# The Efficacy of Executive Coaching in Times of Organisational Change

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# The Efficacy of Executive Coaching in Times of Organisational Change

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ABSTRACT   *Executive coaching is often used in times of organisational change to help executives develop the psychological and behavioural skills needed to focus on reaching their work-related goals whilst simultaneously dealing with the turbulence associated with organisational change. Despite its widespread use, little research has explored the impact of executive coaching during periods of organisational change. This within-subject study used both quantitative and qualitative measures to explore the impact of executive coaching during a period of organisational change on 31 executives and managers from a global engineering consulting organisation. Participation in the coaching was associated with increased goal attainment, enhanced solution-focused thinking, a greater ability to deal with change, increased leadership self-efficacy and resilience, and decrease in depression. The positive impact of coaching generalised to non-work areas such as family life. Recommendations are made for the measurement and design of executive coaching programmes.*

KEY WORDS: Executive coaching, organisational change, leadership self-efficacy, solution-focused thinking

## Introduction

Organisational turbulence has increasingly become part of the everyday experience in organisations in the contemporary Western commercial world. Organisational turbulence is defined as nontrivial, rapid, and discontinuous change in an organisation, brought about by events such as restructurings, downsizings, sales, and spin-offs of assets and acquisitions, the effects of which are often experienced as disconcerting (Cameron *et al.*, 1987).

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Whereas in the last century organisational change tended to be part of designated mergers and acquisitions or pre-planned cultural development initiatives (Gaughan, 2010), since 2000 the rate and unpredictability of organisational change appear to have escalated, resulting in greater demands and stresses being placed on managers and executives (Sablonnière *et al*., 2012). Such economic uncertainty and organisational turbulence have been particularly evident since the 2007 Global Financial Crisis.

Not surprisingly, the executives and employees who work in such uncertain and unstable contexts sometimes struggle to develop the psychological and behavioural skills needed to deal with organisational change whilst remaining focused on reaching their work-related goals (Fugate *et al*., 2008). Indeed, the ability to build effective teams and deliver on organisational goals during periods of disruptive change or organisational turbulence is rated as one of the most important attributes of effective leaders (Gilley *et al*., 2009), although the requisite skills come naturally to only a few (Goleman, 2000). The focus of this article is on examining if executive coaching can help executives and managers during times of organisational change.

*The Literature on Executive Coaching and Organisational Change: an Overview*

Executive coaching is frequently used by corporations to help executives develop their capacity to deal with change and to give them support in reaching their organisational or work-related goals (Goldsmith, 2009). Executive coaching can be understood as a helping relationship formed between a client (the coachee[1]) who has leadership, managerial, or supervisory authority and responsibility in an organisation, and a coach who uses a range of cognitive and behavioural techniques in order to help the client achieve a mutually defined set of goals with the aim of improving his or her leadership skills, professional performance, and well-being and the effectiveness of the organisation (adapted from Kilburg, 1996).

The academic literature on executive coaching per se has grown over time. A search of the database PsycINFO conducted in January 2013 using the keywords 'executive coaching' found a total of 487 citations, with the first published article being Sperry's (1993) discussion article describing the needs of executives and how psychologists can respond to their need for consulting, coaching, and counselling. Between 1993 and 1999 there were a total of 31 citations, between 2000 and 2005 there were a total of 99 citations, and between 2006 and 2013 there were a total of 356 citations (For a detailed review and critique of the literature on executive coaching see Grant *et al*., 2010).

The widespread use of coaching by practitioners and consultants as a means of helping executives deal with a range of change-related issues is echoed in the academic literature. Cross-indexing the terms 'executive coaching' and 'change' identified a total of 111 citations. That is to say that 22.28% of the executive coaching literature in PsycINFO is in relation to issues to do with change. However, of these 111 citations 91 are opinion articles discussing, for example, how various theoretical frameworks can be used to foster meaningful personal change amongst executive clients (Glunk and Follini, 2011), or how integrating Acceptance and Commitment Therapy into coaching methods can help leaders

develop a repertoire of crisis resiliency and value-directed change management skills (Moran, 2010), or how coaching can help executives change on a personal level (Barner, 2006).

*Few Empirical Studies on Change-Related Executive Coaching*

Of the identified 111 citations only 21 were empirical studies. The majority of these ($n = 15$) used a case study methods or retrospective survey approaches (Wasylyshyn, 2003; Schnell, 2005; Fahy, 2007; Kombarakaran *et al.*, 2008; Ozkan, 2008; Kress, 2009; Lewis-Duarte, 2009; Nardone *et al.*, 2009; Perkins, 2009; Freedman and Perry, 2010; Rostron, 2011; Clayton, 2012; Lawler, 2012; Lewis-Duarte and Bligh, 2012; Ratiu and Baban, 2012). There were only three within-subjects studies (Trathen, 2008; Milare and Yoshida, 2009; Howard 2009) and two between-subjects studies (Kampa-Kokesch, 2002; Gravel, 2007), with only one randomised controlled study exploring the effectiveness of executive coaching in times of organisational change (Grant *et al.*, 2009).

Although this emerging evidence-base suggests that executive coaching can indeed be effective, over time there have been concerns expressed in the literature that executive coaching could be merely a fad, problematic, or unhelpful (Nowack, 2003), or that executive coaches who lack rigorous psychological training could do more harm than good (Berglas, 2002). Thus, more empirical research is needed to evaluate the effects of executive coaching, particularly in times of organisational change.

The existing research that explicitly explores the effects of coaching during times of organisational change tends to be qualitative or exploratory. For example, Fahy (2007) presented an exploratory case study in which a grounded-theory approach was used to examine the role that executive coaching with a senior leadership team plays in the process of organisational change, and Schnell (2005) presented a detailed case study of executive coaching as a support mechanism during a period of organisational growth and evolution. Whist such qualitative and exploratory grounded-theory approaches can give rich insights into individuals' lived experience, they fail to provide quantitative data, and both qualitative and quantitative data are needed in order to comprehensively develop the knowledge base.

The rationale for the present study's design is that, to date, little is known from a quantitative perspective about the effects of coaching on executives as they go through periods of organisational change. Quantitative evaluations are important because they can provide objective and aggregate measures of change and allow for direct comparisons between different outcome studies and different populations – key factors in the accumulation of knowledge and the ongoing development of an evidence-based approach to coaching. However, because quantitative evaluations do not highlight individual participants' subjective experiences, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in the present study.

The extent to which coaching helps develop personal change readiness – the capacity to cope with the uncertainties that organisational change introduces into one's work life – is not also known, nor the extent to which coaching helps develop leadership self-efficacy, resilience, or workplace satisfaction.

Hence the aim of the present study was to explore these issues and so doing further develop the knowledge base associated with executive coaching.

### The Psychological Mechanisms of Executive Coaching

Executive coaching is informed by a broad range of theoretical frameworks ranging from the cognitive through to psychodynamic and the solution-focused (see Passmore, 2005). However, regardless of theoretical framework, there are a common set of principles underpinning executive coaching and these include collaboration and accountability, awareness raising, responsibility, commitment, action planning, and action (Grant, 2006). That is, regardless of theoretical orientation, the coaching relationship is one in which the coach and coachee form a collaborative working alliance, articulate goals, and develop specific action steps designed to facilitate goal attainment. The coachee's responsibility is to enact the action steps. The coach's role is to help keep the coachee on track, helping them to monitor and evaluate progress over time, as well as providing an intellectual foil for brainstorming and facilitating the process of examining issues from a range of different perspectives.

Executive coaching may thus be effective through at least three underlying cognitive and behavioural mechanisms. First, having a confidential and supportive relationship in which to reflect upon and discuss personal and professional issues can relieve stress and anxiety and give individuals the space to consider problems from a range of perspectives (Myers, 1999). Second, the process of setting personally valued goals and then purposefully working towards achieving them can enhance well-being, build self-efficacy, and help develop solution-focused thinking (Sheldon and Houser-Marko, 2001). Third, systemically engaging in such processes along with being supported in dealing with any setbacks can build resilience and enhance self-regulation, both of which are vital factors in successfully dealing with change (Baumeister *et al*., 2006). As a result of the above, coachees may well experience greater self-efficacy, change readiness, job satisfaction, and well-being as well as being better equipped to deal with change and workplace stressors.

### Relevance of Coaching in Times of Organisational Change

Given the above delineations of the coaching process, there are several key reasons why coaching might indeed help executives function more effectively during times of organisational change or turbulence.

First, in order to deal effectively with organisational uncertainty, executives need to able to stand back from the day-to-day cut-and-thrust of corporate life and engage in the flexible strategic thinking necessary to understand and constructively react to emergent and unpredictable issues, and such reflexivity sits at the core of the coaching process (Day *et al*., 2008). Second, effective leadership of others requires the leader to have good personal insight – an awareness of one's own personal thoughts, feelings, and behaviour (Gill, 2002) – and coaching has been shown to increase such insight (Grant, 2007).

Furthermore, when working in complex adaptive systems (such as global businesses) that are in states of turbulence, problem-focused diagnostic and causal analysis may not be very helpful, and may even impede goal progression (Cavanagh and Lane, 2012). Leaders need the ability to focus on solution construction and for many this will require a shift in mindset from a diagnostic approach to a solution-focused thinking style, and coaching has been shown to increase solution-focused thinking (Grant *et al*., 2012). Not least, self-efficacy is also a key factor in helping individuals deal with situations that are novel, unpredictable, or stressful (Schunk, 1983) and coaching has been shown to increase both self-efficacy and management skills (Baron and Morin, 2010).

## Context of the Present Study

The present study was conducted in cooperation with an organisation with global capability in strategic consulting, engineering, and project delivery. It operates in 17 countries across Asia Pacific, the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, deploying some 7000 people in 54 offices. Having started in 1964, the business has grown significantly in the last 10–12 years.

The organisation had also undergone a number of significant changes in recent times. In October 2011, a new CEO assumed responsibility for the business following a 15-year tenure by the previous leader. In addition to the organisational change and turbulence often associated with new leadership, a new business-operating model was also introduced in July 2011 with a stronger focus on collaboration across the business, requiring significant shifts in the way that various business sectors operated and interacted. The business has also undergone some recent restructuring. Additionally, during 2011 and 2012 the business was in the process of exploring the possibility of a transformational merger to assist it in fulfilling its ambitious growth targets.

Such organisational changes typicality create significant stress for employees and managers as they re-calibrate their working practices in response to a shifting and turbulent corporate landscape whilst simultaneously striving to achieve their designated organisational goals. It was these issues that made this a useful context in which to study the impact of executive coaching in times of organisational change. The coaching programme was conducted during 2012.

The primary aims of the coaching programme included developing participants' ability to manage change, to navigate ambiguity, and to foster productive relationships across the business. In addition, the programme was used as a way of supporting participants in managing their own career development through developing greater clarity and a deeper understanding of their individual strengths, personal values, and development needs.

The coaching sessions were conducted by 14 experienced professional executive coaches from a global firm of business psychologists. Twelve of these were registered psychologists and of the other two, one was International Coach Federation accredited and the other was tertiary qualified and an experienced executive coach.

It was hypothesised that participation in the coaching programme would be associated with increased goal attainment, enhanced solution-focused thinking,

greater ability to deal with change, increased leadership self-efficacy and resilience, decrease in depression, anxiety, and stress, and increase in workplace satisfaction.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 38 executives and senior and middle managers from the organisation's business units and functional areas. There were 30 men and 8 women (mean age 42.7 years). They covered 14 geographical locations including Adelaide, Auckland, Brisbane, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, London, Manchester, Melbourne, Newcastle upon Tyne, Perth, Santiago, Shanghai, Singapore, and Sydney. Due to unexpected changes in work demands, redeployment, or sick leave, seven individuals were not able to complete all questionnaires or attend all coaching sessions within the specified maximum timeframe of four months. Data from these individuals have been dropped from the analysis.

### Design and Procedure

The study used a within-subjects (pre − post) design with measures taken at Time 1 and Time 2 (four months later). Participants completed the dependent variable measures by hand before the first coaching session and after the final coaching session. They completed the questionnaires in privacy and placed the questionnaires in a sealed envelope which was then returned to the project coordinator. Apart from details about goal content, the coaches did not have access to these data.

### Overview of the Coaching Programme

The coaching programme focused on enhancing and developing leadership capability, with the aim of equipping participants to better lead themselves, their staff, and their organisations more effectively through a period of substantial organisational change.

Specifically, the programme aimed to help participants to:

(1) Meet the challenges inherent in a period of substantial organisational change;
(2) Enhance their leadership and management skills, and develop their personal leadership 'brand';
(3) Develop their ability to work more collaboratively across the client organisation's business sectors;
(4) Enhance their professional development and career opportunities.

The programme aims were used to set broad parameters within which the participants set individual goals for the coaching process. Participants were encouraged to set their own goals that aligned with the programme's aims but were also personally valued and meaningful.

The programme consisted of positive psychology-based 360-degree qualitative feedback processes consisting of their key perceived strengths, a 'best self' description, potential developmental themes and directions and potential future roles, and four coaching sessions. Prior to commencing coaching each coachee was matched with an internal organisation business mentor to provide additional support to them throughout the coaching programme.

*The Executive Coaching Sessions*

The coaching sessions utilised a cognitive − behavioural, solution-focused framework. This approach to coaching rests on the assumption that goal attainment can be best facilitated by understanding the reciprocal relationships between one's thoughts, feelings, behaviour, and the environment, and by structuring these four domains in order to best support goal attainment. Incorporating a strong solution-focused perspective into a cognitive − behavioural modality helps orientate the coaching towards the development of personal strengths and solution construction rather than towards diagnostic problem analysis (Grant, 2003).

The coaching programme consisted of four, 90-minute, one-to-one coaching sessions. Prior to each coaching session coachees completed a preparation sheet and in the documentation they outlined their progress to date, noted any specific challenges they had faced, and detailed their goals for coaching in the session. In order to foster reflexivity, coachees were also asked to make written notes about any personal insights and any agreed action steps during the actual coaching sessions. All initial sessions were completed face-to-face. Subsequent sessions were completed face-to-face where the coach and coachee were based in the same city. All other sessions were completed over the telephone. In total 62% of the sessions were completed in person.

Examples of the goals that participants addressed included becoming less reactive and defensive in meetings; demonstrating better listening and communication skills whilst under pressure; becoming more adept at delegating; and developing stronger relationships in both the business and with clients.

To ensure that the coaching session remained goal-focused, each session started by setting a specific goal for the session. The coach and coachee then typically explored the reality of the current situation, before developing options for action and concluding with specific action steps that help define the way forward (see Whitmore, 1992). The role of the coach was to provide a personal reflective space, to ask often-challenging questions designed to help the coachee think about the issues from different perspectives, and to work with the coachee to brainstorm and develop potential options and action plans.

In order to maximise the chances of creating real behavioural change in participants' leadership and management skills, each coaching session concluded by delineating specific action steps to be completed before the next coaching session.

Following the fourth coaching session, a four- (or five)-way meeting occurred with the coach, coachee, their manager and/or internal sponsor, and their mentor, and their human resource business partner was present wherever possible. The objective of the final session was to review progress, ensure alignment

between the key coaching themes, and the provision of ongoing support mechanisms with the aim of maintaining behavioural change over the longer term.

*Measures*

Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used.

*Quantitative measures*
*Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS).* Participants identified two goals that were aligned with the purpose of the coaching programme. It was emphasised that these goals should be personally meaningful and valued. Participants responded to the question 'up to today, how successful have you been in achieving this goal', and rated their goal attainment on a scale from 0% (no attainment) to 100% (complete attainment). Such goal attainment scales have been used in prior coaching outcome studies (Spence, 2007).

*Solution-focused thinking* was assessed using the Solution-Focused Inventory (SFI; Grant, 2011). The SFI is a 12-item scale with three sub-scales, Problem Disengagement, Goal Orientation, and Resource Activation, that collectively measure an individual's engagement in solution-focused thinking. Grant *et al.* (2012) report test–retest reliability over 16 weeks of .84 and Cronbach's alpha of .84. The SFI has also been shown to be useful in assessing changes in solution-focused thinking following coaching. The measure was scored on a six-point Likert-type scale. Alpha for the present study was .79

*Change readiness* was assessed using a seven-item adaption of the Coping With Change Scale (Judge *et al.*, 1999). This scale assesses the extent to which individuals cope with the uncertainties that organisational change introduces into their work lives. The Coping With Change Scale has been shown to be reliable and valid, demonstrating strong relationships with independent assessments of coping with change and ratings of job performance (Judge *et al.*, 1999). The measure was scored on a five-point Likert-type scale. Alpha for the present study was .77.

*Leadership self-efficacy* was assessed using four self-efficacy questions based on Bandura's (1977) conceptualisation of self-efficacy as being a domain-specific competency rating. The four questions were: How confident are you that you can exercise leadership successfully by:

(1) Setting a clear direction for teamwork in order to reach organisational goals?
(2) Collaboratively working with peers to gain their commitment and cooperation in order to reach organisational goals?
(3) Ensuring that organisational projects are completed on time and within budget?
(4) Managing reorganisation and leading internal change without causing any additional organisational turbulence?

Participants responded using a 0–100% scale. Alpha for the present study was .88.
*Depression, anxiety, and stress.* The Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995) was used as a measure of psychopathology.

The DASS-21 comprises three sub-scales measuring depression, anxiety, and stress. Because it is designed to be used with both clinical and non-clinical populations it is a useful assessment tool for coaching. Internal consistency and test−retest reliability have been found to be good ($r = .71–.81$; Brown *et al*., 1997). The measure was scored on a four-point Likert-type scale. Alpha for the present study was .78

*Resilience* was assessed with a 10-item version of the Cognitive Hardiness Scale (Nowack, 1990). This scale, based on Kobasa's (1979) work, assesses the individuals' sense of personal control, their propensity to rise to meet challenges, and their commitment to action. The measure is scored on a five-point Likert-type scale. Nowack (1990) reports an internal consistency of 0.83. Alpha for the present study was .77.

*Workplace satisfaction* was measured with the Workplace Well-Being Index (WWBI) which has been found to be a reliable and valid measure (Page, 2005). The 16-item WWBI assesses the degree of satisfaction that individuals gain from their work using 'very dissatisfied' (0) and 'very satisfied' (10) as the scale anchors. The Workplace Well-being Index includes 15 domain-specific items such as 'How satisfied are you with how meaningful your work is?', 'How satisfied are you with your working conditions?', 'How satisfied are you with the recognition you receive for good work?', and one question assessing global workplace satisfaction 'How satisfied are you with your job as a whole?' Cronbach's alpha for this study was .89.

*Qualitative measures*
In order to gather some qualitative data on participants' experience of the coaching programme participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended questions once they had completed the measures at Time 2 once they had completed the quantitative measures.

- What specific benefits (if any) has the coaching had on your leadership abilities?
- What specific benefits (if any) has the coaching had on other areas of your life?

The use of an open-question method is an important point in this study because it allowed the participants themselves to determine which issues they considered to be of most benefit.

**Results**

It was hypothesised that participation in the coaching programme would be associated with increased goal attainment, enhanced solution-focused thinking, greater ability to deal with change, increased leadership self-efficacy and resilience, decrease in depression, anxiety, and stress, and increase in workplace satisfaction. Means, standard deviations, and Cohen's *d* for all variables are shown in Table 1. Data were analysed using paired-sample *t*-tests. A significance level of .05 was set for all tests.

**Table 1.** Mean pre- and post-coaching programme scores

| | Pre | | Post | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | SD | *M* | SD | *t*(1, 30) | *p* | *d* |
| Goal scaling #1 | 36.13 | *18.42* | 62.09 | *13.40* | 6.60 | <.001 | 1.62 |
| Goal scaling #2 | 30.00 | *19.53* | 57.58 | *18.02* | 6.56 | <.001 | 1.46 |
| SF thinking | 52.32 | *6.56* | 54.87 | *6.22* | 3.30 | <.01 | 0.40 |
| Change readiness | 25.61 | *3.65* | 26.48 | *2.94* | 2.249 | <.05 | 0.26 |
| Leadership self-efficacy | 29.12 | *5.92* | 31.22 | *4.01* | 2.353 | <.05 | 0.25 |
| Depression | 1.80 | *2.19* | 0.93 | *1.36* | 2.29 | <.05 | 0.24 |
| Resilience | 35.64 | *5.94* | 36.90 | *5.95* | 1.793 | <.05* | 0.22 |
| Stress | 4.00 | *2.56* | 3.77 | *3.05* | 0.43 | ns | 0.08 |
| Anxiety | 1.00 | *1.29* | 0.87 | *2.32* | 0.41 | ns | 0.07 |
| Workplace satisfaction | 118.22 | *15.94* | 118.54 | *11.47* | 0.18 | ns | 0.02 |

Note: SF thinking = solution-focused thinking style; *d* = Cohen's *d*.
*One-tailed *t*-test.

## Quantitative Data

Paired *t*-tests comparing pre- with post-programme means revealed that participation in the coaching programme was associated with significant increases in goal attainment for goal 1, *t* (1, 30) = 6.60, *p* < .001, and for goal 2, *t* (1, 30) = 6.56, *p* < .001.

Participation was also associated with significant increases in solution-focused thinking, *t* (1, 30) = 3.30, *p* < .01, change readiness, *t* (1, 30) = 2.25, *p* < .05, and leadership self-efficacy, *t* (1, 30) = 2.35, *p* < .05. Participation was also associated with significantly decreased depression *t* (1, 30) = 2.29, *p* < .05.

As regards resilience, a one-tailed *t*-test indicted that participants had higher levels of resilience following coaching *t* (1, 30) = 1.79, *p* < .05. However, there was no significant difference between pre-coaching and post-coaching scores for stress, anxiety, or workplace satisfaction.

## Qualitative Data

Participants' responses to the questions: 'What specific benefits (if any) has the coaching had on your leadership abilities?' and 'What specific benefits (if any) has the coaching had on other areas of your life?' were systematically classified and grouped according to content. All participants gave responses to these questions.

Two research psychologists independently read each participant's qualitative responses in order to identify patterns in the data and the key themes inherent in each response. During this process of breaking down, examining, comparing, and conceptualising the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), a range of broad categories were identified. Once this initial coding was completed the researchers met to discuss their findings and resolve any differing views (Neuendorf, 2002). Once a broad agreement had been reached, the data were further examined by both researchers together in order to test the validity of the categories. As

recommended by Spector (1984) the validity of the categories was further established by asking the questions: Do the categories fit and work? Are they clearly indicated by the data? Reliability was established by looking for inconsistencies in the responses and ensuring there was minimal overlap between the various designated categories.

Responses differed in length from one- or two-point-form sentences to a number of paragraphs. The following categories emerged and are ordered below in terms of the frequency with which they were mentioned by the participants: (note: some participants made more than one response).

*Impact on Leadership Abilities*

(1)  Increased self-awareness and increased clarity of thought: 18 responses.
(2)  Helped build leadership brand and build leadership skills: 12 responses.
(3)  Helped achieve organisational or professional goals: 9 responses.
(4)  Greater awareness of career possibilities: 5 responses
(5)  Helped achieve better communication within the organisation: 3 responses.
(6)  Higher levels of confidence and trust in the team: 3 responses.

*Impact on Other Areas of Life*

(1)  Better work/life balance: 15 responses.
(2)  Better relationships with family; less stress and more calm: 7 responses
(3)  Greater sense of purpose in life and awareness of personal values: 5 responses.
(4)  Feel better about self and life in general: 4 responses.
(5)  Able to use programme insights in other areas of life: 3 responses

Representative comments from the above categories are presented below. As can be seen, some comments fit into a number of different categories:

*Increased self-awareness and increased clarity of thought:*

> Opportunity to discuss ideas and issues in a neutral forum and realised the important of refection. I've developed deeper trust in the team and developed more patience in meetings and a greater degree of listening and engagement. I now have more awareness of my goals, other peoples' perceptions of me and the things that trigger me.

Another participant wrote: 'The coaching sessions have been very beneficial, I feel that my sessions have focused me on my developmental themes, as well as helping me understand more about myself.'

*Leadership brand and leadership skills*:

> The coaching process led to a better appreciation of the imperative of being able to delegate and not feel guilty about it. I also recognised some of the blockers to my ability to delegate, including apprehension about delegating from inadequate monitoring. It's a work in progress.

*Better work/life balance and relationship with family:* 'At home I have found that my relationship has improved as I am less cranky to be around and I am practicing the core skills that we identified in the coaching sessions.'

*Greater sense of purpose in life and awareness of personal values:* 'It has helped me identify what values are important to me and why and therefore better understand and motivate myself.'

*Greater awareness of career possibilities:* 'Have spent time thinking about a career plan and the steps and actions needed along the way . . . has enabled conversations with the family about what we want in the long term'. Another participant wrote: 'It has helped me focus more clearly on my broader career objectives.'

*Able to use programme insights in other areas of life:* 'Provided impetus to change some of my behaviours that were causing stress, worry and negativity. I now have an increased commitment to exercise, health and reconnecting with friends, neighbours and family.' Another participant wrote: 'I have been able to apply my business and work learnings of my everyday (out of work) life. There has been a benefit overall.'

## Discussion

This study explored the hypothesis that participation in a coaching programme during times of organisational change would be associated with increased goal attainment, enhanced solution-focused thinking, greater ability to deal with change, increased leadership self-efficacy and resilience, decrease in depression, anxiety, and stress, and increase in workplace satisfaction. The results of this study provide broad support for this hypothesis.

Participants set two goals that they worked on over a three- to four-month period. The nature of the individually chosen goals was closely aligned with organisational goals – such goal alignment being a key facet in facilitating organisation change (Thornhill *et al*., 2000). For example, one participant chose the goal 'to raise my profile in improving my influencing skills so as to have a greater impact and presence more widely across the business and client organisations', and goals related to improving influencing skills within the business or with client organisations were a dominant theme across all participants. A second key theme in the goals related specifically to enhancing one's leadership style through enhancing communication, becoming more receptive to feedback, or improving delegation skills during times of change. A third theme, which was related to the first two themes, focused on career and professional development. Participation in the coaching programme was associated with increased goal attainment, and this indicates that executive coaching in times of organisational change can indeed be successful and beneficial.

### Controversies Related to the Measurement of Coaching Success

The measurement of what constitutes 'success' in organisational and executive coaching is a somewhat vexed issue. There has been considerable controversy and debate in the coaching literature about the most appropriate way to manage and measure coaching outcomes (e.g. Kilburg, 2001; Peterson and Kraiger,

2004; Cox, 2006; Hagen, 2012). A number of authors have argued that, as organisations are in business to generate a profit, financial return on investment (ROI) is the most important coaching outcome metric (McGovern *et al*., 2001; Hernez-Broome, 2010).

This view is not without its critics (Laske, 2004; De Meuse *et al*., 2009; Grant, 2012). In brief, the standard formula for calculating ROI involves subtracting the costs of coaching from the estimated value of the outcomes of coaching and then expressing this as a percentage. However, there are a number of significant problems in using financial ROI as a central coaching outcome measure. These problems include the difficulty of accurately calculating the exact financial costs of the coaching intervention (e.g. due to difficulties in estimating lost opportunity costs) and significant problems in determining the exact financial benefits of coaching (i.e. the degree to which revenue can be attributed to the actual work of the coachee him/herself, as well as difficulties in estimating the extent to which the coachee's performance has been enhanced by the coaching process rather than other extraneous factors, for example, changes in market conditions). The difficulties in calculating the financial ROI from coaching become even more problematic during periods of organisational turbulence and change.

### GAS: a Useful Tool for Evaluating Coaching Outcomes

Hence, a different route to evaluating the success of the coaching programme was chosen. It was reasoned that coaching during periods of organisational change required the identification and pursuit of specific goals or outcomes related to the organisation's mission, and that progress towards such goals would be a more useful measure of coaching success than speculative estimations of the financial ROI. Thus, GAS was chosen as a key measurement method (for a detailed description of the use of GAS in coaching, see Spence, 2007). GAS is widely used in a broad range of contexts including education, rehabilitation, medicine, corrections, nursing, chaplain training, social work, and chemical dependency (Kiresuk *et al*., 1994), and is generally considered to be an effective and valid measure of outcome (Custer *et al*., 2013). However, GAS has not been widely utilised in relation to coaching and organisational change to date.

The findings from this study provide preliminary evidence that executive coaching during periods of organisational change can indeed be effective, can positively impact on goals that are directly relevant to the organisation's mission, and also suggests that GAS may have the potential to be a useful tool in the measurement of organisational change and development initiatives.

### Coaching Enhances Solution-Focused Thinking

Participation in coaching was also associated with significant increases in solution-focused thinking – a key skill in times of organisational turbulence and change. This is an important finding because many leaders have a propensity to engage in analytical problem-focused thinking (Mumford *et al*., 2000). Of course, problem-focused analytical thinking is important. A problem-focused approach assumes that by attempting to understand the causal structure and

aetiology of a problem, effective pathways to action will eventually emerge. However, whilst a problem-focused analytical approach can indeed be effective with relatively simple or stable problem states, or where there is ample time to reflect on a specific problem, it may not be so effective during periods of organisational turbulence when causal factors are not clear, the context is changing quickly, or the causal factors are too complex to unravel. Indeed at its extreme in such conditions, problem-focused thinking may even lead to a debilitating cycle of rumination – a persistent focus on one's problems – and such ruminative processes are linked to the onset of depressive experiences, biased negative memory recall and, paradoxically, impaired problem-solving skills (Lyubomirsky and Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995).

Good leadership requires that leaders be cognitively flexible, able to employ a range of thinking styles, and switch from problem-focused to solution-focused thinking when necessary. Such cognitive flexibility is particularly important during periods of organisational change (Gill, 2002). A solution-focused approach tends to eschew explorations of causal aetiologies, and instead focuses directly on working out how to create a desired change state. By identifying approach goals and resources and finding different ways of achieving those goals, the range of potential actions and possible outcomes is expanded. Indeed, the ability to engage in a constructive style of thinking which is orientated towards the development of solutions is of particular importance when working in organisations which are in a state of flux and change (Cavanagh and Lane, 2012). Leaders in such contexts need to be able to view emerging problems from a range of different perspectives, disengage from the problem, identify specific goals, and then marshal the resources needed to make positive change – and these four facets are the core constructs of solution-focused thinking (Grant, 2011).

A key finding is that the coaching enhanced participants' solution-focused thinking, and this was evidenced by both quantitative data from the SFI and a number of qualitative comments, for example:

> (The coaching) has helped me to focus on areas of strength as a means to drive better performance ... it helped me reflect on activities and achievements and promoted me to think about other ways of tackling problems. I was able to look at the situation from different perspectives and come up with new and different solutions.

### The Role of Reflexivity in Developing Leadership Skills

The opportunity to reflect, review, and evaluate one's leadership style has long been recognised as a vital part of the change process (Lewin, 1952; Argyris, 1977, 2000). Alfes *et al.* (2010) discuss the importance of individual and cultural change in terms of changes in terms of values, beliefs, and learned ways of behaving, and the qualitative comments from participants echoed these points:

> Coaching has taken my leadership abilities to the next level, and has acted as a catalyst to deeper self-awareness and ultimately changes in behaviours, approach and outcomes.

Another wrote about the role of reflection in developing leadership skills:

The coaching gave me important time to reflect on my activities and prompted me to think about other ways of tackling problems. I was able to reflect on my style of leadership. I have been able to stop and think about what I am doing and where I am going. It has taught me (through self-reflection) to focus on my leadership strengths and what I am good at. The coaching and self-reflection has really helped me become more self-aware of my leadership abilities and then work more effectively with others.

The coaching sessions had an immediate impact for some:

Coaching has had an immediate impact on my leadership abilities. I've rapidly come to see those areas of my style that were not helpful in developing stronger leadership relationships. The one on one coaching sessions allowed me to explore these issues of style in a safe environment and hone into the key specific and measurable activities that I could do to change my style.

### Changes in Change Readiness and Leadership Self-efficacy

The coaching also had a positive impact on change readiness. Change readiness is a construct that is related to job satisfaction, the ability to solve job-related problems (Cunningham *et al*., 2002), as well as the willingness and ability to constructively and proactively engage with the challenges inherent in times of organisational change (Jones *et al*., 2005). Given that the organisation was in a state of significant change, the observed increase in change readiness was an important finding which indicates that executive coaching can indeed help coachees become more adept and confident in dealing with organisational change and turbulence.

Such confidence is important because it is a core component of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a domain-specific confidence rating about one's ability to perform a specific task and is an important predictor of behavioural change, partly because one's individual's judgement of self-efficacy influences the initiation of goal-directed behaviours, the intensity of effort, and persistence in the face of difficulties (de Vries *et al*., 1988). Leadership self-efficacy can thus be understood as the level of confidence that a leader holds in his/her ability to successfully exert leadership by setting directions and goals for followers and building relationships with them in order to gain their commitment to change goals, and then working with them to overcome obstacles to change (Paglis and Green, 2002). Not surprisingly, leadership self-efficacy plays a vital role in motivating and engaging team members, and this is particularly important during times of organisational change (Strauss *et al*., 2009). One participant wrote:

It (the coaching) helped clarify my thoughts and aspirations into achievable outcomes, and this generated a greater sense of purpose and my confidence has improved. I feel re-energised. By being more aware of my leadership behaviours and their impact on others and feeling more confident in my interactions with

others, I have noticed stronger relationships developing between myself, my peers and my team and I feel much better about dealing with the current situation.

This study's finding that coaching enhanced leadership self-efficacy gives added weight to the notion that executive coaching is an effective organisational change-related intervention.

*Impact on Mental Health and Resilience*

The coaching programme was also effective at reducing depression and enhancing resilience. It is of interest to note that depression and resilience were not explicitly targeted in the coaching process which focused on specific goals. The observed reduction in depression and increase in resilience make sense because as individuals work towards their goals there are inevitable setbacks and challenges to be overcome. Dealing with such setbacks is likely to improve one's resilience, and levels of depression are also likely to dissipate as individuals begin to experience an increased sense of personal mastery as they overcome such challenges. Indeed, coaching has been found to increase resilience and reduce depression in a range of populations including medical students (Taylor, 1997), high-school students (Green *et al*., 2007), and in the workplace with executives (Grant *et al*., 2009).

Participants' levels of anxiety and stress were not impacted by the coaching. This was unexpected, given that organisational turbulence often causes anxiety and stress. However, in this case it should be noted that levels of depression, anxiety, and stress were all well within the normal range (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995). This was not a clinical population, and issues of psychopathology were not a concern. Stress levels were at the 30th percentile for the general population, anxiety was at the 35th percentile, and depression was at the 40th percentile – well below the 50th to 60th percentile which is typically taken to be the upper limits of the normal range for the general population. Because the levels of anxiety and stress were so low, a floor effect was observed (Henry and Crawford, 2005). However, levels of depression were comparatively slightly higher and hence there was more room for improvement (i.e. a reduction) in the depression scores. This finding highlights the importance of using a broad range of mental-health measures in coaching that capture both improvements in well-being facets such as resilience as well as reductions in issues such as depression.

*Workplace Satisfaction*

The coaching programme did not affect workplace satisfaction. This was surprising because it could be reasonably assumed that the coaching should positively influence participants' work-related satisfaction ratings.

However, it is of note that 11 of the 15 items that comprise the WWBI refer to issues that are outside of the direct sphere of control of the individual. Examples of these items include: 'How satisfied are you with your working conditions?' and 'How satisfied are you with your pay?' Given that participants had little direct control over issues such as their working conditions or pay and that the coaching

did not specifically target those issues, it is perhaps not surprising that WWBI scores did not change.

Although there are a multitude of theories and approaches to managing organisational change, there is relatively little empirical research as to the effectiveness of specific interventions (By, 2005). Overall, the findings from the present study contribute to the literature on the impact of executive coaching and organisational change first, because this study supports past work which has also found that executive coaching can facilitate goal attainment as well as enhancing well-being (e.g. Grant *et al.*, 2009), and second because this is the first study to explore the impact of executive coaching in times of organisational change using direct measures of both change readiness and leadership self-efficacy.

*Relative Impact of Coaching: Locus of Control Issues*

This is also the first coaching outcome study to explore the relative effect sizes of outcome variables, and the finding that there were differences in the effect sizes for the different variables gives some insight into the efficacy and mechanisms of executive coaching.

The variables most directly targeted by coaching and within the control of the coachees showed the largest effect size (i.e. goals). The variables that were not directly targeted in the coaching session tended to show less change. The goal attainment scores showed a large average effect size of $d = 1.54$ (Cohen, 1977) and this was 3.85 times larger than the observed medium effect observed for solution-focused thinking ($d = 0.4$), which in turn was 1.6 times greater than the average small effect size observed ($d = 0.24$) for change readiness, leadership self-efficacy, depression, and resilience.

Although this line of reasoning is somewhat speculative, these data serve as a reminder to coaches and their clients alike that it is important to clearly define the main focus of the coaching intervention and to ensure that those issues are in fact within the sphere of influence or control of the coachee (Rotter, 1990). These varying effect sizes also serve to emphasise that coaching is not a 'cure-all' panacea – coaching has the biggest impact on those issues on which it is focused.

*Importance of Both Quantitative and Qualitative Measures*

The findings of this study highlight the importance of using both qualitative and quantitative measures. Very few of the qualitative statements made by the participants explicitly mentioned one of the key outcome variables – self-efficacy. Yet the quantitative measures captured a clear and significant increase in self-efficacy across the whole group. If this study had only used qualitative measures, the significant impact on self-efficacy would have gone unrecorded.

Conversely, the quantitative measures were not designed to capture, and thus could not capture broader aspects of the participants' lived experiences. Without the use of qualitative measures the fact that many participants experienced better work/life balance and relationships with family, a greater sense of purpose in life and awareness of their personal values, or an ability to use insights

gained in coaching in other areas of their lives would not have been noted. As participants noted:

> The coaching made me consider work/life balance in a more professional way. I have now given this a much higher priority and now I do not see this as a determent to achieving my professional goals but rather a requirement of achieving them.

Another found the leadership techniques learnt in coaching to be useful in other areas of life:

> I have been able to apply the same techniques to my family, especially my children and other relationships too.

In addition to highlighting the wide range of potential benefits associated with participation in a well-designed executive coaching programme, these observations about the use of conjoint quantitative and qualitative measurement remind those who are involved in designing and evaluating executive coaching programmes to take a flexible approach to evaluation and to design evaluations that are capable of measuring the rich array of potential human benefits that good coaching is able to deliver (Grant, 2012). In this way, the potential benefits of coaching can be made salient and tangible to organisations that are sometimes more focused on financial ROI.

### Limitations of the Present Study

There are several limitations inherent in the present study, and these should be taken into account when interpreting these findings. First, the participants were executives and managers from a single commercial corporation. Thus, these findings may not generalise to other populations, for example, managers who are working in other industry sectors or in not-for-profit sectors. Second, the coaching was conducted by a single service provider – a global firm of business psychologists who employed experienced executive coaches with dominant backgrounds in psychology. It is not clear from this study if similar results would necessarily be produced by other, more divergent groups of coaches. In addition, because this study used a within-subjects design, the lack of a no-intervention control group means that the effects could have occurred normally, rather than being caused by participation in the personal coaching programme. Furthermore, the final sample size of 31 was somewhat on the small side, and the sample composition had a decidedly skewed gender balance with only 21% of the total sample being female.

Although this is a somewhat small sample size compared to (for example) survey-based research, such sample sizes are not uncommon in field-based coaching outcome research, primarily due to the logistical difficulties involved in recruiting, managing, and retaining participants. For example, the Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2010) study had 31 participants, the Evers *et al.* (2006) study had 30 in their coaching group, and Gyllensten and Palmer (2005) had 31 in their coaching group.

As regards the timeframe for the study, the second set of measures was taken within one month of the conclusion of the coaching, and so the longer-term effects cannot be assessed. Further, two qualitative questions were specifically asked about the perceived benefits of the programme and this may have inadvertently precluded participants from identifying unhelpful aspects of the coaching programme. Future research should consider conducting a longitudinal follow-up as well as utilising a broader range of qualitative questions.

## Conclusion

The present study has presented original data indicating that executive coaching during times of organisational change can indeed have a wide range of positive effects. In addition to demonstrating that executive coaching can increase work-related goal attainment, enhance solution-focused thinking, develop greater change readiness, increase leadership self-efficacy and resilience, and decrease depression, this study has shown that the positive impact of executive coaching can generalise to non-work areas such as family life. The data from this study also serve as a reminder to coaches and their clients alike that it is important to clearly define the main focus of the coaching intervention and to ensure that those issues are in fact within the sphere of influence or control of the coachee. Future research should seek to further investigate the potential benefits of coaching as a leadership development strategy during times of organisational change.

## Acknowledgements

## Note

1. In line with the nomenclature used in the contemporary coaching literature, in this paper the person being coached is referred to as 'the coachee'.

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