
How is coaching perceived by leaders engaged in a global talent and leadership development programme? A single case study in the banking and financial services sector

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Abstract: This PhD study focuses on the role of coaching in a talent and leadership development programme in a multinational financial services organisation. Talent management (TM) and leadership development (LD) are the main priorities and amongst the most challenging issues on the agenda of CEOs. Coaching is often regarded as a core element of these programmes and yet there have been few attempts to explore its impact on the development of leaders within a global firm. To address this neglect, this study examines coaching in a global corporate environment, analysing perceptions of leaders who receive coaching as part of the organisation's talent management strategy. Drawing on in-depth qualitative data from 22 interviews, the initial findings presented in this paper reveal that coaching is considered to be effective when it is long-term, bespoke, developmental and connective. Examining these characteristics, the paper argues that coaching can play a critical role within global TM and LD programmes.

Keywords: Global talent management, Coaching, Leadership development, Case study, Banking and financial services

I. Introduction

The war for talent is identified as one of the most critical challenges currently faced by global firms (Tarique and Schuler, 2010, Beechler and Woodward, 2009, Canwell et al., 2014). A recent global survey undertaken by KPMG (2014) reports that HR professionals consider addressing skills shortages a priority. The shortage of talent brings the retention of talent to the forefront in organisations (KPMG, 2014, Martin and Schmidt, 2010, Stahl et al., 2012). In addition, professional and academic studies show that leadership development (LD) is both a concern and a core priority for organisational development (McNally, 2014, Martin and Schmidt, 2010, Gurdjian et al., 2014). According to the Global Human Capital Trends survey (Consulting and Deloitte, 2015), leadership capability is perceived as a perennial issue with 86% of global HR and business leaders claiming that it is one of the most critical talent challenges faced by global organisations. Yet only 6% of organizations believe their leadership pipeline contributes to prepare the future global leaders needed in a highly competitive, uncertain and knowledge-based economy (Consulting and Deloitte, 2015). As a result, talent management (TM) has been identified as a critical agenda item in firms' human capital development and HR strategy (Beechler and Woodward, 2009) yet an area which is difficult to manage, especially at a global level (Strack et al., 2014).

Despite a steady interest from HR practitioners and scholars in the past 10 years (Al Ariss et al., 2014, Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016b), the effectiveness of TM activities is often questioned. HR professionals claim that whilst talent management activities are taking place in three-quarters of MNEs, their effectiveness and impact is perceived as limited and difficult to evaluate (CIPD, 2015). Amongst the TM practices taking place in large organisations, coaching has continuously been identified as one of the most effective TM activities by HR professionals and practitioners (CIPD, 2013, CIPD, 2014, ILM, 2013b, Consulting and Deloitte, 2014). Coaching is a developmental intervention widely used in large organisations for performance and leadership development purposes. Surprisingly, whilst being identified as an effective talent management practice, coaching outcomes have received little attention when delivered as part of a TM strategy (Blackman et al., 2016, Ely et al., 2010).

To address this neglect, this study aims to provide a deep-understanding of coaching as perceived by leaders in the context of global TM and LD programmes in a multinational company. Specifically, the research will address the following questions:

1. RQ1: How do leaders perceive the contribution of coaching in the context of a global TM and LD programme in a multinational company?
2. RQ2: What is the perceived role of coaching for leaders receiving coaching at various stages in their career in a global organization?
3. RQ3: How can coaching intervention be defined in the context of global talent management and leadership development?

This paper presents some initial findings based on the analysis of 22 interviews of leaders participating in a TM programme within a multinational firm. This single case study examines the role of coaching as perceived by the talented employees, receiving coaching as part of a global talent and leadership development programme. In addition, the views of HR senior managers, programmes leaders, internal and external coaches have been analysed to provide a deep understanding of the impact of coaching from multiple perspectives. The research design aims to provide a comprehensive and contrasted analysis of the perception of multiple stakeholders to identify any convergence and dissonance, yet with a clear focus on the perception of the leaders identified as talent in a global firm in the banking industry.

2. Overview of the literature

2.1 Talent management

Talent management is a practitioner-led field which emerged in the early 2000s when the consulting firm McKinsey coined the expression "the war for talent" (Michaels, 2001). As an emerging field related to strategic and international HRM, scholars focused primarily on defining the core concept of talent

(Boudreau and Ramstad, 2005, Lewis and Heckman, 2006, Nijs et al., 2014). Although the nature, scope and boundaries of talent management are still being debated (Meyers et al., 2013, Nijs et al., 2014), a consensus has recently started to emerge among scholars. The term talent refers to the human capital needed in organisations to create value and sustain competitive advantage (Collings and Mellahi, 2009, Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016a).

Despite a steady interest and a significant increase of empirical and conceptual papers since 2000, the literature on talent management has been mainly led by practitioners and consulting firms (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015). Indeed, most empirical papers have been published after 2010, with two journals becoming specialists in the field, namely *Journal of World Business* and *International Journal of HRM* (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016b). A review of academic literature published between 2006 and 2014 reveals that talent management has been explored under three dominant themes: (a) the multiple definitions of the concept of talent, (b) the intended outcomes or effects of talent management and (c) talent management practices (Thunnissen et al., 2013). Despite the recent conceptual and empirical developments, it has been claimed that empirical research remains crucial to advance a field which is still in a stage of infancy for some, of adolescence for others (Thunnissen et al., 2013, Dries, 2013).

Due to the internationalisation of business operations, a more global dimension to TM has emerged to analyse the complexity of international workforce trends and aspirations in the pursue of organisational success (Brewster et al., 2005, Kim and McLean, 2012). Global TM encompasses all organisational activities aiming at attracting, selecting, developing and retaining the best employees in strategic roles at a global level (Scullion et al., 2010). Despite a steady interest from HR practitioners and academics, the effectiveness of global TM activities is often questioned (CIPD, 2013). For example, a survey conducted with 7,000 global HR representatives and leaders reveals that 26% of respondents perceive that leadership programmes add little or no value, and only 13% believe that their organisation is excellent at developing global leaders (Deloitte, 2015).

TM practices typically include leadership schemes with one-to-one support in the form of mentoring and coaching, training and international assignments. Amongst these activities, coaching and in-house training are identified as the most effective talent management activities. However, most surveys and studies (CIPD, 2014, ILM, 2013a, ICF, 2013, Ridler, 2013) analyse data collected from HR and LD professionals and decision makers in organisations, but not specifically from the participants being coached in these programmes. Consequently, it has been claimed that talent systems need to be better understood from the perspective of the talented employees, examining specifically their expectations and the impact that TM activities may have on their career progression within the company and their leadership development (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016a, Cascio and Boudreau, 2016). Additionally, a review on talent management conducted by Al Ariss et al (2014: 176) suggests that future research in the field should explore talent management as a “relational construct” and analyse the relationships between individuals, organisational, institutional and national/international contexts that define talent management. Hence, this study explores the perceptions of the leaders coached as part of the activities delivered in the GTM and LD programmes as well as the views expressed by HR policy-makers and managers. The next section reviews the coaching literature as a learning and development practice delivered in global organisations.

2.2 Coaching in organisations

In today's global economy, multinational companies realise the need to develop their capacity to manage international and complex operations, and consequently acknowledge the urge to develop their talent into future global leaders (Mendenhall, 2013). Over the past two decades, research on coaching and global LD has seen a steady and growing interest (Passmore, 2013, Scullion et al., 2010, Festing et al., 2013, Canwell et al., 2014, Rosinski, 2003). Recently, a report commissioned by the International Coach Federation (ICF, 2016) has estimated the global total revenue from coaching at \$2.356 billion USD in 2015, representing a 19% increase over the 2011 estimate. The participants included professional coach/practitioners and managers/leaders using coaching in 137 countries, yet mainly based in North America and Western Europe. The extended funding related to coaching activities in large firms led to much debates on how to identify the benefits of coaching, calculate a

potential return on investment, and establish correlations between the cost of coaching and the contribution to the firm's competitive advantage (De Meuse et al., 2009, Grant, 2012). A review of 49 empirical articles on the evaluation of leadership coaching reveals that there is no prescribed framework for its evaluation, and the articulation of coaching with career progression within the organisation is missing (Ely et al., 2010).

Coaching in the workplace can take multiple forms and denominations in organisations such as business, managerial, executive, leadership and performance coaching. Consequently, practitioners and scholars have claimed that coaching practice in the workplace needs further empirical and conceptual research to establish its nature, scope and boundaries as helping intervention in contrast with counselling, psychotherapy, mentoring, teaching or consulting. From a practitioner perspective, coaching is broadly defined as a developmental practice similar to mentoring, with the two terms often used interchangeably in practice, as suggested on the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) website:

“Coaching and mentoring are development techniques based on the use of one-to-one discussions to enhance an individual's skills, knowledge or work performance” (CIPD, 2017).

Executive coaching is a one-to-one intervention that involves the development of leadership skills. Typically, the purpose of executive coaching is to support individuals in transition between two roles, to prepare them for future challenging assignments and responsibilities. It is typically funded by the organisation as part of a leadership development and talent management strategy (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2015).

As an emerging profession attempting to assert and legitimise itself as a valuable practice for the development of individuals in organisations, coaching has drawn upon the theoretical framework of other established fields such as psychology, management, learning and sociology (Cox et al., 2014, Passmore et al., 2013). Executive coaching literature has developed under two dominant paradigms: (a) psychology, with a focus on understanding the coaching relationship and the behaviours conducive to leadership and performance enhancement; (b) HR development, with a focus on the evaluation of the impact of coaching in terms of effectiveness and return on investment (Flip and Renier, 2015). For instance, some scholars (Bachkirova, 2011, Smither, 2011, Drake, 2009, De Haan et al., 2016) have focused on unfolding the relationship between the coach and coachee by referring to psychology theories in an attempt to better understand the benefits of coaching in the workplace. Another stream of research is focused on understanding how coaching benefits the organisation as an effective investment in human capital and leadership and performance development (Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2015, Hawkins, 2012, Gregory and Levy, 2015).

From an academic perspective, the nature, scope and boundaries of coaching have been much debated (Feldman and Lankau, 2005, Joo, 2005a). A shared definition of executive coaching identifies it as a helping relationship between a coach and a coachee, who has managerial responsibilities, in the pursuit of individual and organisational success:

“a process of a one-on-one relationship between a professional coach and an executive (coachee) for the purpose of enhancing coachee's behavioral change through self-awareness and learning, and thus ultimately for the success of individual and organization” (Joo, 2005b: 468).

This definition assumes that coaching has a positive impact on both individual and organisational levels. Indeed, the benefits of coaching have been identified by a number of survey reports (CIPD, 2014, ILM, 2013a, ICF, 2013) including leadership, performance development and employee engagement. Yet, there is little empirical research on the role of coaching as it is perceived by the participants involved in GTM and LD programmes (Passmore et al., 2013, Clutterbuck et al., 2013, Clutterbuck, 2012).

Also, it has been claimed that executive coaching practices have been traditionally defined and developed in western countries (Kilburg, 2006, Whitmore, 1999, Cox et al., 2010, Kets de Vries, 2010a, Kets de Vries, 2010b) with limited references to cross cultural research in its practice. However, the

work from Rosinski (2003, 2010), Abbott (Cox et al., 2010) and the Centre for Creative Leadership (Ting and Scisco, 2006, Van Velsor et al., 2010) have contributed significantly to raise the awareness of the impact of culture in the coaching process. Yet, some scholars (Passmore et al., 2013) claim that as the practice of global coaching increases, particularly through executive programmes in multinational companies, more knowledge is needed about what is being done, what is possible and what is the impact of executive coaching interventions funded by large corporations.

In sum, despite a flourishing professional literature in the past 10 years and a steady interest from academics, executive coaching is still considered as a profession in its infancy and an emerging field of study (Flip and Renier, 2015). This literature review reveals that talent management and executive coaching share some similarities: that are both growing fields of study, initially led by practitioners, characterised by an empirical research lagging behind and a lack of consensus on the theoretical frameworks (Cascio and Boudreau, 2016, Flip and Renier, 2015). It is commonly argued that empirical research is needed in these fields to move towards a more mature discipline, with a focus on data collected at employee/coachee level, to reveal the perception of talent management and impact of coaching as a talent management practice (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016a, Blackman et al., 2016). Therefore, this study will explore the perception of the role coaching in the context of TM strategy to understand the underlying processes of career progression and leadership development of talented employees within a global firm.

3. Research Methodology

This study provides an in-depth qualitative case study of the role of coaching for leaders at various stages in their career development. The case study organisation is a multinational enterprise in the banking and financial services sector operating in more than 160 countries. It focuses on the leadership development and talent management programmes delivered by the company in the Europe and Middle East and Africa (EMEA) region, which accounts for 55 countries.

The primary data includes in-depth semi-structured interviews of (a) coachees from four different global TM and LD programmes, from Associate Vice President to Managing Director levels as defined by the organisational structure, (b) HR managers and programme leaders, (c) internal and external coaches. The participants were selected based on their participation to at least one of the four programmes deployed by the multinational company in EMEA as part of their talent management strategy. Each programme targets a specific level of career progression within the organisational structure of the company. Specifically, programme A involves emerging leaders, typically at the Associate Vice President or Vice President level. The second programme B is addressed to developing leaders at Senior Vice President up to Director level. The third programme C is dedicated to senior leaders at managing director level. The organisation has also designed a talent management programme for women leaders at senior level to support their career progression. This programme has also been included in the study, so that all talent management programmes deployed in the EMEA region could be analysed.

The interviews covered the following topics: delivery of coaching in the programme, views on coaching pre and post leaders' participation to the programme, purpose of the coaching, role of coaching related to global leadership development and career progression, and the impact of the global dimension of the programme.

4. Initial findings

The initial findings of this study reveals that coachees, coaches and HR managers acknowledge the benefits of coaching, especially when the coaching relationship continues after the end of the formal global TM and LD programme. This study suggests that coaching should be long-term, bespoke, developmental and interconnective in the context of global TM and LD.

4.1 Long-term

The initial analysis of data reveals that leaders value long-term internal coaching relationships to develop their leadership skills and map their career progression. Indeed, leaders see the coaching relationship as successful when it continues beyond the timeframe of the global TM and LD programme. When good chemistry happens, coaching tends to become a long-term relationship similar to mentoring. However, the long-term impact of this coaching, which is set up on a voluntary and informal basis, has not yet been evaluated. This could be further explored in future research.

4.2 Bespoke

Coaching is described as the “human and personal touch” in a large global organisation, allowing the coachees to step back, reflect and focus on their personal development. Leaders participants agree that the coaching agenda is flexible and addresses their personal needs such as work-life balance, leadership development, reputation building and career planning. In addition, readiness for coaching has been highlighted as a critical factor for coaching success. Yet, it is unclear whether cultural differences may bias the perception of leaders, the practice of coaching itself, and the aim and role of coaching.

4.3. Developmental

The study shows that all participants identify coaching as a developmental intervention as opposed to a remedial tool for performance management. However, some participants questioned the purpose of coaching at the beginning of the programme. Some perceived their nomination for a global TM and LD programme as unexpected and unclear since it was not previously discussed with their line manager. Yet, being identified as a talent is viewed as rewarding and motivating for leader participants.

4.4. Interconnective

Coaching is delivered by internal or external coaches who play different roles for leaders at different stages of their career. At all levels, the global TM and LD programmes include a one-day session with an external coach. Delivered as a masterclass by an inspirational speaker, these interventions focus on the development of generic business and interpersonal skills, such as public speaking, the art of sale or the delivery of strategy. The role of the coach is to motivate, teach and give feedback to participants. Hence, coaching may overlap with training in this context.

Additionally, external coaches are allocated exclusively to senior managers or executives due to cost imperatives. At senior level, coaching supports leaders to face challenges in the context of a transition between two positions. Also, it helps them to connect with the self to evolve as an authentic leader. Whereas for junior and middle managers, internal coaches are acting as “advocate, ambassadors and sponsors”. They open internal doors by establishing connections with people, business departments and geographical branches for future horizontal or vertical mobility. They enable leaders to navigate around politics in order to get on the career ladder, acting as developmental and sponsoring mentors.

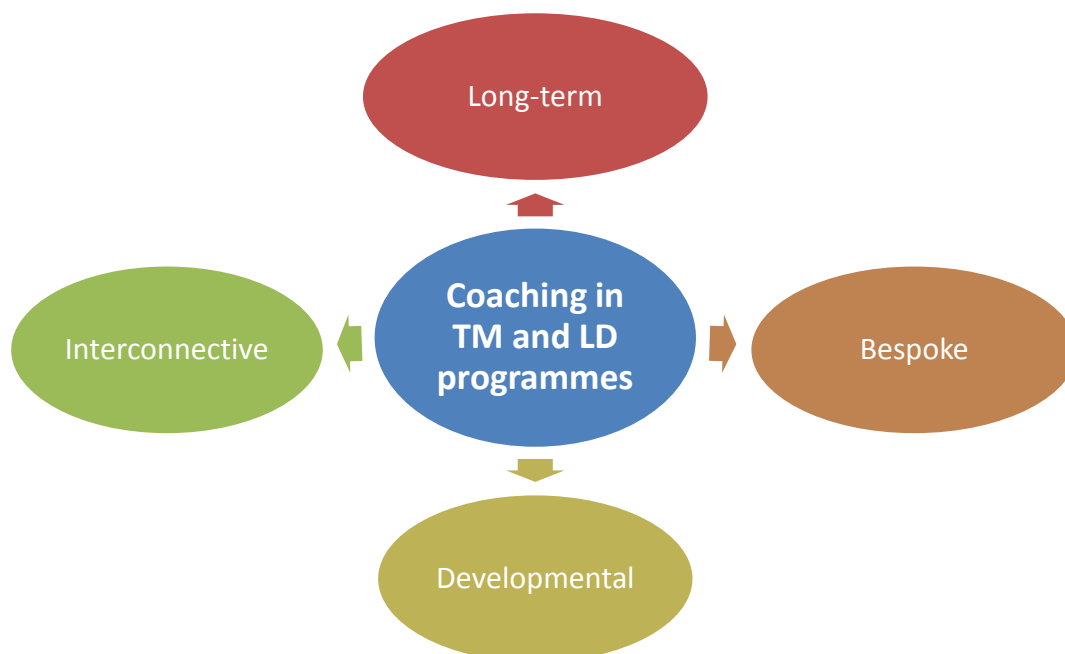


Figure 1: The key characteristics of coaching intervention in a global TM and LD programme

4.5. Coaching, a tool for transformational change

Coaching may have different purposes at individual and organisational levels. Besides the individual benefits of coaching, leaders confirm that they have gained or extended their coaching skills during the process. After experiencing a “taste of coaching” during the programme, leaders feel inspired to use coaching techniques with their team. HR managers and internal coaches strongly support this view. They claim that coaching is embedded in global TM and LD programmes to create a coaching culture in the organisation, enhance employee engagement and develop innovation. Hence, coaching is not only used as an intervention to develop individuals in a talent pipeline, but also as a strategic tool for transformational change at organisational level.

5. Final reflections and way forward

At this stage of initial analysis, the study reveals that HR managers and policy-makers may re-define the coaching intervention in the context of global MT and LD programmes for a greater impact. It suggests that TM in a large organisation may shift from an exclusive to inclusive approach by developing a coaching culture. It also suggests that coaching within a global TM and LD programme has a limited impact unless it continues informally after the programme. In their early career, leaders benefit more from networking, reputation building and sponsorship than from formal elements of global MT and LD programme. Senior leaders value external and internal coaching as trustworthy long-term relationships that support them to face challenges in their current position and career progression. Hence, global TM and LD strategy can be supported by long-term internal coaching provided to an enlarged pool of emerging talents and the combination of internal and external coaching for senior leaders.

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