Coaching Infrastructure
The Building Block of Impactful Coaching Programs

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by Joel A. DiGirolamo

Researchers in the coaching industry have talked about organizations having a "coaching culture" for over 30 years. The results of this current research move that insight one step deeper, to the concept of a "coaching infrastructure." While the term coaching culture is fundamentally correct in that it is desirable to weave coaching concepts and skills into the fabric of an organization, the word infrastructure implies just what it says—structure. Structure is supportive and allows all parties to build upon it.

My hope is that the advent of this term and its accompanying model inspire others to consider what support and structure they can provide to facilitate coaching within their organizations. Development of such an infrastructure signals an intention and weight that the organization is serious about this endeavor.

The foundation for this model is based upon previous research and, most importantly, primary qualitative research from individuals embedded in organizations and fundamentally involved in the day-to-day effort to integrate professional coaching into their organizations. There is no better source of data than perceptions from those individuals experiencing the tribulations and joy that often come with building new programs within organizations. In a sense, these individuals are building a new infrastructure within an existing infrastructure.

Theory holds an important and necessary place in the field of psychological research— and models are often at the heart of theory. From this research, Ditzig, Chandrasekar, Zhao, and Silaba have created a logical model that is easy for professionals to understand and utilize in their work inside their own organization, i.e., it has good face validity. The oft-heard words of statistician George Box are certainly appropriate here, "All models are wrong but some are useful." I feel that this comprehensive concept and model can indeed be useful to the coaching industry and hope that it will be adopted and utilized for the enhancement of all individuals touched by coaching in organizations.

Joel A. DiGirolamo
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Foreword
by Andre Keil

As Coaching Practice Leader for the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®), I've been privileged to work with clients in a variety of ways, including designing and implementing large-scale coaching initiatives, teaching coaching skills, and as an executive coach to individual leaders.

I remember back to one of my initial assignments, a global cohort of 27 top leaders in a chemicals company. Each leader—spread from Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America—was paired with a CCL coach, and in a span of 16 months stepped through a rigorous executive coaching engagement. At the end, a capstone event was to have brought all the leaders and their coaches together, but it never happened, mostly because the logistics were just too much. Or, perhaps it was because at the end of 16 months, we'd all had enough.

The biggest lesson for me in this 16-month journey was provide a solid infrastructure, but allow for enough flexibility in the process that the coaching pairs can take advantage of integrating what's going on around them into their journey. Paradoxically, having a solid infrastructure in coaching implementations lays the groundwork for creating this flexibility that's so essential for growth and development, and a strong coaching culture.

That's exactly what Ditzig, Chandrasekar, Zhao, and Silaba are sharing. A model that includes making the case for coaching in organizations, and how to source and prepare coaches for their journey while matching them in pairs in the best way possible, with clear objectives and good measures for evaluation.

This study is filled with important insights from front-line experts on how organizations attempt to create good infrastructure around coaching. It highlights that the interlocking of strategic objectives, top management support, goal setting for engagements, and monitoring progress to keep everyone on the same path is what will make for success. Oh, and the secret ingredient? Coaching Champions; the people in the organization who have the passion and the will to promote, cajole, and structure coaching efforts.

Andre Keil
Coaching Practice Leader
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Background of the Study

Organizations today are experiencing a faster pace and broader scope of change. Faced with a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment, the best performing companies are distinguished by the quality of both the functional and leadership talent they attract and retain. Today's talent demands ongoing feedback and continuous opportunities for self-development.

The complexity and the fast pace of change mean that development approaches such as courses and training cannot meet all the needs of people in organizations. In their place, organizations view coaching as a more impactful way of developing talent to perform at their highest potential. In addition to the classic one-on-one coaching for senior leaders, organizations are keen to invest in building a culture where coaching is seen as a crucial skill for successful collaboration on every level.

The growth of the International Coach Federation (ICF), the largest professional body representing coaching and coaches, from about 8,000 members in 2004 to 30,000 members in 2016 is testimony to this. In 2016, the global total revenue from coaching was estimated to be $2.4 billion, an increase of 19% from four years earlier.[1]

The Explosive Growth of Coaching Research

The growth of coaching attracted researchers' attention.[2] From a single peer-reviewed journal, *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, that published coaching articles, five peer-reviewed coaching journals were introduced between 2003 and 2008.[3] The body of research generated has been voluminous enough to warrant four meta-analyses of coaching research,[4] comprehensive literature reviews, and large-scale global studies of coaching.[5]

A review of this body of research points to a focus on various aspects of coaching such as attributes of the effective coach, client behaviors that impact the effectiveness of their coaching, the importance of the coach-coachee relationship on coaching outcomes, and coaching's impact on individual and organizational outcomes.[6]

Background of the Study *continued*

Coaching Infrastructure: A Crucial Yet Neglected Research Area

In spite of the growth in coaching research, there remains a dearth of empirical studies examining what organizations can do to create and support their coaching programs. We use the term *coaching infrastructure* to indicate the various systemic aspects and processes that support the conduct of coaching programs in organizations.

A survey of more than 150 expert coaches found that organizational support—what we call having a coaching infrastructure—was one of the top three determinants of successful coaching interventions.[7] However, at least two studies[8, 9] found that very few companies have a disciplined approach to managing the coaching process, and most fail to measure outcomes. While several studies have argued for the importance of deploying coaching within the organization in a systematic and strategic way, one of them went so far as to say that coaching programs should only be launched if they had the strong support from top management, stating that "unless coaching is applied in a planned and strategic way, it is a waste of time and money."[10]

Despite the importance ascribed to organizational support systems, it would appear that many, if not most, organizations fail to create the kind of coaching infrastructure they need to support their coaching programs.

This Study

The [ICF-Singapore Chapter](#) and the [Center for Creative Leadership](#) (CCL®) sought to address this lack of research on coaching infrastructure by setting up a joint team of researchers to conduct a two-phase study. The first phase involved qualitative interviews with a small number of organizations that had coaching programs, exploring what sort of coaching infrastructure existed. A second quantitative phase is planned to conduct a survey of the coaching infrastructure in a wider number of organizations; it will be informed by the results of the first phase. This report shares insights from the first phase of the study.

Based on reviews of the literature and personal experience in coaching, the research team identified a preliminary model consisting of five aspects deemed to be necessary for creating a successful coaching infrastructure within an organization.

We then used personal and professional networks to identify nine organizations with operations in Singapore that have coaching programs. We made no distinction about the level of maturity or the duration for which the coaching programs had been in place.

We held 90-minute interviews with one or two employees of each company who had either direct responsibility for or sufficient knowledge of the company's coaching program. During these conversations, we sought to learn about the organizational systems associated with their coaching programs.

The research team analyzed these interviews, looking for patterns, themes, stories, and practices that informed, refined, validated, and expanded our preliminary model.

This report is organized as follows: In the first section, we introduce our *Coaching Infrastructure Model* and its five aspects. In the second section, we share our insights on each of the five aspects of the Coaching Infrastructure Model. Third, we share some unexpected findings from our interviews. Fourth, we offer some suggestions for those who may be charged with designing and implementing a coaching infrastructure. And finally, we suggest avenues for future research.

I. The Coaching Infrastructure Model

What are the necessary elements for a systematic approach to coaching within the organization? McDermott and his coauthors[11] identified the following four characteristics as essential for an effective coaching program:

- Visible leadership from the top;

- Discipline to define behavioral objectives and measure success;

- Integration of coaching and other leadership development programs; and

- Centralized management of external and internal coaches.

Joo[12] recommended that coaching programs have someone responsible for "overseeing the whole coaching process, consulting with all parties involved regarding the requirements for a successful outcome, ensuring alignment with business needs, managing the coaches, communicating logistic requirements, ensuring explicit contracting and clarity regarding roles, and keeping track of goals and expensed (sic) incurred"

Based on the above, we identified five elements we believe are necessary to have a successful organizational coaching program.
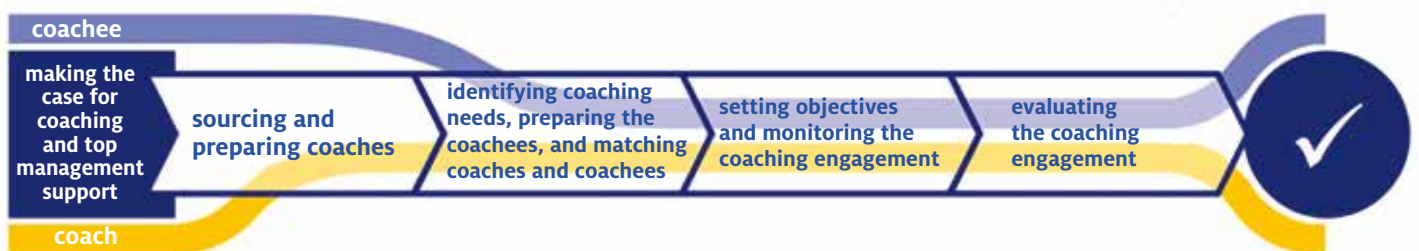
Making the Case for Coaching and Top Management Support

Successful coaching programs should start with a clear reason for having them. Programs that lack a clear link to the organization's strategic objectives are unlikely to survive the first economic downturn. Equally important is having clear support of the CEO and the senior management team. Without these two elements, any coaching that does exist in the organization may be of benefit to a small number of individual managers but unlikely to produce systemic organizational benefits.

Sourcing and Preparing Coaches

In order to ensure that the coaches who are hired are professionally qualified and properly prepared, organizations need to identify a reliable source of coaches, screen potential candidates, and orient them to the particular needs of the organization. Given the range of coaching needs an organization might have, organizations would benefit from having a varied panel of coaches who would be available when needed. Identified coaches will then need to be oriented to the organization's specific needs, its strategic issues, its culture, and the expectations the organization has for the extent of its involvement in the coaching engagement.

Identifying Coaching Needs, Preparing the Coachees, and Matching Coaches and Coachees

Coaching can be a costly intervention. Therefore, it is important to clearly communicate what it will be used for and who will have access to it. Companies need to have a process to identify potential coachees and prepare them to receive coaching. Since coaching is still relatively new, many may have misconceptions about what it is and how it works. Coachees may have worries about who will have access to the information shared during the coaching process and how that might impact their future careers. Information should be provided and concerns addressed before the actual coaching starts. An important factor influencing coaching outcomes is the quality of the coaching relationship between coach and coachee.[13] Because of this, it is vital that coachees get matched to coaches with whom they can develop a good working relationship and whom they are allowed to "divorce" if the relationship does not develop.

Setting Objectives and Monitoring the Coaching Engagement

Maintaining confidentiality is important for the coaching relationship and is a critical element in the ethical codes of all professional coaching bodies. Consequently, the organization's involvement in the objective setting and monitoring of the coaching engagement is a very sensitive issue. Organizations may do this by having the coachee's manager participate in a three-way conversation with the coach and coachee in the early part of the process to confirm coaching objectives are in line with the organization's goals. Having a "check-in" meeting with the coach somewhere in the middle and at the end of the coaching engagement allows for some minimal monitoring of the process. Some organizations may require more to ensure the investment they've made is beneficial.

Evaluating the Coaching Engagement

Clearly defined goals and objectives for coaching also may serve as a basis for measuring and evaluating outcomes. Organizations use various methods to evaluate the outcomes of their HR initiatives. One of the most frequently used methods of measuring coaching outcomes is 360-degree tools to measure behaviors as perceived by self and others before and after coaching. Whatever method is used, companies need a way to assess outcomes in order to justify the time and money invested. Additionally, the evaluation allows for identifying what is working and what is not.

II. Coaching Infrastructure Model— Findings from the Study

The transcribed notes and/or the recordings of the nine company interviews were read and listened to by the four researchers involved in this project, who determined the extent to which each element of the coaching infrastructure identified in our model was present in each company. We used a simple rating scale of: "Little or none," "To some extent," and "To a large extent." Disagreements were resolved by reviewing the transcripts and/or the recordings to obtain evidence for the assessment. The final assessments were unanimous among the four researchers. Table 1 summarizes our assessment of the extent to which each of the nine companies exhibited elements of a coaching infrastructure.

Table 1
Extent of the Coaching Infrastructure Elements in the Nine Studied Organizations

	Company A	Company B	Company C	Company D	Company E	Company F	Company G	Company H	Company I
Making the Case for Coaching and Top Management Support	●	●	●	◑	◑	◑	◑	○	◑
Sourcing and Preparing Coaches	●	●	●	●	◑	●	◑	○	○
Identifying Coaching Needs, Preparing the Coachees, and Matching Coaches and Coachees	●	●	●	●	●	◑	◑	○	○
Setting Objectives and Monitoring the Coaching Engagement	●	●	◑	○	●	◑	○	◑	○
Evaluating the Coaching Engagement	●	●	○	○	○	◑	○	○	○

○ Little or None　　◑ To Some Extent　　● To a Large Extent

A review of Table 1 allows for two immediate observations:

1. Only two of the nine companies exhibited all elements of the Coaching Infrastructure Model, suggesting that most companies—even if they have active coaching programs—do not provide full support; and

2. The two least-often implemented elements of the Coaching Infrastructure Model were "Setting Objectives and Monitoring the Coaching Engagement" and "Evaluating the Coaching Engagement."

Making the Case for Coaching and Top Management Support

Is coaching linked to strategic objectives?

In all of the interviewed companies, coaching was introduced to address specific organizational needs, most commonly leadership development. However, none of the companies presented us with a document that clearly defined how coaching is supporting this or any other strategic initiative. In the few instances where there seemed to be a clear case articulated by either the coaching champion or senior management, there still was no document that linked the coaching initiative to specific corporate strategic objectives. More often, we found that the business case for coaching relied more on the senior management team having received coaching themselves and becoming vocal advocates for it.

However, the more the case for coaching emphasized a strategic organizational link to bottom-line success, the more it was accepted and supported throughout the organization. When coaching is too "personal," the effectiveness of the approach seems to be limited, no matter how elaborate (and/or rigid) the related processes are executed. "Personal" in this sense means (a) a champion is highly engaged and embodies the whole practice, (b) only a few senior leaders are convinced or (at least) supportive of the practice, and (c) the coaching focuses on solving individual issues of the coachees. Less "personal" then would mean: (a) the Coaching Infrastructure is more institutionalized, (b) the entire management sees coaching as an instrument for improving not only individual performance but also overall organizational effectiveness, and (c) the coaching itself takes a more systemic/contextual perspective on working with the individuals.

How supportive is senior management?

Senior management's acceptance and support for coaching depends on their own experience with coaching, their assessment of how it will help address certain business issues, and actual success stories that could be used to make the argument for coaching. Where there is strong senior management support, coaching is seen in a positive light and becomes almost a status symbol, overcoming the often-seen perception as a remedial measure for an executive's failure.

However, sometimes when the organizational culture does not acknowledge coaching as a valuable "investment" in the organization's success, managers tend to see it as a cost factor only, especially when they're not benefitting personally from coaching.

Given this, top management support for coaching infrastructure could be observed in the following forms, in order of increasing intensity:

- Senior leaders providing a positive decision for implementation and the necessary budgets, but no further involvement in the process itself,

- Complete C-suites going through the exercise to be convinced of the benefits coaching can have on their employees,

- Top-level executives personally writing about the importance of coaching to managers who receive it, thus making it clear that coaching is a major building block in their development,

- A president actively involved as a gatekeeper for the program's quality by personally screening the coaches engaged.

Observations on Making the Case for Coaching and Getting Top Management Support

There is no "one size fits all" approach to establishing coaching infrastructure in an organization, as straightforward the process may be. Besides having people convinced that coaching is beneficial for personal development based on their personal experience, a coaching program must have a strategic intent that aims at organizational improvement and not just at individual improvement. This does not mean that establishing coaching infrastructure needs to have a detailed business plan explaining the return-on-investment (ROI) of such an endeavor. It does, however, mean that the success of the coaching practice can still (and should) be linked to the success criteria of the organization, especially when those criteria are derived to measure the outcomes of strategy implementation.

We discovered that establishing coaching infrastructure in an organization is not so much based on a "business case" with tangible numbers and bottom-line effects, or return on investment data, but more on "making the case" with passionate players and compelling stories on the benefits of coaching. Citing examples of coaching's impact on an individual manager who was known to the senior leadership had more impact than rational arguments demonstrating the potential benefits of having a coaching program. Another substitute for "making the case for coaching" was to have key decision makers experience coaching for themselves. In some cases this occurred because a key decision maker had previous experience with coaching, but often we found that this was a method used by the coaching champion within the organization. The downside of this is that the case for coaching is only loosely linked to the strategy of the organization, but it could be a crucial factor for the long-term success of the coaching program.

Sourcing and Preparing Coaches

This is an important element of the Coaching Infrastructure Model, because the quality of the coach is a determining factor for the quality of the coaching outcomes. During this study, we discovered that these processes are different for external and internal coaches; consequently, we will describe them separately.

Where do external coaches come from?

When sourcing external coaches, organizations seem to depend heavily on networks. When an organization has a coaching champion, this person uses his/her network to find coaches. Our interviewees also shared with us that, in some cases, external coaches were introduced by senior leaders who recommended coaches they had used. In either case, personal networks are instrumental when organizations have coaching needs. This is not because of the unavailability of external sources, but rather a preference. For example, one interviewee said, "Earlier, we would have coaches referred to us by our senior leaders. That was one source, and then it becomes the key because that person wants that coach to coach their people." Some interviewees also mentioned the use of external vendors to source and select suitable coaches. For example, Company E started working with a leadership research and training institute on leadership development programs and then continued with the organization to source coaches.

In terms of the criteria for external coaches, all interviewees told us that they seek high-quality coaches, and often they were able to articulate the specific criteria for what makes a good coach. Professional certification is a very important filtering factor.

In all organizations interviewed, coaches with a business background are preferred, and in some it is a must. As one interviewee said, "I am definitely looking for somebody who had some prior corporate experience. I would not say somebody from manufacturing [industry] [...] but somebody who's been working in a corporate world." Whether a coach has a psychology or HR background is not a priority. Interviewees told us what they look for is whether the coach has empathy, curiosity, and chemistry with coachees—for all these, a psychology background may help but it is not required.

A few companies required that coaches have coach supervision in addition to being accredited. One company required the coach to have indemnity insurance.

How are external coaches prepared?

We asked interviewees whether and how they prepare external coaches after they are recruited, especially regarding organizational culture and business context, etc. Some interviewees said they brief coaches during the selection process; some send documents to the coaches as preparation; and some do nothing at all because, as one interviewee said, "they are not coaching [the organization]. They are coaching an individual who is in a specific situation."

Whether or not organizations give orientation to external coaches depends on several factors:

- The amount of influence the organization wants to have in the engagement: Some interviewees did not see the benefits of getting involved in preparing coaches.

- What the organizers assume the coaches already know: Some interviewees see it as external coaches' responsibility to understand the coaching background and trust them to be professional enough to explore it.

- The general motivation for coaching: For some interviewees, the motivation for coaching is the coachees' growth. They see the coaching relationship as owned totally by the coaches and coachees; hence, they do not want to interfere.

Where do internal coaches come from?

Companies mainly use three approaches to source internal coaches: hire, volunteer, or assign.

First, some organizations hire people who have undergone coach training. Accomplished coaches are hired to provide their skills to the organization on a permanent basis. Many of our interviewees belong to this category. This person may have the additional or even the main task to build the coaching infrastructure.

Second, some organizations use a volunteer approach by conducting internal campaigns to promote coaching, with the goal of educating employees about coaching and increasing awareness of its importance. Recruiting potential coaches is part of the initiative. Any manager who believes in the value of coaching and is willing to learn the skills can raise his/her hand to receive the necessary training.

Third, in other organizations, the champion of the coaching initiative (or other senior leaders) identifies potential coaches within the organization. These potential coaches are usually spotted when their behaviors are observed during other leadership development programs. Upon identification, these individuals are assigned as coaches.

How are internal coaches prepared?

Organizations that are serious about building their own capacity for real coaching assignments often involve recognized external coaching training vendors to certify internal coaches. For example, Company F collaborates with a specific coach training provider on a custom program and sends its potential internal coaches to this training and certification process. In this case, the responsibility of assessing internal coaches falls on that provider.

In another organization that invests heavily to develop internal coaches, candidates need to pass an internal assessment before they start coaching. One interviewee used her own experience to explain the assessment process: "It was actually a real interview as such, we even role play[ed]. We needed to coach a senior coach on the spot, and the other senior coach observed and gave me feedback on what could be better. Of course we also spoke about motivation and what is in it for me, to determine whether you are ready to coach an employee."

The same interviewee also shared that internal coaches also go through an orientation process and sign agreements that specify the codes of conduct. Then their profiles are uploaded to an internal platform where employees with a coaching need can search and choose a suitable coach.

Observations on Sourcing and Preparing Coaches

When it comes to sourcing external coaches, we noticed that none of the interviewees mentioned the use of advertisements or other marketing tactics. It's understood that coaching is a specialized service that cannot be purchased "over the counter" and that coaching champions or senior leaders often are gate keepers to the resources. Still, if organizations aim to institutionalize coaching practice, they need to consider building up a systematic approach to source the best from the market.

Based on our interviews, executive coaching that involves external coaches often has three categories of objectives: development, enhancement, and transition. It is important to be clear about the coaching objectives.

The internal coaching relationship can be more complicated because internal coaches and coachees work for the same organization. We have two observations in this regard. First, some organizations strongly believe that coaching should be offered to everybody in the organization while others are more targeted. Second, most of our interviewees reported that it is inappropriate for internal coaches to coach their own direct reports.

Identifying Coaching Needs, Preparing the Coachees, and Matching Coaches and Coachees

In the previous section, we discussed the steps organizations take to source and prepare coaches to meet the objectives of the coaching program. In this section, we look at the aspect of "fit" or "match" from the coachee's perspective.

How do organizations determine who gets coaching? How is "fit" established, and if there is no initial "fit," what options are available? We asked these questions of our interviewees regarding both their external executive coaching and their internal coaching.

Who gets a coach?

Who gets a coach is largely determined by the objectives for the coaching set by the organization. In Company E, coaches were assigned only to leaders who were promoted to the next level or were making a transition into a challenging role. In Company I, all leaders above a certain organizational level who had been identified as high potentials could ask for a coach. In company C, management believed "everyone should get a coach" and had a massive program to find and train internal coaches.

The key question the decision makers asked themselves when they came across a request for a coach was, "Is this a coaching issue?" The answer to this question gained higher significance when engaging external coaches, given the amount of resources required.

How are external coaches matched?

After sourcing potential coaches, the most common approach is to select up to three possible coaches for a specific engagement from a pool of coaches. This initial choice of three coaches is often made after discussions with the coaching service vendor and is closely tied to the business experiences.

The potential coachee is then presented with the profiles of three possible executive coaches and has an opportunity to have a chemistry meeting with each of them. Based on these initial meetings, the coachee selects the coach that feels like the best match.

How are internal coaches matched?

The process of holding chemistry meetings between the coach and coachee is also followed by most organizations that use internal coaches. The setting of the meetings, however, varied substantially. While some use the classic meeting setting, Company D used a "speed dating" process for coaches and coachees to choose each other.

Observations on Sourcing Coaching Needs and Matching Coaches and Coachees

Company C, where people believe everyone should get a coach, presented an interesting phenomenon. While the organization had a lot of enthusiasm for coaching, getting enough coachees was a challenge. Managers were more interested in signing up to be a coach than to be coached. In the context of programs that use internal coaches, the coaching champions play an important role in matching supply and demand.

Setting Objectives and Monitoring the Coaching Engagement

Most of the organizations we interviewed used both external and internal coaches. In almost all cases, the organizations developed internal coaching capabilities after having some experience with external coaching. The motive to develop internal coaching capability was based primarily on a desire to extend coaching to a larger segment of the organization while managing costs. But regardless of whether the coaching program was primarily external or internal, reaping the maximum benefit from their coaching programs requires organizations to have some involvement in setting the objectives for coaching engagements and monitoring those engagements.

Programs Using External Coaches

Most of the organizations that use external coaches would have three-way objective-setting sessions to ensure boss-coach-coachee agreement on the coaching objectives. The coach and boss would frequently re-connect at the mid-point and have another three-way session at the end of the coaching engagement to share perceptions of the coaching outcomes. Some organizations even use four-way objective-setting meetings where the coaching champion, HR representative, or sponsor of a program tied to coaching will also attend. When asked why they need to sit in as a fourth person, the interviewee from Company A responded, "It is my responsibility, since others do not know what to expect." This particular coaching champion was so serious about monitoring the objective-setting process that she requested a 50% refund from a coach for not focusing on the agreed-upon coaching objectives.

Programs Using Internal Coaches

Organizations that rely primarily on internal coaches tend to be less involved in setting objectives and monitoring the coaching process. In Company C, individuals can request coaching without having their boss involved or even knowing about the coaching.

The interviewee from Company F reported that the boss might be aware that a coaching engagement has started but generally will leave it up to the coach and coachee to determine the coaching objectives. Coaching objectives are not documented or reported. In this organization, HR will monitor the engagement only "at a distance … since coaching is very personal." No reporting on outcomes is required.

Company I, an extensive user of coaching where many of the training programs routinely have a coaching segment, reported, "As the HR person I don't need to know details … I just want to know if the person gets better. The coaching is for personal development." In this organization, while coaches are contracted for a defined period of coaching, that contract is "quite loose." When objectives are set, they are often as general as "how to make you a future GM."

Observations on Setting Objectives and Monitoring the Coaching Engagement

Company C runs a program that uses external coaches and is managed centrally by its headquarters. In this case, the local HR person, who started and manages a program that uses internal coaches, isn't informed and doesn't know who is receiving coaching within the region. The company has developed an online system to register for internal coaching and connect with potential coaches. It has invested heavily in training a cadre of internal coaches who are then interviewed by a panel of seasoned internal coaches to determine their readiness. The coaching champion told us that the program that uses internal coaches is very "coachee–driven," with little to no HR involvement, documentation, or tracking of internal coaching engagements, even though the system would make tracking and reporting quite simple. Instead of leveraging the potential to easily monitor the coaching activities, the online system is only used to provide potential coachees an automated process to select a coach and initiate a coaching engagement without the need for approval from their immediate boss or assistance from someone responsible for the coaching program.

In companies that used both external and internal coaching, the external coaching programs had more involvement in setting objectives and monitoring the engagement. This may be due to external coaches being used more with senior executives who have a greater impact on the overall performance of the organization, as well as the greater cost incurred with the use of external coaches.

The extent of organizational involvement in a coaching engagement varies depending on a number of factors: How closely the coaching program is tied to the organization's strategic initiatives; how active senior management is in supporting the coaching program; whether the coaching program is seen as serving primarily individual developmental purposes; and whether the coaching program uses primarily external or internal coaches. But the single most important factor for objective-setting and monitoring seems to be whether coaching is provided by internal or external coaches.

Evaluating the Coaching Engagement

Investing in coaching engagements comes at a steep cost in terms of time, effort, and money for organizations. We were interested in understanding how organizations followed up on their investments in coaching. How did they evaluate coaching engagements? What tools did they use? What sort of input did they seek, and from whom?

On a more complex level, did they take a "return-on-investment" approach to coaching? And if so, how did they do it? Once they had data on the impact of the coaching engagement, who had access to it and how did they use the information? We asked these questions of our interviewees.

Are companies taking an ROI approach to coaching?

Our interviewees and their organizations generally did not subscribe to the "return-on-investment" approach to demonstrate the impact of coaching. The reason most often cited for this was that coaching engagements were very individual, and it was too difficult to tie them to organizational outcomes. Conversely, they felt comfortable looking for changes in individual behavior and its the impact on individual metrics that were agreed upon earlier in the coaching process or in the organization's regular performance appraisal.

How is the impact of coaching measured?

Many of the companies took a quantitative approach to measuring the impact of coaching. Most of them used a 360-degree feedback assessment, with at least one taking pre- and post-coaching measures. This was especially true when external coaching was to be evaluated. Those who did not use 360s took a more individual approach, using verbal feedback or capturing success stories of how coaching helped individuals change their behaviors. While one organization involved the coach, coachee, the supervisor, and the HR representative in the evaluation conversations, most other organizations limited themselves to information shared voluntarily by the coach or the coachee. When asked why more wasn't being done to evaluate coaching outcomes, the primary reason given was the confidential nature of the coaching conversation and the desire to not intrude.

Observations on Evaluating the Coaching Engagement

The evaluation of coaching programs that use external coaches was better planned and more extensive than evaluation of coaching programs using internal coaches. Usually, coaching engagements were evaluated for two reasons: to support the business case for why top management should continue the coaching program, and to provide proof-of-concept.

III. Additional Insights

While this research was intended to validate the elements of our Coaching Infrastructure Model, three interesting and somewhat unexpected findings arose that are worthy of discussion as well:

- The inter-relationships among the following three elements of our model: The strategic intent for the coaching program, the support that top management provides, and management's involvement in setting the coaching objectives and monitoring the coaching engagements;

- The role of the coaching champion, the person who has a passionate commitment to bringing coaching into the organization and ensuring coaching engagements are well-managed;

- The importance of having both senior management support and a coaching champion.

Strategic Intent, Senior Management Support, and Monitoring

While we can conceptually distinguish the connection to an organization's strategic objectives from making the case for senior management support for the coaching program, we found that, in almost all instances, one doesn't exist without the other.

Furthermore, organizations that have developed or connected their coaching programs to support important strategic initiatives and have strong senior management support seem to be more involved in setting coaching objectives and monitoring the coaching engagements.

Company A (where the coaching champion had asked for a partial refund because the coach did not stay focused on the coaching objectives), branded its coaching initiative as "TCM—The Coaching Movement" and developed a three-tiered program including external coaching, internal coaching, and training managers for coaching skills. When asked why coaching is needed, the coaching champion explained that 80–85% of the employees were millennials who want to both make a contribution and have a voice in how things are done. She also believes that in their industry, whose products are intangible and creative ideas, the organization needs to empower young employees to think for themselves, and managers need to lead in a way to maximize and retain the best talent. Coaching was seen as an important way of leading and creating a corporate climate that helped them win business.

Company B developed coaching to respond to the restructuring in its industry following the 2008–2009 recession. The new CEO felt the need to get people to "think for themselves" and believed coaching would "help build that muscle of self-reliance." This company used coaching as part of a leadership development program for a group of 13 targeted future leaders who each received two years of coaching. It also used coaching to support an initiative called "Accelerating Differences," which was used to accelerate the advancement of women executives with remarkable results: 46% of the women participants were promoted, versus 24% of women not in the program and 25% of men. Interestingly, the sponsor of that program is slated to be the next Global CEO of this Fortune 100 Company. To tie coaching closely to the business objectives, this company established a Coaching Centre of Excellence (CoE), enlisting HR coaching business partners to support the business leaders, ensuring that the coaching was business-relevant.

Coaching programs at some companies were started by people who believed in the value of coaching but saw coaching as an individual development intervention. While they believed in the company's ultimate benefit when their members receive coaching, there was not a strong effort to connect the coaching to the company's objectives. This meant that they were not as actively involved in objective setting and monitoring the engagement.

Often in these cases, the coaching champion who initiated the program had only limited or no apparent senior management support. This can be detrimental to the success of the program, since coachees might look for clues from the upper management if coaching is a valued instrument for career advancement.

In Company H, the very passionate coaching champion "sold" the program to the CEO, who was not personally impressed by coaching, and the 360-degree feedback-based, very structured, stringent coaching approach for leadership development wasn't appreciated by the recipients and lacked follow-through.

In Company F, which was less active in setting objectives and monitoring the engagement, the coaching champion said the business case for coaching programs was "Developing the Asia Talent Pipeline." While this was a laudable objective, based on a general belief that coaching is a useful tool for talent development, it was not clearly connected to a specific business objective. In this instance, the coaching champion refused to comment on the question regarding senior management support.

All of this is a clear indication that the backbone of a successful coaching infrastructure is formed by interlocking the aspects of strategic objectives, top-management support, objective setting for the individual coaching engagements, and monitoring these engagements to stay on this strategic path.

The Role of the Coaching Champion

When we approached each organization, we asked to interview the people most involved with their coaching programs. Often these people came from the organization's HR function and would spend 10–20% of their time focusing on coaching issues. The two organizations (A and B) that had the most robust coaching infrastructure had a resource dedicated exclusively to managing the coaching program.

In the other organizations, we found that the people responsible for managing the coaching programs varied in the amount of passion and commitment they expressed for coaching as an intervention to support organizational objectives. However, it became clear to us that the passion expressed by these individuals strongly correlated with the extent and success of their organizations' coaching programs. We began to think of these passionate individuals as "champions" for coaching.

We also noticed that these champions' tasks are different depending on if they work with external or internal coaches. For programs that use external coaches, the primary task is to organize the process for recruiting and matching external coaches with coachees. For programs that use internal coaches, the champion must often build the internal coaching resource from scratch and design a system for recruiting, training, and engaging the internal coaches. This often involves having a community of practice to keep internal coaches engaged. Managing a program based on internal coaches appeared to be more challenging—a challenge requiring passionate coaching champions.

The Importance of Having Both Senior Management Support and a Coaching Champion

While having a coaching champion was a critical element, it was not a sole factor for successful coaching programs. Sustained success requires an infrastructure that can transform the coaching initiative from a "personality driven project," based on the strong motivation of the champion, into an institutionalized practice. To develop such an infrastructure, it is critical to have both a champion (in the function and with coaching practice) and a sponsor (on the decision-making level and with a positive view of coaching).

Why is it so critical to have both? Because an effective program cannot be created without the practice and enthusiasm of the champion, and implementation cannot be sustained without the support and resources from senior management.

IV. Action Steps for Coaching Champions in Organizations

So you find coaching a highly useful approach to personal and especially leadership development. You may have had coaching yourself and/or you have undergone a coaching training. And now you want to convince your organization to have coaching for your key personnel (however you might define that).

Based on what we have found when asking our interview partners how they established coaching in their organizations, we offer you action steps and some questions to reflect upon. The depth and quality of the answers will determine the overall acceptance and success of your initiative.

Define the Coachee

Begin by defining the "customer segment" of coaching—the coachee population: is it only the most senior executives, the high potentials, the ones in challenging situations (e.g. during a transition, or being an expat)? Or is it employees in specific functions, every manager, or even every employee? Furthermore, should it be part and parcel of some change initiative (and therefore limited for a period of time), or will it be added to the permanent list of developmental instruments?

Ask yourself: what resources are necessary to implement and maintain stable processes? Consider the costs to employ and/or train internal coaches, or to implement coaching skills as a management tool itself, along with expenses incurred by using external coaches.

Begin Champion-centered; Migrate to System-centered

One crucial ingredient is what we call a "champion." Are you willing to walk the extra mile across all obstacles and to be the standard bearer (in more than one sense) for the tedious task of promoting coaching in the organization? Who else could take on this role?

Another critical factor is the support of senior management, which has to decide if and how coaching is to be implemented in the organization as well as approve the financial investment. The more frequent and positive experiences this group has with coaching for themselves, the more likely it is they give continued support to the approach. Who could this be in your organization?

But the journey doesn't end here: the "personal" stories need to be transformed into an "organizational" storyline, and the necessary processes must be established and professionalized. For coaching to have sustained benefit in the organization, it must become an institution rather than rely on the motivation of a few individuals.

Sustain Coaching with a Strategic Link

What strategic goals does your organization have to achieve, and how can coaching support those? How can you make sure the objective-setting in coaching engagements is closely linked to the organization's objectives? You may want to create a related and reliable metric (qualitative and/or quantitative) to measure the outcomes of coaching engagements. Which metric would fit best to your organization's measure of success, on either the individual or the team level? The answer might differ for your various "customer segments."

What is already defined in your organization that could help you build a coaching infrastructure? If coaching-related procedures, policies, or systems already exist somewhere in the organization, there's a good chance these are already informed by the organization's strategy, proven as concepts, and ready to use. At the same time, these pre-conditions might limit your freedom to implement the kind of coaching infrastructure that fits your organization.

Creating a coaching infrastructure requires that you ask a lot of questions, but they are invaluable in helping you create a compelling storyline to convince the decision-makers and serve as a framework for implementation. It may be beneficial to first start small (and top-down), create success stories, and then scale as appropriate.

V. Future Research

In the next stage of the research project, we plan to use a much larger and more diverse selection of organizations in terms of country of origin, industry sector, and organization size. We also plan to obtain perspectives not only from the people directly involved with implementing and maintaining the coaching infrastructure, but also from other stakeholders, such as decision makers, external and internal coaches, and coachees. This will allow us to better determine the influence of multiple factors on the demand for coaching, the perceived value of coaching, and the design of any coaching-related processes.

Although seemingly simple and straightforward, the Coaching Infrastructure Model we have proposed is flexible enough to meet the unique strategic needs of any organization.

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Acknowledgements

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Hermann Ditzig was president of the IFC Chapter in Singapore in 2016–2017 and has been a professional executive/leadership coach since 2001. He has spent most of his professional life helping leaders be more effective.

He started his career as a researcher working as a medical sociologist in the departments of psychiatry at two medical colleges, where he participated in a five-year study of the incidence of psychopathology in previously undiagnosed organizational populations. He shifted to Organization Design/Development and Leadership after the results of that study showed leadership and organization experiences can have a significant impact on the psychological well-being of organizational members.

Shifting his focus to Organization Science and Leadership, he taught university-level courses in the United States and then in Singapore where he moved in 1984. Arriving in Singapore he also began working as an OD consultant and corporate leadership trainer, first for Singapore agencies and then as a partner with PA Consulting Group in charge of the Management Development Practice in SEA and as the SVP (Asia) for a PA subsidiary, Cubiks, which focused on developing online psychometric assessment tools and services.

In 2003, he founded LeAD Consulting Group, focusing on Leadership Assessment and Development and Executive Coaching.

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Sophia is a CCL-certified feedback coach and is also going through the journey of Co-Active Coaching Certification. She is certified in the Influence Style Indicator, WorkPlace Big Five, CCL Benchmarks® 360 Assessment Suite, and CCL's Youth Leadership Toolkit. She is also a certified consultant by PolarityPartnerships.

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