotherapy outcomes. Although we understand and acknowledge that there are important differences between psychotherapy and executive coaching, we believe that there is sufficient similarity between the two processes[1] to warrant exploration of how the four active ingredients may be at work in executive coaching.

As five of our nine commentators point out, the assumption of similarity is critical to our case for generalizing from psychotherapy to executive coaching. If the two domains are different in fundamental ways that change the active ingredients themselves (i.e., different active ingredients) or their relative potency (i.e., the amount of outcome variance they predict), we will have to be more circumspect in generalizing from one to the other. We appreciate the yellow light of caution switched on by these commentators—it forces us to slow down, sharpen our thinking, and temper our enthusiasm for the

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1. ''Both are efforts to facilitate psychological and behavioral change through the medium of a collaborative relationship between a trained professional and a motivated client.'' McKenna and Davis (2009, p. 6).

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application of the four active ingredients to executive coaching.

Consequently, we will begin our response by considering differences between psychotherapy and executive coaching that could impact our ability to generalize about the four active ingredients. Then, we conclude with a brief response to those who hit the green light and sped ahead to bolster our hypotheses with their own data (Frisch & Lee, 2009), to extend our ideas to other vehicles for leadership development (Avolio & Hannah, 2009), or to drill down on elements of the four ingredients (Avolio & Hannah, 2009; Beck, Gregory, & Carr, 2009).

Differences That May Make a Difference

Several of our commentators argue that we have downplayed or ignored important differences between executive coaching and psychotherapy, thus making our generalizations questionable or even misleading (cf., Hollenbeck, 2009; Passmore, 2009; Smith, Borneman, Brummel, & Connelly, 2009; Stern, 2009). Looking across the comments, our colleagues call out four types of differences between therapy and coaching that we will consider here: (a) characteristics of the client (e.g., high vs. low functioning), (b) differences in goals or success criteria (e.g., personal growth vs. performance), (c) differences in defining who is the client (e.g., the individual vs. the organization), and (d) differences in the contextual knowledge and experience of the coach (e.g., personal vs. business).

In so doing, however, we will put a finer point on the discussion by focusing on how these differences are likely to change the basic equation of the active ingredients as we move from psychotherapy to executive coaching. Our ultimate goal is to find the right equation for executive coaching. And we think the psychotherapy outcome literature is a reasonable, even exciting, place to begin that search. So we will organize our response to the five types of differences identified by our commentators by considering their impact on the active ingredients discussed at length in our paper.

Impact of Differences on the Client/Extratherapeutic Factors

Our commentators seem to agree that characteristics of the client and her world have an important impact on the success of an executive coaching engagement. And there are indeed differences between executive coaching and psychotherapy clients and the worlds with which they must deal.

Differences in client characteristics. Executives are a select group who, compared with typical psychotherapy clients, enter a coaching engagement with unusually strong learning, problem solving, and relationship skills (Davis & Barnett, 2009).[2] Although the challenges they face are often daunting, executives are a good bet for learning and growth whether they are working with an executive coach, a psychotherapist, or heart surgeon. And executives are probably a better bet for improvement than your average psychotherapy client.

Differences in goals and success criteria. Executive coaching and psychotherapy clients have different motives for getting help. As several of our commentators pointed out, these motivational differences translate into differences in goals or success criteria. We agree. Most people go to a psychotherapist for relief from some kind of pain. Most executives go to a coach to improve their performance in a current or future role.[3] Both goals require learning that

2. This raises an interesting question: When we talk about ''executive'' coaching are we really referring to executive-level clients? Or are we using the term to inflate the image of our coaching practice for marketing and identity purposes? Our impression is that a lot of what is called executive coaching is simply management-level coaching.
3. This is an oversimplification, of course, but one that maps to reality in a reasonable way. There are struggling executives who come to coaching looking for pain relief (e.g., on the verge of derailment and personal conflict with key customer). And there are high-functioning clients

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will lead to behavioral change. But the motivational engine and the internal obstacles to learning and change are quite different.

For the psychotherapy client, pain is a powerful motivator. But it often comes with a level of stress that makes it more difficult for the psychotherapy client to think clearly, control feelings, learn quickly, and act in new ways. Learning must be achieved in a context of pain.

By contrast, executive coaching clients—though often stressed by the burden of responsibility that comes with their level—come to coaching with more optimism and emotional stability. Learning unfolds in a context of possibility.

In their commentary, Smith et al. (2009) go a step further and suggest that there are ''drastically different'' goals across executive coaching clients (e.g., interpersonal sensitivity, political prowess, understanding of gender dynamics in the workplace from the cases presented in our article). They urge research to determine whether the same equation of active ingredients predicts success for different goal clusters. This is an interesting idea, but it may not be the best investment of resources for research. Compared with the range of problems and criteria combined in psychotherapy meta-analyses, the differences in executive coaching goals are miniscule.

For example, in meta-analyses that include problems ranging from anxiety to addiction to schizophrenia, the four active ingredients and their relative weights in predicting psychotherapy outcomes are robust. Remember too, as we mentioned in our article, the four active ingredients have surfaced in research in predicting outcomes in medicine and education as well (Murphy, 1999; Scovern, 1999).

Differences in the extratherapeutic (environmental) factors. Unlike psychotherapy, the process of executive coaching often involves a formal, contractual relationship with the sponsoring organization as well as with the individual client. As several commentators note, this means that the organization through its representatives (e.g., the client's manager and HR liaison) has a legitimate voice when it comes to goal setting, evaluating progress, and termination/continuation of the relationship. Neither the client nor the coach is free to pursue an agenda that does not reflect the interests of the organization, which is usually footing the bill.

How does this difference affect the potency of the extratherapeutic factors as an active ingredient in executive coaching? For the individual client, as with the client characteristics factor, it gives an advantage to the executive versus the psychotherapy client in their quest for learning and change. Where the organization and its representatives are involved as partners in the process, they will be more confident that their interests (as well as those of the executive) are being served and that there will be a good return on their investment. This should incline them toward support, rather than sabotage or indifference, for the executive's efforts to transfer what is learned through coaching back to his job. Although some types of psychotherapy (e.g., marriage and family therapy, court-ordered interventions) may engage the client's environment to support and reinforce change, this is much less common that in executive coaching. So again, this structural difference between coaching and psychotherapy puts the executive in a more favorable position to benefit from the assistance of a coach.

Impact of differences on the client/extratherapeutic factor in the active ingredient equation. Recall that the client/extratherapeutic factor is the single most powerful predictor of psychotherapy outcomes (40%). The strengths that the client brings to the engagement are critical. And whether the environment is ''wind at her back or wind in her face'' is equally important.

who come to psychotherapy looking for learning and personal growth (e.g., changing careers and building a stronger marriage).

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If we accept that this is true for coaching clients as well, we can see how the differences between psychotherapy and executive coaching can work to the advantage of the individual executive. More strengths and a supportive environment can only help. And though we cannot develop this argument here, there is evidence indicating that the base rate of performance improvement in executive coaching is very high (cf., Corporate Leadership Council, 2003; Holt & Peterson, 2006; Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas, & Kucine, 2003).

So as executive coaches, the message is to take full advantage of the client's strengths and engage the organization in a way that encourages application of learning and insists on accountability for real changes in performance.

But from a research perspective, it is interesting to note that there may be more homogeneity on individual characteristics and environmental factors with executives than there is with psychotherapy clients. This restriction of range could limit the amount of coaching outcome variance attributable to these factors in the active ingredients equation. So with range restriction on the single most powerful variable, do other active ingredients become more potent in predicting executive coaching outcomes? Only research can answer this question.

Impact of Differences on the Relationship Factor

The quality and strength of the relationship between client and therapist account for 30% or more of the variance in psychotherapy outcomes. We believe that it is critical that we not lose track of this point by trivializing its underlying complexity (''Who can argue that a good coaching/therapy/consulting relationship is not essential for a successful engagement?'' Hollenbeck, 2009, p. 3) or discounting the skill it takes to build and sustain a vital coaching relationship. Bordin's (1976) research-based definition of the relationship as a working alliance based on *goals, tasks, and bonds* gives specificity and focus to that which I–O psychologists may be tempted to deem soft and squishy.

As we have seen, the *goals* of psychotherapy and executive coaching are usually different. But in both worlds, a key question in creating and maintaining an alliance is whether the client believes that the work of the relationship is focused on the goals she thinks are top priority. In psychotherapy, this is a direct and ongoing negotiation between the client and the therapist. But in executive coaching, the negotiation on goals often includes the organization through its representatives. When the client's goals and those of his boss diverge, for example, the coach has an additional relationship puzzle to solve.

As in psychotherapy, the *task* dimension of the alliance in executive coaching is strengthened when the client believes that the coach's approach to the problem at hand makes sense and is effective in helping the client to feel better and perform better. For example, when an executive believes that the team building problems he's having with his staff are being caused by one difficult or incapable team member, and the coach keeps pressing for a more systemic perspective, the task dimension of the relationship may come under strain. Or if the coach takes a deep psychological angle on what the executive sees as an organization design or business strategy problem, the executive is likely to resist and tune out. This weakens the alliance and dims prospects for a successful outcome.

Here we join with several of our commentators in agreeing that specialized knowledge of business and organizations is essential to the work of the executive coach. Like psychotherapists who specialize in addiction or eating disorders, an executive coach needs to understand not only the psychology of the individual with the problem but also the context in which that problem is being faced. But in terms of the active ingredients equation for executive coaching, we interpret this need for a deep understanding of the business context as having its primary impact on the coach's

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ability to build and sustain credibility with a smart, business and organization savvy client. The sophistication of the coach's ''theory of the problem'' does matter, but we believe it's less about having the right answer (i.e., the right theory or technique) and more about being able to understand the client's perspective at a level that leads the client to say, ''This coach gets my situation. I can learn from her.''

We believe that the affective *bond* connecting executive coach and client is very important to the success of the engagement. But coaching is not therapy. In most cases, the tasks of coaching do not require the intimacy and vulnerability often necessary in psychotherapy. It is also likely that the formal involvement of representatives of the organization in the coaching process has an impact on the intimacy and depth of relationship between the coach and the client. Compared with a psychotherapy client who enjoys almost complete confidentiality, an executive coaching client may not feel comfortable revealing his thoughts and feelings to a coach who must report to his board chair. This limits the depth of the bond that is likely to develop.

Some would argue that this difference makes the relationship a less potent variable in executive coaching. But in our experience in working with senior leaders, we find that their challenges can be deeply personal and rooted in ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that have worked well for them to this point in their careers. This is where the relationship really begins to matter. Where others are contractually privy to reports on the work being done in coaching, the client needs to be able to trust that the coach will not disclose information that goes beyond the negotiated agreement about what will and will not be reported back to the organization. It takes a mature, thoughtful coach to walk the line between the interests of the client and the interests of the organization. It also takes a wise, ethical coach to know when the executive should be referred to a good psychotherapist.

We will take this opportunity, however, to reiterate our view that executive coaching is defined as a helping relationship focused on improving the performance of an individual executive. With due respect to commentators Stern (2009) and Segers and Vloeberghs (2009), we would argue that extending the definition and scope of coaching to include team or organization development goals confuses coaching with consulting (as commentators Fontaine and Schmidt [2009] ably assert). It also makes the task of identifying the active ingredients that lead to individual change much more difficult. Although individual change will hopefully drive team and organizational performance improvement, we prefer to keep these levels of analysis separate in our thinking and research.

Impact of Differences on the Hope Factor

As Hollenbeck (2009) points out in his commentary, who could argue that ''the client had better believe that things can improve'' (p. 3)? But from our perspective, anything that has the potential to predict 15% of the variance in coaching outcomes deserves closer examination. Is hope more or less important in coaching than it is in therapy? And if it's important, how do we cultivate it?

From an individual client perspective, it would follow from any of our motivation theories that an expectation of success would be beneficial to a coaching effort. But it is also true, as Beck et al. (2009) maintain in their commentary, that we challenge clients with increasingly difficult but achievable goals.

From a research perspective, however, executives are probably more homogeneous with respect to their hope for change and improvement than the typical psychotherapy client. It makes sense to us that executives with a track record of success and a yen for learning how to improve their performance will have higher hopes for success than a therapy client trying to deal with an anxiety disorder or high-conflict marriage. But again, we see where range

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restriction in the predictor may constrain the power of hope to predict outcomes in executive coaching.

Nevertheless, a demoralized executive is unlikely to find the motivation to do the work necessary to improve her performance. So it is critical for the coach to attend to the hopes of the client as they ebb and flow over the coaching engagement. And one of the best ways we've found to do this is to focus their attention on the strengths they have that can be applied to their challenge and on building an active network of supporters in their work environment who will encourage and back them when making changes becomes difficult. In other words, we try to bolster the client/extratherapeutic factors in their personal development equation.

Impact of Differences on the Theory and Technique Factor

Several of our colleagues argue that theory and technique matter more in executive coaching than in therapy (Hollenbeck, 2009; Passmore, 2009). Their main argument is that it is essential for the executive coach to have a sophisticated understanding of the context in which the client is working. Perhaps it goes without saying, but executive coaching is no place for fresh PhDs or clinical psychologists looking to expand their client base. It is a demanding, highly specialized field.

But this does not necessarily mean that theory and technique matter more in coaching than in therapy. It is clear that an effective therapist must understand the client's context as it is being communicated. She must be able to communicate that understanding in a credible way to the client. She must be able to present alternative ways of seeing and interpreting what's happening in a manner that make sense to the client. Even the most brilliant clinician will fail if she cannot connect with the client and his experience.

As we've said, executive clients are smart and savvy about business and organizations. Most would not have become executives if it were otherwise. In our experience, a coach who does not have the contextual knowledge necessary to connect with the experience of the client will be dismissed immediately. This seems to be less true with clients at lower levels in organizations.

But there are many different lenses through which one can understand what's happening to an executive in a business organization (McKenna & Wright, 1992). Although the lenses of some consultants may be less helpful (or even misleading) than others, presenting oneself as an expert with the right answer can backfire in many ways. First, you probably don't understand the context nearly as well as you think you do. Second, executives have their own theories that need to be heard and explored. Third, if an executive tries to implement your theory without making it his own, it is likely to fail. Fourth, you create an unhealthy dependence that will be an obstacle to the executive's further development.

As we said in our focal article, we think theory and technique matter. But it is the way the coach uses theory and technique to engage the executive in a challenging, developmental dialogue that changes it from an inert knowledge base into an active ingredient.

Bolsters, Extensions, and Drill Downs

We are grateful to each of our colleagues for their thoughtful commentaries. But we must admit it was exciting to see several of them take our ideas and run with them. We were intrigued by Frisch and Lee's (2009) description of their research with coaches in training. Their findings clearly support our argument that the coaching relationship is a powerful determinant of outcome. But more than that, it is clear that executive coaches need more training in clinical skills, such as the use of self with the client. Echoing Fontaine and Schmidt

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(2009), we agree that if executive coaching is to become part of the curriculum in I–O psychology graduate programs, students will have to be trained to deal with real people as well as people on paper. We also need to be clear with students that coaching, particularly at the executive level, is no place for those with limited business and organizational experience.

Avolio and Hannah (2009) made the very interesting argument that the active ingredients model could be extended to leadership development programs. Given that the psychotherapy active ingredients model predicts health outcomes of doctor–patient relationships and learning outcomes of teacher–student relationships, it seems reasonable to see how it works with manager–direct report relationships, mentor–mentee relationships, peer relationships, and so on.

We also appreciated Avolio and Hannah's effort to drill down into the challenge of determining client or leader readiness for development. This is a critical component of active ingredient #1, client factors, and there is a tremendous opportunity for thinking and research here.

Beck et al.'s (2009) focus on goals, feedback, and incentives provides useful, deeper thinking about how multiple goals and feedback can be used to strengthen the working alliance or relationship with the client. Although we have concerns about linking monetary incentives directly to the achievement of coaching goals (e.g., gamesmanship, undermining intrinsic motivation to learn and grow), we appreciate their exploration of this aspect of the environmental forces that may help or hinder the coaching process and its outcomes.

Conclusions

We hope that the active ingredients model will become a catalyst for creative thinking and research on how to improve our coaching with executive-level clients. We remain convinced that the ingredients themselves are generalizable to coaching and that they are all potent predictors of coaching outcomes. We predict that future research will show that the relationship or alliance is even more potent than in psychotherapy. We also expect that the coach's ability to use theory and technique in an adaptive way that resonates with the client's own theory will prove to be a linchpin in building an effective relationship. Client and environmental factors as well as hope will prove to be critical in individual cases, but these ingredients may account for less variance in the equation due to range restriction in executive versus psychotherapy populations.

Executive coaching is one of the most exciting and challenging new areas of practice for I–O psychologists. We have great resources in our root discipline of psychology to leverage on behalf of clients and in search of fresh ideas. May we not leave them hidden in plain sight.

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