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Executive Coaching as a Transfer of Training Tool: Effects on Productivity in a Public Agency

This action research is the first reported attempt to examine the effects of executive coaching in a public sector municipal agency. Thirty-one managers underwent a conventional managerial training program, which was followed by eight weeks of one-on-one executive coaching. Training increased productivity by 22.4 percent. The coaching, which included: goal setting, collaborative problem solving, practice, feedback, supervisory involvement, evaluation of end-results, and a public presentation, increased productivity by 88.0 percent, a significantly greater gain compared to training alone. Descriptions of procedures, explanations for the results obtained, and suggestions for future research and practice are offered.

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Numerous factors have been identified that influence the extent to which knowledge acquired during classroom training transfers to the job (e.g., the work environment; the personality of the trainee).¹ There is considerable evidence that a critical factor influencing transfer of training is the extent to which the trainee receives the opportunity for practice and constructive feedback.² One-on-one executive coaching can provide this opportunity. Coaching trainees once they return to the job can facilitate the transfer of training, especially if the coaching fosters the development and use of knowledge imparted during training. Through coaching, trainees have a safe, personalized environment in which practice and feedback can take place.

In recent years, there has been particularly rapid growth in the use of one-on-one executive coaching.³ Among the organizations adopting this practice are: American Express, the American Management Association, AT&T, Citibank, Colgate, Levi Strauss, Northern Telecom, NYNEX Corporation, and Procter & Gamble.⁴ Yet, the use and efficacy of one-on-one executive coaching has not, to date, been reported in a public sector municipal agency. To our knowledge, the present action research is the first such intervention.

Various methods of executive coaching have been employed; some programs, grounded in a psychodynamic perspective, aim to ameliorate personal problems; others are more directive, using, for example, goal-setting, feedback, and collaborative problem-solving.⁵ The present intervention entailed the latter approach, emphasizing: (1) goal-setting, (2) collaborative problem solving, (3) practice (4) feedback, (5) supervisory involvement, (6) evaluation of end-results, and (7) public presentation.

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Through one-on-one executive coaching, managers were given the opportunity to practice and obtain constructive feedback regarding the subject matter they had "learned about" during training. Each coach met individually, on a weekly basis, with one or more managers. Managers received coaching on topics such as personal issues, project planning, implementation of changes, and the probable short- and long-term impacts of their actions on

their personal performance and on the performance of their units. Naturally, all feedback was constructive in nature, and included suggested modifications in behavior where appropriate.

The seventh component of coaching, public presentation, was a central facet of the present intervention. The managers who were coached were notified at the outset that they would be required to make an oral presentation of their results, accompanied by a written report, to a group composed of their peers, supervisors, and (importantly) top-level executives—including the agency commissioner.

Method

Sample

Thirty-one participants (top-level managers, mid-level managers, and supervisors at a health agency in a major Northeastern city) participated in this action research. All participants volunteered to participate in both phases of this endeavor. Phase One consisted of classroom training, Phase Two entailed one-on-one executive coaching.

During Phase One, the senior author served as the classroom instructor, and the 31 participants were called "trainees." During Phase Two, the senior author served as consultant to eight managers. The consultant taught these eight managers how to be one-on-one executive coaches. The project for these managers (coaches) was to coach the 23 remaining participants (coachees) during Phase Two.

Procedure: Phase One

The 31 trainees acquired knowledge of managerial competencies⁶ during classroom-style, three-day, interactive, training workshops, conducted by the external consultant. The workshop content provided an overview of the most important roles managers and supervisors needed to enact to increase productivity, quality, and effectiveness within the agency. Trainees learned to identify the roles they had been enacting, new roles they should consider enacting, and when various roles were appropriate. Thus, the training phase emphasized two of the four training environments described by Sims and Sims: those that are perceptually and symbolically complex.⁷

Trainees completed a knowledge inventory before and after the workshop. They also completed a questionnaire at the end of the workshop that gauged their reactions to the training and the instructor.

Procedure: Phase Two

During eight weeks of on-the-job consultations, the senior author provided the eight coaches with detailed coaching processes and advice tailored to the agency's context; this facilitated the latter's success with their respective coachees. Each coachee was required to conduct a real work project that could be completed during Phase Two, and that would enhance work-unit performance, especially productivity, quality, and effectiveness. Each project was chosen by the coachee, subject to approval by his or her administrative supervisor, and from his or her functional supervisor where appropriate. Coaches worked individually with their coachees to monitor, and enhance project progress.

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Each coach provided feedback and guidance during confidential, weekly, one-hour coaching sessions that occurred over a period of two months. The content of the feedback emphasized the process of enacting new managerial competencies (behaviorally specific skills) and implementing new measurement and control systems. Feedback to coachees was also provided by phone, fax, e-mail, memoranda, and regular mail during Phase Two.

Although each project was tailored to the specific needs of the individual coachee, and to his or her unit, all projects shared common characteristics:

- Each project had a written plan;
- Each project had a time-defined beginning, middle, and end;
- Each project had customers (internal and/or external) who benefited from it;
- Each project influenced the work behavior and job performance of one or more of the coachee's subordinates;
- Each project was evaluated against qualitative, and where possible, quantitative, criteria;
- Each project was completed within two months.

In summary, eight projects focused on coaching others, and 23 projects focused on enhancing individual and unit performance. All participants (coaches and coachees) orally reported on their respective projects in a meeting attended by their peers, supervisors, and top executives. Each oral report included a description of the project objectives, agency-related outcomes, personal skill enhancements, and reactions to Phase Two. Additionally, all participants were required to submit a written report containing the same information. It will be noted that the coaching phase emphasized the remaining two training environments identified by Sims and Sims: those that are affectively and behaviorally complex.⁸

Results

Phase One: Training

Reactions. Trainees were trained in two groups (to reduce the number of trainees in each workshop). The trainees rated their workshop on five dimensions using a 5-point scale, where 1 = poor and 5 = excellent: usefulness of materials (4.82), instructor's knowledge (4.88), instructor's facilitation (4.88), overall instructor rating (4.94), and overall workshop rating (4.85). The mean rating across both training groups and all five dimensions was 4.87.

Trainees also provided numerous unsolicited laudatory comments regarding the instructor and the workshops on the rating forms. Many also requested follow-up assistance in transferring their new knowledge to the job.

Knowledge. Trainees responded anonymously to a knowledge assessment pre-test administered before training began. They also responded anonymously to a parallel post-test at the end of their workshop. The results for both groups combined were: 71.1 percent correct for the pre-test versus 88.0

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percent correct for the post-test. Because trainees provided a four-digit code number on their pre- and post-tests, it was possible to match their scores and to perform a paired t-test. The increase in percent of correct answers (24 percent) was statistically significant ($t = 4.78, p < .001$).

Behaviors. All trainees reported that the training would improve their skill in several behaviorally-based managerial competencies. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that these reports were essentially impressionistic and future-oriented.

Outcomes. The training workshops stressed the importance of developing specific quantitative indices of production and productivity, and obtaining systematic data on outcomes in order to control work. Notwithstanding the fact that productivity did improve after training (and will be reported later), and that measurement and documentation were emphasized in training, no quantitative data were collected by trainees after training alone.

Phase Two: Coaching

Reactions. Virtually all coaches and coachees reported favorable reactions to the coaching phase (Phase Two). Two themes emerged prominently from their comments: coaching was beneficial to them personally, and coaching was beneficial to the agency. These reactions were not, though, quantitatively measured.

Knowledge. A sample of coaches provided knowledge data before and after coaching. Although the results indicated a 20 percent increase in test scores, the number of cases ($n=4$) was too small to permit any statistical inferences.

Behaviors. As part of the coaching phase, coachees were asked to retrieve and analyze data on their productivity levels at three points in time: before training, after training but before coaching, and after coaching. As noted above, prior to the coaching phase, no coachees had gathered quantitative data. This is an important issue. Although training alone was found to have improved productivity, coachees did not begin to seek evidentiary documentation of results until they received coaching. Productivity (or production) data were collected for the post-training period in nine cases, in the post-coaching period in 13 cases, and after both training and coaching in seven (see Table 1).

Outcomes. The key outcome criterion was an index of productivity, defined computationally as outputs divided by inputs. For illustrative purposes, the data pertinent to case number 12 (Table 1) are reviewed next. The criterion for this case was the percentage of timely and fully completed patient evaluation forms (PEFs) per employee. Before training, only three out of 17 PEFs were completed fully and on time (17.6 percent), and there were four employees to perform this task—yielding a baseline productivity index of 4.4 percent. (That is, the outputs [.176] divided by inputs [4] yielded a productivity index of .044.) After training, 18 out of 28 PEFs were completed fully and on time (64.3 percent), and this was accomplished by six employees—a productivity index of 10.7 percent representing an increase in productivity of 143 percent. After training and coaching, 16 out of 20 PEFs were completed fully and on time (75 percent), a feat accomplished by seven employees, for a productivity index of 11.4 percent—an increase of 159 percent over baseline (i.e., before both training and coaching).

In each case where productivity data were not obtained, it was assumed for data analytic purposes that the actual productivity effect in the work unit was nil. (The assumption of a nil [zero] effect in such cases is a conservative one.) After training alone, the average increase in productivity was 22.4 percent. When training was augmented by coaching, the average increase in productivity was 88.0 percent. The difference in the magnitude of productivity improvement was statistically significant ($t = 2.03$; $p < .05$). Further, in those work units where both post-training and post-coaching data were collected, the median effects on productivity were 33 percent and 167 percent, respectively—a finding significant on a nonparametric basis at $p < .01$ (binomial sign test).

Table 1: Percent Change in Productivity After Training Alone and After Training Coaching

After Training Alone ¹			After Training and Coaching ²	
Case	Productivity Computed	% Change in Productivity	Productivity Computed	% Change in Productivity
1	No ^a	nc ^a	Yes	72
2	No ^a	nc ^a	No ^a	nc ^a
3	Yes	-100	Yes	167
4	No ^a	nc ^a	Yes	41
5	Yes	0	Yes	300
6	No ^b	na ^b	No ^b	na ^b
7	No ^c	na ^c	No ^c	na ^c
8	Yes	41	No ^a	nc ^a
9	Yes	14	Yes	20
10	No ^a	nc ^a	Yes	100
11	No ^a	nc ^a	No ^a	nc ^a
12	Yes	143	Yes	159
13	Yes	76	Yes	103
14	Yes	32	No ^a	nc ^a
15	No ^c	na ^c	No ^c	na ^c
16	Yes	33	Yes	200
17	No ^c	na ^c	No ^c	na ^c
18	No ^a	nc ^a	No ^a	nc ^a
19	No ^a	nc ^a	Yes	133
20	No ^c	na ^c	No ^c	na ^c
21	No ^a	nc ^a	Yes	86
22	Yes	275	Yes	603
23	No ^a	nc ^a	Yes	40

¹ Change in Productivity (or Production) after training compared to before training

² Change in Productivity (or Production) after training and coaching compared to before training

^a Not calculated or no written report

^b Not applicable; Project consisted of improvement in interpersonal relationships

^c Not applicable; Project generated a plan or program where productivity was not applicable

Note: in all cases (superscripts a, b, and c) where productivity and production data were not available or not applicable, a zero effect was assumed.

Discussion and Conclusions

The present research demonstrates the dramatic effects of one-on-one executive coaching as a transfer of training tool. As is typical of many management training programs today, the training phase focused on enhancing participants' self-awareness, and knowledge of managerial competencies

that they could potentially use in their current supervisory or managerial jobs. Although the training phase emphasized the importance of developing indicants to track progress, none of the trainees systematically or quantitatively measured productivity after training alone. However, after trainees underwent one-on-one executive coaching, archival data were collected indicating that training alone increased productivity by 22.4 percent. Most importantly, training, when augmented with coaching, yielded productivity increases almost four times the level achieved by training alone (88.0 percent).

There are a number of explanations for the dramatic increase in productivity as a result of coaching. The coaching phase consisted of one-on-one interactions emphasizing (1) goal-setting, (2) collaborative problem solving, (3) practice, (4) feedback, (5) supervisory involvement, (6) evaluation of end-results, and (7) public presentation. While all of the steps in the coaching were important, we believe goal-setting and public presentation were critical.

Several researchers have indicated that goal-setting leads to higher transfer levels.⁹ With one-on-one executive coaching, the coach and the coachee worked together to define concrete actions (goals) that coachees would undertake by the end of the coaching phase. In order for goal-setting to be effective, the goal must be specific, challenging, measurable, assignable, realistic, and time-bound.¹⁰ All these conditions existed in the present action research intervention.

Goal-setting has also been demonstrated to enhance perceived self-efficacy.¹¹ Because one-on-one coaching provided participants with hands-on experience performing the tasks they had learned about in training, they were able to receive feedback regarding the results of their actions from the job itself (when production and productivity were measured), organizational peers, superiors, coaches and customers. Consequently, they saw the extent to which their newly-acquired knowledge had been converted to practical skills that had positive utility. In essence, the positive reinforcement from all sources enhanced participants' self-efficacy.

The requirement of a public presentation underscored a central feature of the intervention: namely, that it was important to the highest executive levels of the agency. The oral presentations reflected on the achievements of both the participants and their supervisors and no doubt served as an additional incentive for the participants.

Also, due to the fact that the training and coaching culminated in the completion of an actual project, the trainees found the training eminently useful. Our endeavor underscores the importance of developing skills rather than merely transmitting knowledge, an issue identified by Gaziel as critical for successful training.¹² Unfortunately, oftentimes trainees find training to be "too academic."¹³ The present project coupled training with the opportunity for further learning (coaching), a combination often needed for public sector career development.¹⁴

Because the present intervention was undertaken as part of a contracted training intervention, rather than as a research effort, the selected design did not permit the conduct of a field experiment, viz., random assignment of participants to experimental and control groups. As Cummings and his

colleagues noted in 1985, the conduct of action-oriented inquiry, i.e., research that is undertaken for practical purposes, typically rules out the conduct of rigorous studies, because numerous changes need to be incorporated simultaneously.¹⁵ Consequently, it is not possible to rule out definitively several threats to internal validity. It might be argued, for example, that additional training could have produced the added benefits obtained after the coaching phase. Yet, it should be emphasized that it was only after coaching that any of the participants measured performance—not one trainee measured performance after training alone.

It might also be argued that the coaching phase merely provided the opportunity for more training, rather than providing a substantively different experience. We would counter that there is a qualitative difference in the type of learning that takes place in training and coaching, each phase serving a unique purpose. The training provided a period of abstract learning of principles, while the coaching facilitated concrete involvement in a project specific to each participant's work unit. These two experiences provided a program sufficiently balanced for individuals with differing learning styles. In a larger sense, both phases constitute "training," but each provided a unique contribution to the learning experience. As noted by Sims,¹⁶ when trainees are provided with a number of varying learning experiences, the optimal learning environment is created. One suggestion for future research would be to compare the results of a "training-only" condition and a "coaching-only" condition, in order to capture the distinct impact of each form of learning.

In a similar vein, it is not possible to determine which of the seven facets of the coaching process were most instrumental in enhancing performance, given the present research design. Perhaps the requirement of a public presentation, by itself, might have yielded a significant increase in job performance. While we believe that goal-setting and public presentation were critical elements of the coaching phase, future research might also examine the relative importance of each of the elements of executive coaching.

The benefits from managerial training will likely be suboptimal if there is limited follow up, feedback, and measurement of outcomes (end-results). Executive coaching is an important way of ensuring that knowledge acquired during training actually emerges as skills that are applied at work.

Notes

- ¹ The importance of the work environment has been examined by J. Bruce Tracey, S. I. Tannerbaum, and M. J. Kavanagh, "Applying trained skills on the job: The importance of the work environment," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 80, no. 2 (1995): 239-252. The relationship between the personality of the trainee and the transfer of training has been researched by A. Tziner, R. R. Haccoun, and Avi Kadish, "Personal and situational characteristics influencing the effectiveness of transfer of training improvement strategies," *Journal of Occupational Psychology* 64, no. 2 (1991): 167-177.
- ² Irwin L. Goldstein, *Training in Organizations*, 3d ed., (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1993): 115; Kenneth N. Wexley and Gary P. Latham, *Developing and Training Human Resources in Organizations*, 2d ed., (New York: Harper-Collins, 1991): 73-80; and Gary P. Latham and Lise M. Saari, (1979). "The application of social learning theory to training supervisors through behavioral modeling," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 64, no. 3 (1979): 239-246.
- ³ Richard Koonce, "One on one," *Training and Development* 48 (February 1994): 34-40; Bernard Johann, "The meeting as a lever for organizational improvement," *National Productivity Review* 13, no. 3 (1994): 376-377; and Adam Snyder, "Executive coaching: The new solution," *Management Review* 84 (March 1995): 29-32.
- ⁴ Lee Smith, "The executive's new coach," *Fortune* (27 December 1993): 126; and Snyder,

- "Executive coaching," 29.
5. Snyder, "Executive coaching," 30.
6. For example, Robert E. Quinn et al., *Becoming a Master Manager: A Competency Framework* (New York: Wiley, 1990).
7. Ronald R. Sims and Serbrenia J. Sims, "Improving training in the public sector," *Public Personnel Management* 20 (Spring 1991): 75-77.
8. *Ibid.*, 75-78.
9. James Anderson and Kenneth N. Wexley, "Applications-based management development: A method to promote practical application of managerial and supervisory training," *Personnel Administrator* 28 (November 1983): 39-43; Michael Feldman, "Successful post-training skill application," *Training and Development Journal* (September, 1981): 72-74; Edwin A. Locke and Gary F. Latham, *Goal Setting: A Motivational Tool That Works* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984); and Kenneth N. Wexley and Timothy T. Baldwin, "Post-training strategies for facilitating positive transfer: An empirical exploration," *Academy of Management Journal* 29, no. 3 (1986): 503-520.
10. G. Doran, "There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives," in *Dynamics of Management*, ed. by Gerald Olivero (New York: New York City Dept of Personnel, Bureau of Professional Development, 1993) 134; and Edwin A. Locke, and Gary F. Latham, *A Theory of Goal Setting and Task Performance* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990): 29-31.
11. Colette A. Frayne, and Gary P. Latham, "Self-management training for increased job attendance: A follow-up and a replication," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 74 (1989): 411-416.
12. Haim H. Gaziel, "Managerial studies and perceived job performance: An Israeli case study," *Public Personnel Management* 23 (Summer 1994): 341.
13. A. Carol Rusaw, "Mobility for federal women managers: Is training enough?" *Public Personnel Management*, 23 (Summer 1994): 258.
14. *Ibid.*, 261.
15. Thomas G. Cummings, Susan A. Mohrman, Allen M. Mohrman, and Gerald E. Ledford, "Organization design for the future: A collaborative research approach." In Edward E. Lawler III, Allan M. Mohrman, Jr., Susan A. Mohrman, Gerald E. Ledford, Jr., Thomas G. Cummings, and Associates (Eds.). *Doing Research That is Useful for Theory and Practice* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 1985): 284-289.
16. Ronald R. Sims, "The enhancement of learning in public sector training programs," *Public Personnel Management* 22 (Summer 1993): 253.

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