Aalborg Universitet

When middel managers are doing employee coaching

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Published in:
International Coaching Psychology Review

Publication date:
2013

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Link to publication from Aalborg University

Citation for published version (APA):
Spaten, O. M., & Flensborg, W. (2013). When middel managers are doing employee coaching. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, *8*(2), 18-39. http://www.sgcp.org.uk/sgcp/publications/international-coaching-psychology-review/when-middle-managers-are-doing-employee-coaching$.cfm

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INTERNATIONAL COACHING PSYCHOLOGY REVIEW – Volume 8, No. 2

International Coaching Psychology Review

Volume 8 No. 2 September 2013

Paper

When middle managers are doing employee coaching

Ole Michael Spaten & Winnie Flensborg

Objectives: *Until now, rather limited empirical research has been conducted as regards managers who coach their employees (Crabb, 2011). The aim of this research was to investigate the managers' challenging and successful experience when coaching their employees and how these coaching sessions were assessed by their employees.*

Design: *The overall study investigated 15 middle managers – from a major Danish nationwide company who were trained to coach by two coaching psychologists through theoretical presentations, individual coaching and peer coaching sessions with direct supervision (learning-by-doing: Spaten, 2011b) – when they were coaching their 75 employees through an online survey and semi-structured interviews.*

Methods: *Four middle managers and employees were interviewed after the intervention. Thematic analysis was chosen and elicited three main themes: (1) coaching skills; (2) professional and personal development; and (3) the coaching relationship and power relation.*

Results: *The study found that the manager as coach should be highly sensitive and empathetic in building the coaching relationship, should be aware of the power relation, and should draw clear boundaries between their role as leader and their role as coach. The middle managers' coaching skills were assessed very positively by employees.*

Keywords: *Executive; employee coaching; middle management; template analysis; semi-structured interviews – qualitative data; coaching; power relations, and productivity.*

AS THE CORPORATE WORLD becomes shrouded in the mists of partially unknown global changes, attempts are being made to sustain middle and top managers' peak performance. Towards this end, huge amounts of money are spent on a growing coaching industry: globally, the estimated number of coaches is approaching 50,000, and today they generate a turnover of nearly US $2 billion (ICF, 2012).

According to the ICF, both turnover and coach numbers will continue to show an increasing trend in years to come. This growth has been exponential in the past decade, according to previous figures: in 2003, *The Economist* estimated the corresponding turnover figure at US $1 billion, and in 2008 the ICF (International Coach Federation) estimated the number of people engaged in coaching to be around 30,000 (Spaten, 2011b).

Coaching is an extensive and all-embracing industry: around 94 per cent of US-based Global 1000 enterprises and more than 65 per cent of non-US-based Global 1000 enterprises (Bono et al., 2009) make use of coaching. Coaching may assume a wide variety of shapes when aiming to enhance both personal and professional leadership and management, but in general, coaching is most frequently used by private enterprises to support action plans for management (Spaten, 2011c). Excellent, or at least satisfactory, management and leadership are crucial when organisations are about to launch their strategies, missions and plans.

While it is clear that coaching is a large industry (and 'big business'), a very limited amount of research has been conducted in the field (Crabb, 2011; Spaten, 2011a), and though the research that does exist generally shows that executive coaching is beneficial.

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To take one example, Smither et al. (2003) showed how managers who worked with an executive coach were better able to formulate specific (rather than vague) goals than their peers, and that they improved more than other managers who did not receive any kind of coaching. Grant et al., (2004, 2009) demonstrated through surveys and quantitative investigations that coaching by managers has a positive effect on the mental health of the coachee: coaching significantly reduces participants' depression and anxiety levels (Duijts et al., 2008). Individual investigations have also demonstrated that coaching, including activities related to problem-solving, goal setting, feedback, evaluation, and so on, increases productivity by up to four times more than if only activities such as training and education were instigated (Olivero, Bane & Kopelman, 1997). Coaching considerably enhances the likelihood that what is learnt will be successfully implemented in daily activities.

In summary, the use of coaching in private enterprises is widespread, but only sporadic research is being conducted in the field. Already pointed out by Grant and Cavanagh (2004), a vanishingly small amount of methodologically sound, peer-reviewed, empirical coaching research exists. By contrast, a very large amount of literature has been written on the topic, including more than 400 books on executive coaching alone over the past decades (Bono et al., 2009). In Denmark, more than 40 books on coaching have been published since 2007. In line with international literature, the Danish publications comprise interesting case studies, investigations of 'best practice', theoretical reflections and deliberations concerning different types of coaching, as well as a number of individual perspectives on coaching (Spaten, 2013). Of these books, which have sold well, fewer than five include systematic, peer-reviewed research into coaching psychology. Consequently, an overall analysis demonstrates that we are in possession of limited empirical evidence showing whether coaching (by managers) works, how it works, and how coaching participants perceive and assess different interventions (Spaten, 2013; Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Peterson, 2002; Kilburg, 2001).

The present study was conducted with the intention of reducing this gap between, on the one hand, the extensive practice and abundant theoretical literature on coaching, and on the other hand, the very limited research-based knowledge on coaching, including the coaching of a coach's own employees. A large proportion of that little amount of research is being conducted in the area comprises studies of 'executive coaching' (Bono et al., 2009; Bond & Naughton, 2011), which focuses on the executive segment of employees in an organisation. Executive coaching has been extensively described, whereas internal coaching by managers has received very little attention, for example, stated by Gregory and Levy: 'despite its continued growth in organisations, minimal research has been conducted on employee coaching' (2010, p.111). Research in the quality and efficiency of coaching conducted within organisational frameworks is also required (Evers, Brouwers & Tomic, 2006).

The research presented here is, therefore, concerned with internal middle manager coaching and on the coaching skills of the manager. The research question of the overall study is two-fold: what successful and challenging experience do middle managers gain when coaching their employees, and how do the employees evaluate the middle managers' coaching skills? As a starting point for this study, the first part of the article aims more precisely to characterise the nature of coaching in organisations.

Coaching in organisations

Coaching in organisations may be divided into two main areas: 'executive' coaching, where top executives are coached, typically by an external coach, and 'employee' coaching, where employees are coached by their direct manager (Gregory & Levy,

2010). There are significant differences between these two types of coaching. One is that the 'coaching relationships' (Palmer & McDowall, 2010) are fundamentally different: in executive coaching, the executive will typically select their own coach, whereas in employee coaching the employee has no influence on who will coach them: their superior will conduct the coaching. One hypothesis of the study will be that the nature of the coaching relationship reflects this fundamental difference.

Table 1 states two of the general differences between executive and employee coaching, and the following two subsections further explore differences and similarities between these two types of coaching. It will be clarified, for instance, that the typical goals of both types of coaching are similar, for instance, to improve and develop performance at work.

Executive coaching

One of the essential differences between employee and executive coaching is that the latter is generally carried out by external consultants who have no formal authority over their clients. Executive coaching is defined as a short- or medium-term relationship between a (top) manager and a consultant, with the aim of improving and developing the work efficiency and competences of the manager (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). During the past few years, this type of coaching has also developed into a means to facilitate learning, and to move executives from high performance to excellent performance (ibid.).

From the research literature, we may identify three characteristics which typify executive coaching: (1) the use of 'one-on-one' consultations regarding work related topics; (2) coaching sessions based on 360 degree feedback regarding strengths and weaknesses; and (3) the goal of improving the efficiency of the (top) executive in his/her current position (Bono et al., 2009; Bowles et al., 2007; Feldman & Lankau, 2005).

According to Feldman and Lankau (2005), an executive coach does not assume the role of technical expert, is not employed for traditional organisational consultation, and will typically not deliver any recommendations for precise business interventions. Executive coaching focuses on improving the performance of the executive in his/her *current* job. Usually, the coaching relationship will last for a period of six to 18 months, and is formally entered into by contract (Yukl, 2002). No personal bond is required between the executive and the coach, and the relationship tends to be more structured in its nature compared to employee coaching. The similarity between these two types of coaching is that both aim to change short-term behaviour and enhance performance, rather than to change emotions in the long term (ibid.; Kauffman & Scouler, 2004).

Employee coaching

The coaching relationship in employee coaching is a working partnership between an employee and his/her direct manager which focuses on sustaining the task performance and meeting the development needs of the employee (Gregory & Levy, 2010). This

Table 1: Who coaches and selects the coach.

Executive coaching	Employee coaching
Top executives are coached by an external coach.	Employees are coached by their direct manager.
Coachee selects his/her own coach.	Coachee does not select his/her own coach.

relationship also draws upon experience from former co-operation and evaluations in the workplace, and is, therefore, not merely a coaching relationship. More precisely, employee coaching is defined as a development related activity in which 'an employee works one-on-one with his or her direct manager to improve current job performance and enhance his or her capabilities for future roles and/or challenges, the success of which is based on the relationship between the employee and manager, as well as the use of objective information, such as feedback, performance data, or assessments' (Gregory & Levy, 2010, p.111).

Employee coaching is, therefore, believed to enhance the usefulness of feedback, form the basis of goal-setting, and preferably assists employees in working their way towards these goals, hence improving their performance. At a personal level, individual differences between the manager and the employee will have implications for the coaching relationship and for the efficacy of a given coaching process. So not only the organisational context but also interpersonal relations are of importance to coaching. Waldroop and Butler (1996) emphasise this: no behaviour – not even coaching – 'takes place in a vacuum' (p.112). But importance is certainly also ascribed to the organisation's 'feedback environment' in determining the result of the coaching, including quality, coaching frequency and an informal feedback supply procedure (Smither et al., 2003). However, the manager's ability to instil confidence into the coaching relationship is one of the key factors in a successful coaching process (Gregory & Levy, 2011). The confidence of the employee in his/her manager partly mediates the effect of transforming management on the employee's perception of the coaching process.

The manager may contribute to the creation of a high-quality coaching relationship through listening to individual concerns and constructing a positive feedback environment based on confidence and empathy (ibid., p.80). Some of the above dimensions described and studied in employee coaching may be factors that would influence any coaching relationship to the same extent, but as the employee is not involved in the selection of his/her coach, and as the manager is usually not replaceable, it cannot be taken for granted that the coaching relationship will be adequate and flawless. Summing up, the above mentioned represents some of the most important characteristics about executive and employee coaching.

Table 2 summarises the significant differences and similarities between the two types of coaching.

Table 2: Goal, duration and relations in executive and employee coaching.

Executive coaching	Employee coaching
Short/medium-term relationship between manager and coach (six to 18 months).	Relationship includes experience from previous co-operation and may be continuous or last for an indeterminate period.
The aim is to improve and develop the work efficiency and competences of the executive.	The aim is to improve and develop the employee's performance in his/her present job.
The coach is replaceable.	The coach is not replaceable.
Coaching is conducted by consultants with no authority over the clients.	The coaching relationship is a working partnership between the employees and their direct managers.

Method of this study

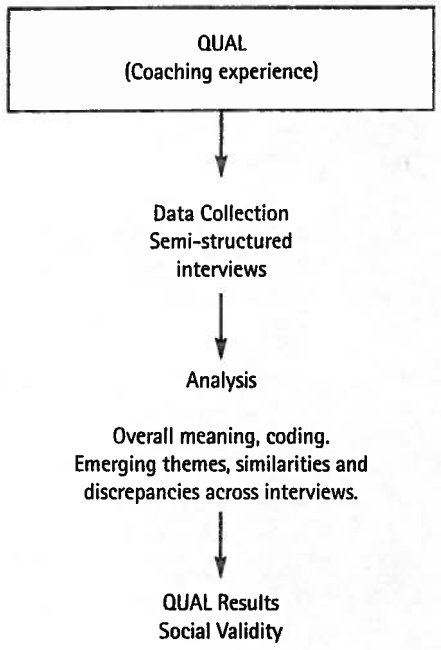
The overall research has – as mentioned – a two-fold aim, in that it will study both the middle managers' successful and challenging experience of coaching their employees and also how the coachees (the employees of the middle managers) assess the quality of the coaching sessions. When research interests include an investigation of both individual and general experiences, and evaluation and assessment, it may typically be relevant to apply mixed methods (Creswell & Piano Clark, 2007). A mixed method design (Hanson, 2005) in which quantitative and qualitative data are collected relates, but in this paper the qualitative analysis only will be present and the quantitative work will be saved for further breakdown and examination (Creswell, 2007).

Design

The overall research project uses a longitudinal, sequentially explaining design with quantitative data collection and qualitative interviews. The data collection takes place through clearly, distinctly separated phases of the research process. First, quantitative data are collected, followed by the qualitative data, in strict accordance with the requirements of a sequential mixed design (Creswell, 2009). Whereas the quantitative data provide a general overall impression of how the coaching sessions are assessed and evaluated, the qualitative data provides in-depth knowledge about the experience gained by middle managers and employees as coach and coachee, respectively. The overall aim is to create a maximally comprehensive picture of the phenomenon being studied, in which quantitative and qualitative data complement each other. This article covers the first qualitative presentation of the findings and the process is schematised in Figure 1.

Later it is planned to publish an article which will cover the quantitative findings from the study.

Figure 1: Study design detailing study phases.



Participants

The 15 middle managers participating in this study were in the final phase of a 30-month professional business programme, during which they all participated in bi-monthly training workshops learning coaching skills, among other business workshops. Previous research has documented the quality of coach training based on principles of 'action-reflection-learning' (Spaten & Hansen, 2009). Thus, the middle managers worked as experienced coaches, whereas 75 employees (coachees) were recruited from among the middle managers' own employees in departments from across Denmark. In some departments all of those who signed up to be coached (up until the maximum of five coachees) were chosen and if there were more than five, they were randomly picked to participate in the subsequent coaching sessions. After the coaching interventions, and among these 15 middle managers and 75 employees, four middle managers and employees were randomly selected for being interviewed and they signed up voluntarily.

Semi-structured interviews – and the qualitative data analysis

At the end of the coaching sessions, four middle managers and employees were interviewed, and these interviews will be the focus of the present paper. Various more general and specific types of question were included in the semi-structured interview guide. Examples of interview questions are as follows: How would you describe your experience of the coaching session? What did you particularly like about the coaching? What worked less well during the coaching session?

In the following phase, the interviews were transcribed and analysed using Template Analysis (TA), following the guidelines from King (1998, 2002) and Langdridge (2007). TA is rather parallel to Smith's (1996) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) building on phenomenological psychology but also includes concepts from discursive psychology (King, 1998). In TA a thick phenomenological description will represent the meaning ascribed by the individual to their specific experience, in this case of a coaching session. The analysis construct a coding template which contains different codes that represents themes identified in the data. This is a thorough process by cautious reading back and forth by several re-readings of the text. Typically the codes are structured hierarchically with first level codes representing broader themes in the data and then second level codes with *'narrowly focused themes within these themes'* (King et al., 2002, p.333). The analytic work involves non-stop modified lists of codes through continuous re-readings of the interview transcript's until a full data description *'...is feasible without reaching the state at which the description is so finely detailed that any attempt to draw together an interpretation becomes impossible'* (King et al., 2002, p.333). This work, through the stages of TA, results in the identification of a number of emerging first order themes: (1) Coaching skills; (2) Professional and personal development; and (3) Coaching relationship and power relations. Additional results from the qualitative analysis will be described in the results section below.

Procedure and ethical considerations

Fifteen middle managers each coached five of their employees five times during a period of three months, which amounted to a total of nearly 400 coaching sessions. After the coaching process had been completed, four employees and managers also participated in individual qualitative interviews with a duration of around 45 minutes.

As regards ethical questions concerning the research, colleagues from the Centre for Qualitative Studies at Aalborg University, and the affiliated research group, were consulted. Information regarding the research project was also submitted to the company and discussed with the company and all involved parties. The research project management explained that participation

was voluntary, and that any participants were free to withdraw their consent without notice. The non-participation option applied to coaching sessions as well as the subsequent interviews for both managers and employees. The participants were also informed about the framework and rules regarding confidentiality and anonymity in the final presentation of the study, and pseudonyms were used throughout. Furthermore, it was agreed that all interview sessions would be followed by a short debriefing session. All coaches took part in a preliminary presentation of significant findings from survey results in the end of 2011. In addition, presentations and a report of the research results are scheduled to be forwarded to all participants. No conflicts of interest are considered to exist as regards this work, for which the researchers were financially supported by their Department and external funds.

Analysis and discussion

The following analysis and discussion takes as its point of departure the themes drawn from the template analysis, as discussed above (coaching skills, professional and personal development, coaching relationship and power relations).

- Theme 1: Coaching skills, comprises three subthemes in particular: (a) planning, framing and time; (b) problem identification; and (c) empathy and contact.
- Theme 2: Professional and personal development, comprises two subthemes in particular: (a) personal development of the coachee; and (b) the coachee's experience of fruitful coaching.
- Theme 3: Coaching relationship and power relations, focuses on the conditions of fruitful coaching.

Qualitative data will be presented in the following sections through the analysis and discussion of the three main themes from the TA (King et al., 2002) and their sub-(ordinate) themes drawn from TA.

Theme 1: Coaching skills

In order to gain basic insights into how the coaching was conducted, the theme of coaching skills examines the skills highlighted by coachee and coach as being of crucial importance. In this way, the theme contributes to a discussion of a key question asked by this research project: What experience did the middle managers gain through coaching their employees? Here, the focus is on the importance of coaching skills, and the theme also illustrates how the coaching sessions were evaluated by the coachees. Three specific subthemes are explored, as mentioned above: (A) planning, framing and (precious) time; (B) (the promotion of good) problem identification; and (C) (the ability of the coach to create) empathy and contact.

First, however, a brief review of coaching literature will be undertaken to illustrate which coaching skills (Öestrich, 2008; Auerbach, 2006; Grant & Cavanagh, 2004) are considered to be essential. The following elements (A–F) describe what the coach should achieve in creating a successful coaching session.

A. Create a clear framework for the coachee and the coaching session.
B. Identify the problem clearly and explicitly.
C. Create an empathetic relation with the coachee.
D. Conduct a dialogue regarding actions and increase the coachee's self-knowledge, for instance by using the SPACE model (Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008).
E. Find possible solutions and set achievable goals with the coachee, for instance, by using PRAKSIS (Spaten, Kyndesen & Palmer, 2012).
F. Ensure that the coachee leaves the session with a good idea or a plan for future action (Grant & Zackon, 2004; Palmer & Whybrow, 2009).

In the present study, A, B and C will be studied in particular, whereas D, E, and F will only be considered to a lesser degree. The analysis highlights specific focal points in relation to employee coaching.

(A) Subtheme: Planning, framing and precious time for coaching

The ability to create a clear 'framework' is described as the fundamental competence underpinning successful coaching sessions (Palmer, 2010). Framing is also of essential importance in connection with the third theme of the study (*The coaching relationship and power relations*, as discussed below). An unclear framework may, for instance, result in problematic role identification and an imbalance in the coaching relationship. In essence, framing is the act of providing the coachee with an introduction that describes as clearly as possible the course of the coaching session, so that the coachee does not spend undue energy reflecting on this issue (Öestrich, 2008).

Framing also includes the planning of the actual coaching process, an aspect which several participants returned to during the interviews; therefore, this aspect has received considerably more attention in employee coaching than in typical coaching sessions. Planning is decisive for the success of the coaching process (Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008; Pill, 2012), and during the follow-up interviews the coaches pointed out the challenge of planning the coaching process. The challenge was to find time for the coaching of employees in a busy and stressful work schedule.

Precious time must be considered important as regards resources made available for coaching in the given context. In addition to the general wish to extend coaching sessions, a wish is expressed to have larger time gaps between the coaching sessions in order to implement the new insight developed by the coachee. The interviewee states:

> *The entire coaching course should be longer with larger time gaps between the individual coaching sessions (...) and then she said she would like to continue with coaching, and so would I, and should it be two to three times a year for instance, or according to need?*

The interview accentuates that coach and coachee wish to continue with coaching sessions two to three times a year. The time perspective varied for individual coachees, however.

> *Yes. Then it would have been rewarding, as I think we would have gained something if we had had a session every month; that would have been more appropriate I think.* (2:55)

The opinions of coach and coachee vary as regards the time gap between sessions that would yield maximum benefit, but among the interviewee there seems to be a general agreement that the coaching sessions must be spread out more in order to provide additional time for reflection.

> *And so, I actually think that I have started quite early but it has still meant that some work tasks, for whatever reason, sickness and attending courses, have coincided, and that the entire co-ordination process, I actually think that I had time to get some of the other final coaching sessions finished because I knew that some of them would have to be pushed forward, that would be inevitable, so with a couple of them I am running a bit late after all, and I have simply had some appointments where we agreed that we had to delay the coaching if there was some work that needed to be done.* (2:33)

Planning has posed some coaching challenges: for instance, the above coach was well aware of the co-ordination process, which may sometimes become complicated when a coaching process has to be adapted to the life of an organisation.

(B) Subtheme: Good problem identification

Both coachee and coach point to effective identification of problems as an essential part of coaching skills. This element relates closely to the theme of *Precious time*: time plays a key role in a busy and challenging work life, and the efficient use of time therefore becomes more important than if coaching is conducted in a different context. The manager's coaching of his or her employee takes place during working hours, and time for coaching is deducted from the time which might be spent on work tasks in the organisation. Considering these conditions, it becomes crucial that the coaching sessions are efficient and, therefore, good

problem identification becomes a decisive point of departure. If the problem identification is insufficient, the coaching will not provide the optimal outcome for coach and coachee.

These results from coaching research are also identified as essential for successful coaching sessions: Szymanska (2008) emphasises, for instance, that the coach should identify the correct problem and narrow it down to one concrete element which can be worked on during the course of the coaching session. Once the problem has been identified, the coach may find it advantageous to use the SPACE model in order to shed light on all aspects of the problem; this may also function as an educative process for the coachee (Szymanska, 2008; Cavanagh 2005). Coaching researchers Palmer (2007), Palmer and Szymanska (2007) and Spaten, Kyndesen and Palmer (2012) emphasise that the first part of a successful coaching session consists of careful problem identification. The coach might ask, for instance: What is the social context of your problem? Which thoughts (or feelings, actions or possibly physical reactions) do you notice in relation to the problem?

The focus of the coach on achieving good problem identification is indeed expressed several times during our interviews. Below the coach describes how much energy is in fact spent on finding the best issues/problems to talk about, with a view to best motivating the coachee.

> *So all the time I have had to throw out some bait to inspire them, like... I think (...) it was necessary to offer some examples or some directions to what exactly was it we were to talk about?* (1:97)

In the above, a middle manager describe how it is essential to 'throw out some bait' to the coachee in order to achieve the best problem identification. Here, this may indicate that the coach is focusing on his or her guiding role in finding the issue or problem that is most inspiring for the coachee and which will, therefore, motivate the coachee most. Motivation is indeed described in more detail in an interview in which a coach states:

> *And when I look back on this and will have to use my experience for future coaching, we must get much better at – or I must get much better at perhaps 'massaging' into the conversation, so that we know exactly what we are going to talk about, so that they don't just turn up and say, like, I don't really know what it is that we are going to talk about, but I have thought about this topic. This is what has been the greatest challenge, because when we are actually sitting there all is fine, but then the coachee hasn't thought of something, and then motivation is not really very high (no), on their part.*

So if the coach is to optimise the outcome for the coachee, and the coachee is to be motivated for coaching, the coach should support the coachee in finding a suitable problem to work with. Finding such a problem is the biggest challenge for the coach. Coaching research also demonstrates that thorough problem identification will result in the problem being handled in a suitable way, which will elicit the greatest motivation on the part of the coachee and consequently the highest degree of goal achievement (see, for instance, Spaten, Løkken & Imer, 2011; Grant & Zackon, 2004; Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008).

Another interesting wording used in the above quotation is 'massaging into the conversation', by which the speaker means making the topic of conversation clear, thus enhancing explicit problem identification. This aspect is also emphasised by Palmer (2007), following Wasik (1984), as being essential for successful coaching.

As is evident, middle managers participating in the present research are focusing extensively on adequate problem identification, which is an aspect described as essential by other scholars in this research field (e.g. Grant & Grene, 2001). In order for problem identification to be successful, it is important to establish excellent rapport between coach and coachee, so that a suitable point of departure can be found for the coaching process. In order to ensure that coach and coachee agree, it is necessary for the parties to make real and genuine contact (Rogers, 1995). This brings us to the third subtheme, *Empathy and contact.*

(C) Subtheme: Creating empathy and contact

The coach's abilities in creating empathy and contact abilities have turned out to be a key aspect, emphasised by both coachees and coaches as decisive in our interview data. Coaching research stresses the importance of the coach's empathy and listening skills. For instance, listening includes the ability to return to elements in the story told by the coachee, rather than waiting for a break in the speech flow to occur, making it possible to ask the next question (Stober, 2006, p.30). Empathy and contact also consist in being able to reflect body language and use appropriate listening noises (Rogers, 1995). In addition, it is important to maintain eye contact and give the coachee time to answer complicated questions. These aspects are decisive in building a trustful relationship with the coachee, making it possible to ask mildly confrontational questions without the coachee feeling attacked (ibid.; Palmer & McDowall, 2010). This aspect is further accentuated in employee coaching due to the apparently asymmetrical relationship and its power aspects, which will be illustrated and expanded later on during the presentation of theme three: *The Coaching relationship and power relation.*

The importance of central coaching skills, such as, for instance, empathetic active listening and providing space for the coachee, are to be illustrated by the following testimony:

> *Yes, and perhaps being able to hold on to some of the things, the small signals I might send and provide, just grabbing hold of them and saying 'what was it that you just said?' and seeing them as part of a whole, and perhaps some things I haven't thought about, that things were connected in that way. To stir up some thoughts in my mind, right, and that again is a question of being serious about it, isn't it?* (4.333)

The personal contact which the employee has with his or her manager during the coaching session is decisive in determining the extent to which the coaching will yield an outcome. It is evident from the above interview excerpt that the coach is experiencing a sense of security, and that a development is in progress through *thoughts being stirred up* in the mind of the coachee when the coach is listening actively and pointing out possible connections between thoughts and stories. Thus framing, structure, contact, empathy and contract are decisive in employee coaching, and it is important to keep these factors in mind. In the discussion of the following theme, these will be further elucidated, drawing upon the template analysis.

Theme 2: Professional and personal development

This theme illustrates the dialectics between personal and professional development, which existing research characterises as basic, intertwined and interconnected. Among other aspects, this theme includes the manager's recognition that when employees are developing personally, they are apparently also developing professionally. Furthermore, the relation between coach and coachee is in focus, and the coach describes it as advantageous to know the coachee's personality in advance. The coach also gains personal and professional benefit from the coaching process.

In a study from Harvard University including 140 coaches, 76 per cent stated that they had worked on personal issues with their coachees, even though only three per cent had been hired to work with personal as opposed to professional issues (for further details, see Coutu & Kauffman, 2009). In spite of a tripartite agreement between coach, coachee and direct manager that coaching should focus on work-related issues, it seems that other issues (including those of a personal character) may come into focus during coaching sessions. The relevance of this aspect of coaching, particu-

larly in employee coaching, is emphasised by Collins and Palmer (2011).

This raises an interesting question: is it problematic if personal issues are discussed in manager-employee coaching? This question cannot be answered unequivocally, but one aspect of this theme is addressed in the following subtheme, which examines how personal development relates to and enhances professional development.

Subtheme: Does the coachee's personal development enhance his or her professional development?

The analysis of this subtheme demonstrated that coaches experienced the necessity of striking a balance between personal and professional coaching topics, even though they turn out to be reciprocally connected. In the following, a coach describes how personal coaching topics may also have business-related significance:

> *But I also think that discussing personal themes is rewarding in a business-related sense, this is what I believe, it cannot be measured anywhere, but I just believe that I get happier and more motivated employees from doing so.* (1:188)

Furthermore, the coach describes his or her idea that an employee may be more motivated by receiving coaching which is also related to personal issues. Research has emphasised the importance of this aspect (Grant, Curtayne & Burton, 2009).

Subsequently, a coach describes how he handles this act of balancing, considering that coaching should not only be personal but also embedded in business-related issues:

> *Maybe it goes like this, oh, but it's nice that you will listen to me, and it's always very nice to work in a place which makes space for letting me talk about things that take up energy in my private life, and you are able to help me so that I can change it. Then I say you are welcome to do so, because it may also help you to be more focused on your tasks when you are at work.* (2.895)

Here the coach presents his or her view to the coachee that the coaching of personal issues may bring about better professional results. This illustrates that the personal outcome is also an important result of the coaching sessions: the following testimonies reveal the extent of the impact of coaching sessions on the coachees' self-knowledge and personal development. A number of the participating coachees emphasise how the personal development they have achieved through the coaching process is influencing their work satisfaction and efficiency. An instance of personal development positively influencing professional life is described in this interview:

> *...this question, does this add something to my personal bottom line? Well, what I discovered over the five coaching sessions is that in the end it did. Both personally and in relation to my work I think that I gained a great deal. It made me change my views on some issues, I suppose it is this thing about seeing the difference between the coaching and one's own view of the world; because I was both coached and did some things that were different from what I normally do, and also in relation to changing the way I see things (...) perhaps you are having some kind of guideline inside yourself and are actually following this, because that's actually what you were brought up to do perhaps 10 or 20 years ago, and then all of a sudden to have this changed. That was what was so fascinating, I think – and it is.* (3:59–3:76)

The above coachee is left with a changed worldview after the coaching sessions and has, through the coaching process, begun to focus on some old habits – and the limitations they were imposing on life here and now. During the interviews, the coachee experiences development and finally acknowledges that the process has resulted in general personal development and an increase in self-knowledge.

> *And it may be hard when things/there is a telephone call and there are meetings, right, and well in that discussion we agreed that I would try to take one day a month to work from home and get some things sorted out, and then say that now I am simply disconnecting the phone and taking my computer home to get some of these things done, in order to clear things up and keep the things down that may be bothering me.* (4:215)

We might say that, in general, the coaching sessions have increased the self-knowledge and the personal development of the individual coachee, which is also apparent at the workplace and has an impact on work efficiency. Through coaching, solutions are found to problems which also affect work life, so even though personal topics are discussed and included in coaching sessions during work hours, doing so positively affects the overall situation. This leads us on to the next subtheme.

Subtheme: The coach experiences personal and management-related benefits

This theme illustrates that middle managers taking on the task of coaching are also experiencing personal gains from acting as coach – the benefits are becoming reciprocal, as shown in the following quote.

> *Well, as a manager it is my impression that I, well I think, well I become damned egotistical, well it gives some satisfaction that I feel that when she comes back she has had a good coaching session (yes), and then I actually become, I suppose I'm bloody happy that we did actually take this step and pat my own shoulder a bit.* (1:181)

In this example, the reciprocal gains are described in a very clear and explicit manner, as the coach mentions how the coaching sessions provides him or her with personal satisfaction. In addition, as in the previous subtheme, benefits in the workplace accrue from the coachee's professional development which arises his or her own personal development. This will affect the coach as a manager, as this contributes to the strength and competence of the team under the coach.

But to be able, as a middle manager, to coach your employees, in both the professional and personal dimensions, requires a well-developed relation between manager and employee. Below, an employee describes the importance of this relation in connection with the coaching sessions, which are termed 'meetings':

> *I felt we were equals during each meeting, and that was important, I think (...) It is in fact important, talking of power, it is important that the coach is able to step down or step up to the right level, which the coach must, as a matter of fact/or where the person she meets is, or the person he meets; because if I had been sitting with a feeling that some manager from some place who is just coming out to tell me that you must remember that I'm the boss here, and then we can move on to the coaching, then I wouldn't have told the coach anything at all.*

The association between personal and professional development is unfolding in a fruitful coach-coachee relation. Here the experience of equality is described as completely essential for the coachee in relation to the coach. Equality is achieved by the coach by showing empathy and by being 'at equal levels with' the employee, so that a sense of trust emerges in the situation. The importance of an equal relation is described by O'Broin and Palmer (2010, p.38): *'The relation must be based on mutual respect and empathy'*. According to the employees we have interviewed, mutual respect is characterised by being 'at equal levels with'. In the above quotation, this forms an essential basis for optimal contact in the coaching relation. If mutual respect and empathy are essentially present, the coachee is able to make constructive use of the coaching session. The coachee can go into the coaching session without worrying about the possible intentions, or whether confidentiality is safeguarded.

In the event that mutual respect and empathy are not present, or if confidentiality is not assured, the employee may easily be reluctant to participate. Research has pointed out in a number of contexts that the interpersonal relationship between coach and coachee is of paramount importance (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2006; O'Broin & Palmer, 2010; Palmer & McDowall, 2010). This relationship should be characterised by trust, equality and confidence, with the former property argued to be fundamental: *'A 'trusting relationship' is paramount for effective coaching'* (Ting & Riddle, 2006, p.111).

The quantitative findings show a significantly positive evaluation of the coaching process, suggesting that the required trusting relationships were established. But in the following testimony, a coachee also points to the 'delicate balance' that the coach is required to strike in order to facilitate equality and a trusting relationship:

> *This is a delicate balance – it is one thing that he is the manager next door, and quite another matter that when he enters my office, he is the coach – so to speak. He is still the person who should be in control. He is the one to be in control of this coaching session – on the basis of some questions and some models he has learnt – and because of some training he has completed. Then he must still be the person in control – and on the other hand, he must let go of his role as manager.*

As seen here, the delicate balance involves the coach being in control of the interview and the coaching session, but at the same time letting go of his or her role as manager and take on the distinct role of a coach (Orth et al., 1987). The appropriate form of control for the coach exists in an equal relationship in which it is mainly the coachee who sets the agenda for the coaching session.

The controlling role of the coach includes the power held by the coach, which is immanent here. This brings us to the third theme emerging from the template analysis: *the coaching relationship and the power relation.* The interplay between the need for equality in the relationship and the controlling power held by the coach is of paramount importance in the relationship between coach and coachee.

Theme 3: The coaching relationship and the power relation

In the qualitative analyses this essential theme is illustrated on the basis of the following two questions.

1. Is the coach able to create an equal relationship and build trust with the coachee even though coach is still clearly in control during the coaching session?
2. Is the power held by the coach, as the daily manager and because of his or her role as coach, as problematic an aspect as might be presumed?

The interpersonal relationship between coach and coachee, with a focus on the power held by the coach, was a key finding from the template analysis. In the following discussion, the above two questions will be expanded upon, drawing on existing literature in the field.

It is widely recognised that power is immanent in and exerts an influence on the relationship between coach and coachee (see, for instance, Dam Hede, 2010; Elliot, 2011). It is important to consider this power dimension, as the quality of the relationship between coachee and coach is paramount for the positive result of the coaching session (O'Broin & Palmer, 2007). In fact, the power and the quality of the relationship are inseparable in the coaching relationship, and, therefore, it becomes a key issue that the coach is aware of the power relation between coach and coachee – even more so when the coach is also the boss.

Research in the application of evidence-based management theories to coaching managerial development (Elliot, 2011) argues that the power relationship should be considered as important as authority and trust in the coaching relationship. This tripartition is also referred to in a previous interview excerpt in which the coachee says:

> *I felt we were equals during each meeting, and that was important, I think (...) It is in fact important, talking of power, it is important that the coach is able to step down or step up to the right level which the coach must, as a matter of fact/or where the person she meets is, or the person he meets.*

The influence of power on the coaching relationship has been investigated by Welman and Bachkirova (2010) in their analysis of the relationship between coach and coachee, resulting in the following definition of power as a concept in the coaching relation. They define power on the basis of two fundamental types (ibid., p.141):

> *'One is power over somebody, the ability to dominate him or her, to impose one's will on them. Or the other is power to do something, to be able, to be potent.'*

When seen in relation to findings from the qualitative analysis, this definition describes the double relationship which is at the centre of the coaching relationship. Balancing becomes essential due to the coach's position as manager. It becomes critical to be able at once to abandon the power of the manager, and to adopt the power of the coach in the coaching relation. This delicate balancing act is described by Fromm (1960) on the basis of a distinction between power and dominance. He introduces the hypothesis that *'A person with a lack of potency is more likely to strive for domination'* (ibid., p.140).

Here, Fromm (1960) posits that individual potency will determine whether the fundamental power relations will turn into domination. From this we may extrapolate that the personal abilities of the coach are decisive and essential for the maintenance of power balance. If these are not sufficiently developed, power is misused in the relation between coach and coachee in a way that manifests itself as domination. If they are sufficiently developed, the power held by the coach may be used in a positive way for the *empowerment* of the coachee, as pointed out by Welman and Bachkirova (2010, p.141).

Subtheme: The conditions of fruitful employee coaching

The power relations between coach and coachee have been studied by several researchers, taking as their point of departure what may be termed 'the symmetry problem'. The symmetry problem is considered by, for instance, Dam Hede (2010) to be a universal condition for a fruitful conversation. It includes three dimensions: (1) The institutional structure; (2) The conversation-dynamic character; and (3) The self-technological dimension (see Dam Hede, 2010, p.33, for further information). The first of these is the most relevant for the present study.

In the institutional dimension, Dam Hede (2010) describes the asymmetrical difference in the subject-object relation, which is characterised by power, position and the distribution of roles (Dam Hede, 2010). For the present study, this is the very institutional dimension (between manager and employee) within which coaching takes place, a relation which is considered of paramount importance by the respondents, and which is emphasised and expanded on in this theme of the template analysis.

The asymmetry is dependent on the extent to which the coach/authority functions as a link between possible resources useful for the coachee (e.g. further education or knowledge), and power over their employment in respect of hiring and firing (Dam Hede, 2010). In the following testimony from a coachee it is pointed out how asymmetry in resources, here in the shape of knowledge, also plays a role:

> *What I mean is that some of the things I have said during the coaching sessions, they will remain there – and it is not something that will be misused against me in some situation – or to make things better for me.*

We get the impression that the employee has considered the possible misuse of the knowledge which the coach obtains from the coaching process. However, at the same time it certainly seems that trust has been established, and that the coachee is not expecting such knowledge to be misused.

The asymmetry in the relation is further complicated by the fact that the employee may provide the coach with an insight into how the employee's development is progressing. We find a number of examples which express this asymmetry. Below, the manager describes knowledge derived from an employee through coaching sessions:

> *I'm almost 100 per cent certain that I wouldn't have known this if it wasn't for the coaching. Then I might have heard it in six months, and then you might say that it wasn't important.*

This shows that asymmetry is present in the coaching relation, mainly in the form of the exchange of knowledge which would not

otherwise have been available to the coachee or to the coach. This aspect has been documented in previous studies of employee coaching, which point out that employee coaching may promote job satisfaction if the asymmetry is not too strong or futile (see, for instance, Bowles et al., 2007; Grant, Curtayne & Burton, 2009; Grant & Zackon, 2004).

Welman and Bachkirova (2010, p.145) also point to three types of factor which are essential to focus on when considering power in the coaching relation: *'Factors influencing the predisposition to exercise power in the coach; Contextual issues, including the power of the coachee; Dealing with power in the immediacy of the coaching interaction'.*

It is perhaps mainly contextual aspects that are seen as particularly important in the present study, as typified by the following quote:

> *It is a delicate balance – it is one thing that he is the manager next door, and quite another matter that when he enters my office, he is the coach – so to speak. He is still the person who should be in control.*

When the coach walks through the door, the manager is entering, and once the door has been closed, the manager has changed roles and is now the coach. This makes the context in which coaching takes place a key aspect, since a change in roles is vital for a profitable result for both parties. Furthermore, the significance of the distribution of roles is seen in the above testimony, which is a role distribution in the subject-object relation which Dam Hede (2010) describes to be of paramount importance in the institutional dimension of the asymmetrical relation.

It therefore seems of essential importance that the coach emphasises the fundamental role of confidence in the coaching session (Palmer & McDowall, 2010). Once confidence has been established between coach and employee (coachee), this may result in the coach receiving some information, due to his or her role as coach, and consequently also as manager. This aspect is developed in the following subtheme.

Subtheme: Dilemmas of the coach: balancing personal and professional issues in confidential coaching sessions

A number of times, the manager has had the experience of having to navigate between the roles of manager and coach, when knowledge and consequently power is acquired from the coaching sessions with employees. This further complicates the asymmetry in the relation. It may, therefore, be seen as a strength that the coach includes these reflections when contemplating his or her coaching practice.

> *Yes, it works both ways because I also receive a lot of good input, but at the same time I also get my hands tied a bit – in some areas at least.* (1:925)

Balancing between personal and professional issues may be awkward and challenging for the coach. The above coach may feel paralysed in some areas, whereas the manager below sees it as his or her duty, as manager, to also offer space for listening to the personal issues of the coachee.

> *It does, yes, but it is also important for me as manager to offer space for listening to personal issues. That I don't just say that I'm afraid you'll have to speak to someone else about this, this is not the place to discuss such things.*

This insight regarding personal and professional issues emphasises the importance for the coach of setting clear boundaries, so that the coaching does not become exclusively personal, but also includes a work-related focus. So, it is important that there is space for personal topics during coaching sessions, but equally important for the coachee that the manager sets boundaries, to ensure that the coaching topics do not become *too* personal. The ability to set these boundaries becomes an aspect of the power of the coach, which is of especial relevance in the case of employee coaching.

From the present analysis it appears that the context is of paramount importance in the asymmetrical relation. The ability of the coach to navigate the power dynamics and make role distribution manifest is a key focus point in employee coaching if a fruitful result is to emerge through the coaching sessions.

Summary: Middle manager coaching of employees and internal vs. external coaching

According to Heslin, Vandewalle and Latham (2006), the coaching of employees is a key task for middle managers in several major American enterprises, and this phenomenon is widespread and increasing in Danish enterprises (Coaching Barometret, 2009). This makes it highly relevant to conduct studies of this practice. In this article we are well underway in analysing and discussing how employees evaluate the coaching competences of middle managers, and which challenges and opportunities we are able to identify in the coaching of employees by managers.

One of the issues which is considered most pertinent is the power balance in the coaching relationship, as described in theme 3. According to Welman and Bachkirova (2010), the power balance is a key focus point in all types of coaching, but when the coach is also the manager of the coachee, this seems even more critical. Welman & Bachkirova (ibid.) point out, for instance, how the coach may be tempted to exert power (both consciously and unconsciously) in coaching. It may be, for instance, that the coach is uncertain of his or her own skills, or that the coach wishes to achieve a certain result through the coaching: for instance, improvements in efficiency or the solution of internal conflicts. This risk seems to be heightened when the coach is also a manager and wishes to achieve a certain goal. According to Welman and Bachkirova (2010), this is problematic as decisions made on the basis of a coaching session in which the coach has more or less consciously exerted this power do not lead to actions or changes outside of the coaching context, and, therefore, the coaching has no effect. On the basis of this study, we would further emphasise the paramount importance of actively including the power issue in coaching, especially when this balance has an effect on decisions or discussions. The dilemma of being manager and coach at the same time has been illustrated in the present study, where the theme mainly has emerged from the qualitative analysis.

Another aspect of the experience of middle managers coaching their employees (internal coaching by managers) concerns in more general terms the relationship between coach/manager and coachee/employee. Several researchers (Gregory & Levy, 2010, 2011; O'Broin & Palmer, 2010) find, as mentioned, that the coaching relation is of vital importance for the results of the coaching process, cohering with the observations of Palmer & McDowall (2010, p.3): *'Stephen Taylor has presented research that showed that most people resign from their job because they are "sick of their immediate boss", pointing to the fact that good relationships are key to retention and engagement in the workplace, Taylor saying that 'the difficult bit [at work] is the area of interpersonal relationships"'.* The relationship between manager and employee is of vital importance for the involvement of employees in their workplace, and can be improved through coaching (ibid.). When discussing the relationship between coach and coachee, it is also essential to establish a good (work) alliance, which includes clarification of the goals of the coaching process, the tasks of each of the two parties, and the establishment of mutual respect and empathy (O'Broin & Palmer, 2010). The establishment of a coaching relationship – including a fruitful alliance well established at the beginning of the coaching process – is connected with the previously mentioned power issues, which may possibly be reduced or discussed proactively. In spite of the widely acknowledged significance of these issues, the amount of research on the influence of the coaching relationship on the efficiency of the coaching process is very limited (Gregory & Levy, 2010). The present study contributes to this knowledge.

Finally, let us consider what impact it has on the coaching that a (middle) manager

acts as coach – or in broader terms: Who can coach at a sufficient quality level? Bono has conducted extensive studies of 428 coaches with various educational backgrounds and experience (Bono et al., 2009). Her studies show that, for instance, the difference between a coach education and a psychology education is extremely small, when evaluating coaching skills. Therefore, it cannot be rejected that managers who are formally qualified and educated as coaches may function equally well comparing with psychologists doing coaching. All coaches in the present study have – as mentioned – attended extensive coaching courses over a number of years and are, therefore, presumed to be well qualified for the task. Bono et al. (2009) point out that future research within this area should explore in depth the active ingredients in coaching: for instance, what does the coach do in concrete terms in order to enhance motivation in their employees, which tools and questions are used, and what constitutes high quality coaching? It has been observed (Kvale, 1994) that qualitative interviews in particular can be used to clarify this. Qualitative interviews provide the coach with the opportunity to articulate the course of the coaching process in more concrete terms (ibid.). In their qualitative studies of the effect of coaching on stress reduction, Gyllensten et al. (2005) discuss the different positive and negative aspects of the individual participant's subjective perspective. A rather similar method of analyses, an IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Smith & Osborn, 2003) was employed in the qualitative studies mentioned above. The results demonstrate that coaching may contribute to a reduction in stress, but paradoxically may also increase stress if it is not considered relevant and useful but is instead only seen as a 'time waster' (Hackett, Palmer & Farrants, 2007). The conclusion of the study was, however, that through coaching the participants obtained tools that they considered to be useful for them in future stressful situations. In general, participants found that coaching helped them combat stress and not, for instance, escape from conflict-ridden situations but instead endure these without imposing another stress factor on themselves (Gyllensten et al., 2005, Palmer & Cooper, 2007).

In the present study of coaching by middle managers, we have identified the importance of clearly delineating the change in roles from manager to coach, and the need to emphasise confidentiality in the coaching relationship. It remains an open question whether it is a fruitful solution at all for an organisation to use internal coaching. It may be claimed that the complex dilemmas of power and relationships are reduced or avoided if an external coach conducts employee coaching instead (Søholm, 2006). On the other hand, there might be a risk that coaching by an external coach remains in a closed circuit between the external coach and the manager, and is not embedded in the daily practice and professional lives of the coachees. Perhaps it will be more fruitful to be aware of, and particular about, the topics which are considered suitable for coaching, whether it is a (middle) manager or an external coach who conducts the coaching. Dam Hede (2010) touches upon this aspect in a study which showed 90 per cent of coachees preferring an external coach; there is, however, no unequivocal support for this finding in the coaching community. Stelter (2002, p.143), however, proposes that *'Coaching should mainly take place internally in an organisation, either with the manager acting as coach or with appointed employees as coaches'.* The argument in favour of Stelter's choice is that the organisational effect will be larger, as the coaching process is embedded in the organisation itself and linked directly to the management and daily work life conditions. On the other hand, it may be argued that an external coach provides the best opportunities for open and honest reflection, and employees will not have to consider too much any power problems related to a given issue.

The results of the present study mainly support the stance that coaching by internal (middle) managers of their employees is feasible and fruitful. The results present such coaching processes as contributing successfully to professional development for both coach and coachee. However, at the same time it is important to acknowledge that the resulting double relation also encompasses a number of delicate issues.

> *But I also think that coaching contributes to the professional development. It can't really be measured anywhere, but I'm convinced that I am getting a happier and more motivated employee as a result of it.*

More focus should be placed on the relation-creating skills of the coach, so that the 'symmetry problem' and power aspects of the coaching relation do not become unnecessarily troublesome. On the basis of the findings of the present study, the coach's relational competences are important, and attention must be paid to the influence of power on the experience of equality in the relation. We can, therefore, recommend that a number of issues should be emphasised in the training of coaches. Designing a safe and trusting framework for the coachee, for instance, and developing the coach's skills in being empathic are essential. To this we can add the coaching competences that were positively evaluated in the study such as problem identification.

Finally, it seems that personal issues should probably not always be banned from the coaching room, since these may contribute to enhancing employee motivation. The analysis actually points out that the coaching of personal topics may contribute to boosting concentration on the workplace job. However, it is important to maintain a primary focus on professional issues in employee coaching, and it is essential to keep the power aspect – as described above – at the forefront of the middle managers' attention.

Conclusion

The two-fold aim of this research was to investigate, on the one hand, the experience gained and challenges met by managers when coaching their employees, and on the other hand, how these coaching sessions were assessed by coachees (the middle managers' employees). The corresponding conclusions of this study can be summarised as follows.

The challenging areas include administrative issues such as the planning and scheduling of coaching appointments, and a natural willingness to adapt that is inherent to the role of coach. To this we can add the issues that render it problematic to coach exclusively on work-related issues. Topics of a more personal character often do not have a direct impact on the employee's professional work, but indirectly the employee can 'grow' at the professional level by developing at the personal level. The middle manager as coach must be adept in balancing between personal and professional issues, and must be able to navigate both streams without capsizing. He or she must ensure that the coachee experiences equality in order for the coaching session to have value. Paradoxically, in this situation, the coach is both coach and manager, and may consequently find it difficult to establish equality in the coaching room, even though this issue was seemingly negotiated successfully in the coaching examined by this research project.

During the course of the study, the middle managers as coaches acquired a great deal of successful experience at both personal and professional levels. In the coaching room, positive experiences occurred when the coachee made good progress towards the goal, or indicated that the sessions were helpful. Such experiences are rewarding for the coach and contribute to their development as a coach, both personally and professionally. It must be emphasised that all employee responses were anonymous to the manager, and the employees knew this; this was intended to promote less biased responses in the discus-

sion regarding the power relation. Thus, the study concludes that the employees participating in the coaching session generally find the process extremely successful; they submit extremely positive assessments. The employees indicate that contact with the coach was empathic, and that, in general, thorough problem analysis took place in coaching sessions (Spaten et al., 2011). Empathy, contact and thorough problem-analysis are essential aspects of facilitating a fruitful experience with positive relations when participating in a coaching or counselling process, as highlighted by a large number of scholars (Rogers, 1995; Palmer & McDowall, 2010; Stelter, 2008).

Although these important results are partly newly found and partly underscore recent studies, major challenges still remain as regards the contribution of research (Rogers, 1995; Palmer & McDowall 2010; Stelter, 2008) in this field concerning both executive coaching and the coaching of employees by internal middle managers. Future research should include both qualitative, more profound and extensive studies, and preferably more participants, and randomised as well as control studies, as far too little light has so far been shed on both the effect and quality of managers' coaching.

Acknowledgements

As is well known, few major research projects can be completed without being embedded in research environments, and I would, therefore, like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues, the psychologists affiliated with the Coaching Psychology Research Unit at Aalborg University. In particular, I thank psychologist Winnie Flensborg, who has been my working and sparring partner through all phases of the project, and Professor Stephen Palmer, who has also followed my research project and provided advice. I could not have accomplished this study without discussions and the exchange of notes and ideas for the qualitative material and the analysis of this with members of the Unit and notably psychologists Anna Imer and Sofie Friis. In the concluding phase with the editing of the article, student assistant Stephanie Backström and Henriette Ernst has stood by. I look forward to co-operation with these colleagues in on-going and future research projects.

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