Cognitive, Behavioral, and Affective Learning Outcomes of a Coaching Program

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Abstract

The following paper evaluates the cognitive, behavioral, and affective learning outcomes of a coaching program in an international law firm. The C-B-A framework is an application of Kraiger, Ford, & Salas' (1993) seminal evaluation work on learning outcomes and provides a holistic framework to organizing learning outcomes from coaching. This particular coaching program yielded statistically significant pre-post differences on affective variables such as job satisfaction and perceived organizational support. Posttest means and qualitative data also demonstrated coaching's impact on cognitive variables such as self-awareness, and behavioral variables such as relationship skills. Results, limitations, and implications for future coaching evaluation research are discussed.

Keywords

coaching outcomes, evaluation, Kirkpatrick, Kraiger

Coaching is an enormously popular intervention that lacks rigorous outcome research. There are at least 19,000 coaching practitioners worldwide (International Coach Federation, 2012) operating in an industry with an estimated global market value between one and two billion US dollars (Orenstein, 2006). Despite this, coaching research is in its infancy with less than 250 coaching outcome studies published since 1980. This lack of evidence has called the value of coaching into question and some have argued that there currently is no basis for coaching to be considered a viable intervention. One of the barriers to studying the efficacy of coaching is that there is no agreed upon approach or framework to evaluate coaching "outcomes." Studies that do exist evaluate outcomes differently making comparisons, as well as the accumulation and synthesis of knowledge, more challenging. This paper suggests an organizing framework for the evaluation of coaching programs and it models its use by examining the impact of a coaching program in a large law firm.

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Assessment Framework for Coaching Outcomes

An organizing framework that is used in assessment should clearly relate to purpose of coaching and allow for multiple outcomes to be easily examined. Performance coaching helps coachees maximize their own performance (Whitmore, 1992) by developing related skills and facilitating performance enhancing behavior change (Passmore, 2007). Goals for coaching also include enhancing the experience of work; this may involve (1) deepening self-awareness (Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker, and Fernandes, 2008), (2) improving job satisfaction and motivation (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001), (3) increasing feelings of support by the organization (Evers, Brouwers & Tomic, 2006), and (4) improving the well-being and self-regard of the coachee (Passmore, 2007). As a coaching research review noted (Greif, 2007, p. 241):

> A fundamental difficulty of coaching outcome research is the extreme heterogeneity of issues, problems and goals, which can be picked out as themes in different coaching interventions. Therefore, it is difficult to identify outcome measures which are applicable to the whole range of coaching interventions.

Rather than attempt to identify universal measures, a more pragmatic approach is to fit the multiple goals of coaching into a well-known framework: the Cognitive-Behavioral-Affective model of learning outcomes (Kraiger, Ford, & Salas, 1993).

Cognitive-Behavioral-Affective Model of Learning Outcomes

Kraiger et al.'s Cognitive-Behavioral-Affective model is supported by a wide variety of psychological domains and was introduced partly to addresses the shortcomings of Kirkpatrick's (1994) popular training evaluation framework. Kirkpatrick's pyramid model, displayed in Figure 1, is arguably the most-widely utilized framework in training evaluation due to its practical ease of understanding. Kirkpatrick identifies four levels of evaluation that progress from minimal to comprehensive: (1) positive reactions to training (e.g., "I'm happy with the instructor"), (2) achievement of learning objectives (e.g. "I learned effective communication techniques"), (3) transfer of learning into behavior change (e.g., "I use these communication techniques with customers"), and (4) explicit identification of results (e.g., "My Return-On-Investment was 500%"). Despite the utility of this approach, Kirkpatrick's framework has an important weakness that Kraiger et al.'s training evaluation model addresses. Unlike Kirkpatrick's model, Kraiger et al.'s framework highlights the "multidimensional" nature of learning by explicitly identifying learning outcomes as cognitive, skill-based, and affective.

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These three categories represent a more sophisticated understanding of learning as a construct, which is particularly important in coaching since learning in this arena is often nuanced, customized, and, at times transformational. Refraining from oversimplifying learning measures is critical to advance the science and practice of coaching evaluation because coaching, as noted previously, has multiple possible outcomes that may be evaluated depending on the client's and researcher's needs. Figure 1 compares the two models, their respective terms, and identifies this study's particular C-B-A variables. Please note that this study's particular C-B-A variables are listed in italics.

Cognitive	Behavioral	Affective
• Static knowledge • Dynamic process of knowledge acquisition, organization, & application ○ *Self-awareness*	• Development of technical skills ○ *Project management skills* ○ *Relationship skills*	• Development of attitudes, values, and appreciations ○ *Job satisfaction* ○ *Perceived organizational support*

Kirkpatrick's classic training evaluation model (1976)

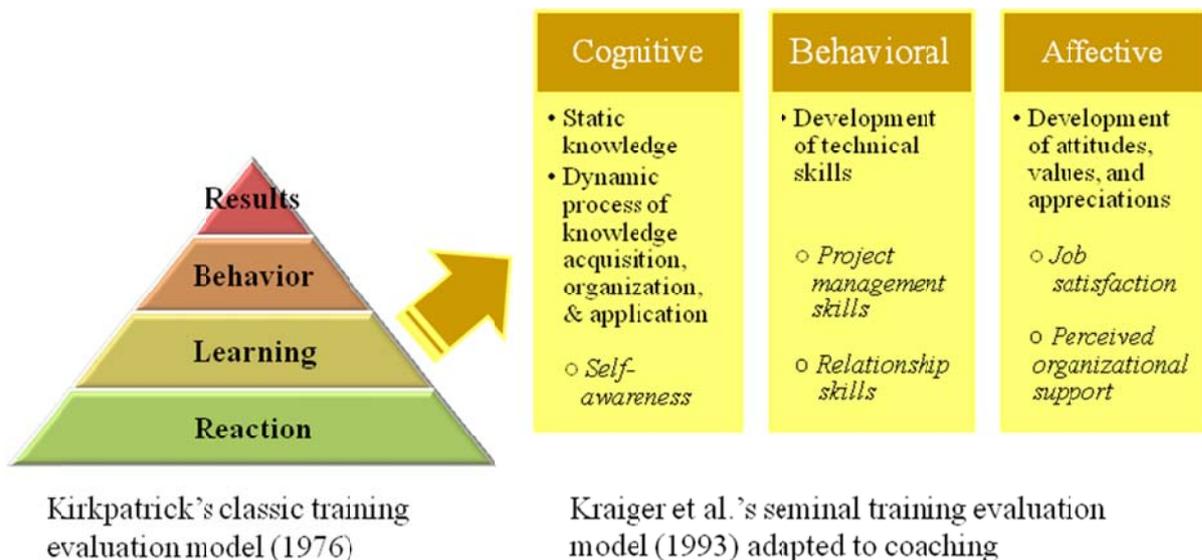Kraiger et al.'s seminal training evaluation model (1993) adapted to coaching

Figure 1. A comparison of two important training evaluation models

Kraiger et al.'s model elaborates on Kirkpatrick's "Level 2 Learning" construct. Notice Kirkpatrick's reaction measures are replicated under Kraiger et al.'s Affective category, and that Kraiger et al.'s model lacks an explicit focus on results or behavioral transfer. A further point of clarification: Kirkpatrick's "Level 3 Behavior" refers to the transfer of learning into new behaviors at work, while Kraiger's Behavioral category refers to the learning of behavioral skills, irrespective of their utilization. One can after all learn a skill and not use it. Taken together, the models support the established notion that learning is a precondition of behavior change.

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The Three Domains and Their Hypothesized Relationship to Coaching

Cognitive Domain

The cognitive domain of learning includes educational objectives dealing with the development of intellectual skills and understandings (Bloom, 1956). A cognitive perspective focuses not only on static states of coachee knowledge, but on the dynamic processes of knowledge acquisition, organization, and application (Kraiger et al., 1993). For example, research has demonstrated that coaching can help coachees acquire new modes of thinking (Evers et al., 2006), impact levels of self-reflection and insight (Grant, 2003), and increase self-awareness (Kombarakaran et al., 2008). In fact, "enhancing self-awareness" is considered by numerous coaching evaluation researchers as core to their definition and practice of coaching: "A new perspective develops by examining the underlying patterns of perception and behavior and utilizing that insight for change" (Kombarakaran et al., 2008, p. 79). Coaching programs often encourage participants to spend time reflecting on the assumption that this will lead to insight, and ultimately facilitate goal attainment and behavior change (Grant, 2003). Given the importance of self-awareness as a learned outcome of coaching, this study hypothesizes that:

Hypothesis 1: Coaching improves coachees' self-awareness.

Behavioral Domain

Kraiger et al. (1993) identified skill-based, or behavioral, learning outcomes as concerning the development of technical or motor skills. Some evidence exists that coaching can help employees acquire skills. For example, a cross-sectional field study utilizing qualitative and quantitative methods found that coachees said they learned new skills that were important in their day to day managerial activities, such as project management skills (Gegner, 1997). While Gegner relied on a self-report questionnaire and follow-up interviews, additional evidence is presented by Orenstein (2006) who relied on a 360-type analysis. Orenstein's pre-post examination of a coaching client's behaviors by 20 raters found behaviors directly related to coaching objectives (e.g., communication) were most influenced by coaching, while behaviors not related to coaching objectives were not influenced (e.g., sense of humor). In other words, there is reason to believe that coaching can develop a coachee's work related skills.

One of these important work-related skills, that is likely coachable, is relationship-building. Judge and Cowell (1997) found that help building trusting relationships and modifying interaction style rank high among skills frequently requested of coaches,

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while Gegner's field study found positive effects of coaching on social interactions with others (1997). An empirical examination of a large coaching program in a global pharmaceutical company provides more evidence (Kombarakaran et. al, 2008). One of the explicit aims of this program was to strengthen ties between the 114 coachees and their various reporting relationships, including their supervisor. A post-test examination found positive changes in this relationship: Seventy nine percent of coachees agreed that they established a more productive relationship with better communication and feedback as a result of coaching. Therefore, building on previous research in the behavioral domain, this study hypothesizes that coaching improves both project management and relationship skills:

Hypothesis 2a: Coaching improves coachees' project management skills
Hypothesis 2b: Coaching improves coachees' relationship skills

Affective Domain

The affective domain includes learning objectives that focus on the development of attitudes, values, and appreciations (Bloom, 1956). It is possible that coaching may have an impact on attitudinal variables such as job satisfaction. This is because: a) coaching is an indication that the organization is willing to invest in an employee, and b) if coaching improves a coachee's skills, it should also improve the coachee's job performance and job satisfaction. While coaching research has yet to verify this mechanism, elements of this rationale are supported by previous research on perceived organizational support, or POS (Eisenberger, Hutchingson, & Sowa, 1986) – the degree to which an employee feels valued by his or her organization. A professional career survey of 514 lawyers found, after controlling for firm size and several demographics (such as gender, organizational tenure and job position), that POS affected associates' attitude towards the organization (Loi, Hang-yue, & Foley, 2006). Furthermore, a meta-analysis of seventy POS studies (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) indicated that beneficial treatment received by employees (e.g., supervisor support and organizational rewards) were associated with POS and that POS, in turn, was related to favorable outcomes to individuals (e.g., job satisfaction) and the organization (e.g., performance). Given the importance of such outcomes, this study hypothesizes that coaching will have a positive impact on both job satisfaction and perceived organizational support.

Hypothesis 3a: Coaching improves coachees' job satisfaction
Hypothesis 3b: Coaching improves coachees' perceived organizational support

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Method

Participants and Program

Fifty second-year lawyer associates in a large international law firm, headquartered in New York, participated in a voluntary coaching program. Eight coaching sessions were made available to coachees for over a course of 3 months with the vast majority attending all sessions (~90%). Coachees selected an external coach from four experienced professionals based on biographical (e.g., industry experience) and demographic data (e.g., gender, race) made available to them. The program was framed to coachees as a developmental, as opposed to remedial, opportunity with the confidentiality of coaching conversations emphasized. The anonymity and confidentiality of evaluation surveys were also emphasized to encourage candid responses.

Design

Quantitative and qualitative measures assessed the impact of coaching on coachees. A survey distributed to coachees approximately one week before and one week after the coaching sessions were completed with response rates of 52% (pretest) and 46% (posttest). Qualitative data were collected from both coachees and coaches post intervention in order to provide another vantage point with which to help validate potential conclusions. Coachees were asked 3 open-ended questions (e.g., "What were the programs key benefits? Please elaborate."), and coaches were asked 12 open-ended questions (e.g., "To what extent are you being effective? How do you know?"). Qualitative data were reviewed for evidence of support and refute of specific hypotheses.

Quantitative Measures

All survey items were co-created with HR personnel using the Empathic Organic Questionnaire methodology. This method, first applied to executive coaching by Orenstein (2006), is a joint process of inquiry that develops the content of instruments from the experience of organizational members in the system under study. In-depth interviews with key organizational members – in this case with Professional Development & Training personnel – identified significant areas for examination with corresponding items vetted for maximum relevance to the client organization. This study includes prettest-posttest measures as well as a number of posttest only items.

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All quantitative items were measured on a 10-point Likert-type scale with a score of "10" indicating "strongly agree," a midpoint score of "5" indicating "neutral", and a score of "1" indicating "strongly disagree."

Self-awareness. Two post-test items measured self-awareness of coachees, with a scale Alpha of .80. For example, "Coaching program helped me gain a clearer understanding of my strengths."

Project Management Skills. Three items measured coachee's project management skills, with a scale Alpha of .61. For example, "I manage my projects effectively."

Relationship Skills. The following posttest item measured coaching's impact on relationship skills: "Coaching helped me develop my relationships at work."

Job Satisfaction. Adapting Westaby's (2006) measures, the following pretest-posttest items were used to investigate job satisfaction (Alpha .88):

"I would characterize my experience at the Firm as having

   a. Job flexibility
   b. Job security
   c. Good Benefits
   d. Enjoyable Work
   e. Good Opportunities in the Future
   f. Good Relationships with Partners
   g. Good Relationships with Sr. Associates
   h. Good Relationships with Peers"

Perceived organizational support (POS). Four pretest-posttest items measured POS (Alpha .88). For example, "I feel the Firm is invested in my professional development."

Results

Independent samples T-tests were used to evaluate pretest-posttest measures since matching subject responses across testing periods was not possible in this organizational context. The need to preserve the confidentiality of coachees superseded concerns about research design, which is a common challenge of conducting coaching research in applied settings (Ellam-Dyson & Palmer, 2008). See

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Table 1 for data gathered, including descriptive statistics of posttest-only measures.

Table 1.

Quantitative Results of C-B-A Measures

Learning Outcome Category Measures	Prettest Mean (*SD*)	Posttest Mean (*SD*)	Cronbach's Alpha
Cognitive			
Self-awareness	-	8.1 (1.6)	.80
Behavioral			
Project Management skills	5.0 (1.6)	4.7 (1.1)	.61
Relationship skills	-	7.8 (1.9)	a
Affective			
Job satisfaction*	6.9 (1.4)	7.9 (1.2)	.88
Perceived Organizational Support*	6.1 (2.0)	7.3 (1.9)	.88

Note. Mean scores were assessed on a 10-point scale. *SD* stands for standard deviation.

a Conbach's Alpha not calculated since this was a single item measure

* $p < .05$.

Cognitive Learning Results

The first hypothesis stated that coaching improves coachees' self-awareness. Posttest measures indicated that coachees and coaches perceive that coaching helped coachees gain a greater understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. A high mean of 8.1 with a relatively low standard deviation indicates that most coachees are in agreement. Numerous qualitative comments by coachees also support this conclusion, such as "It provided a good outlet to discuss my challenges, goals, strengths, and areas for improvement in my career path." Qualitative comments from coaches also support this notion, such as "Clients have expressed gaining both enhanced self-awareness and concrete action steps, which they have implemented to address specific goals and challenges."

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Behavioral Learning Results

The second hypotheses stated that coaching improves coachees' (a) project management skills and (b) relationship skills.

Project management skills. Pretest-posttest data suggested that coaching did not improve project management skills. A *t* statistic was not significant at the .05 level with 44 degrees of freedom: $t(44) = 0.9$, $p > .05$. However, qualitative data indicated that at least some coachees improved their project management skills. For example, "[Coaching] helped me break big tasks down, to look for small wins… and then celebrate getting some things knocked off." This is also supported by qualitative data from coaches, such as:

> *Some examples [of coached skill development] include: setting up a daily prioritized "to do" list, reducing procrastination by engaging a difficult project for five minutes, learning to address a client group more effectively, paraphrasing and active listening with a partner for clarification and validation, and getting better assignments from Partners [supervisors].*

A relatively low alpha of 0.61 suggests further refinement of the project management items may help account for this discrepancy between the quantitative and qualitative data.

Relationship skills. Posttest data suggested that coaching improved coachees' relationship skills in the workplace. A posttest mean of 7.8 with a standard of deviation of 1.9 implies that enhanced relationship skills were perceived by many coachees as a concrete deliverable. Qualitative data from coachees supported this conclusion. For example, "I also liked learning new strategies for developing professional relationships." Qualitative data from coaches provided further evidence: for example, "[Coachee] reported in each [coaching] meeting on the progress made in networking in the firm to form key alliances."

Affective Learning Results

The third hypotheses stated that coaching improves coachees' (a) job satisfaction and (b) perceived organizational support.

Job satisfaction. Pretest-posttest data suggested that coaching improved coachees' job satisfaction. There was a significant difference in job satisfaction pre-post: $t(45) = -2.4*$

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p <.05. Qualitative data from coachees also supported this notion. For example, "[Coaching's] key benefit is having a safe, supportive, and intelligent person to discuss fears, hopes, etc. It helped me see how happy I am. Learn how to improve my performance by working more efficiently and communicating better, and chart out a plan for professional growth." Coaches' quotes concurred: "Client feedback that their daily work satisfaction, confidence, motivation, development, and value-added contributions have been increasing."

Perceived organizational support (POS). Prettest-posttest data suggested that coaching improved coachees' POS. There was a significant difference in POS pre-post: $t(45) = -2.0^*$ $p <.05$. Qualitative data from coachees supported this notion. For example, "[Coaching Program] shows the Firm's investment in us."

Discussion

Connecting Results to Literature

Cognitive Results. This study's finding that coaching enhanced the self-awareness of coachees is in line with previous research and theory on the purpose and impact of coaching (e.g., Evers et al., 2006, Kombarakaran et al., 2008). Self-awareness also appears to be fundamental to recent publications on cognitive behavioral executive coaching (Good, Yeganeh, & Yeganeh, 2010) and mindful experiential learning practices (Yeganeh & Kolb, 2009). Overall, therefore, it is anticipated that this cognitive variable will continue to appear in the ever-expanding body of coaching research.

Behavioral Results. This study's mixed support for the hypothesis that coaching improves coachee's project management skills may relate, as stated previously, to the low alpha coefficient yielded. The alpha score of 0.61 is below the 0.70 "acceptability" standard (George & Mallery, 2003). Another possible explanation relates to a recent empirical study on coaching and project management outcomes by Hagen (2010). Linear regression analysis on survey data collected from six organizations found the independent variable *coaching expertise* to account for most of the variance in project management outcomes. In other words, Hagen's study suggests that skilled project management requires the ability to coach direct reports, in addition to abilities to prioritize and manage one's time effectively.

This study's finding that coaching enhanced the relationship skills of coachees aligns with previous research findings (e.g., Gegner, 1997, Kombarakaran et al., 2008). It also

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aligns with a recent case study on four professionals, which found coaching to be an effective vehicle to develop coachees' relationship skills (Hurd, 2009). Overall, therefore, evidence continues to mount linking coaching and the development of "soft people skills."

Affective Results

This study's statistically significant finding that coaching enhances both a coachee's (1) job satisfaction and (2) perceived organizational support aligns with recent coaching publications. Specifically, this study provides empirical evidence to theoretical linkages between coaching and job satisfaction proposed by Britton (2008). This study's findings also align with a recent quasi-experimental study of 64 bank employees, which found coaching to positively affect job satisfaction (Kauffeld & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2010). Finally, this study's findings relate to the two between-subject studies conducted by Grant and his colleagues linking coaching to workplace well-being (Grant & Green, 2010, Grant, Curtayne, & Burton, 2009). Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that coaching can indeed yield significant affective learning outcomes.

Limitations

Like most evaluations of coaching programs, no control group or random assignment was available for this study (Greif, 2007; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). Lack of funding, appreciation, and political capital/will for more thorough coaching research (Bennet, 2006) prevented more experimental control and thus this study is vulnerable to numerous internal and external threats to validity including history and maturation (Campbell & Stanley, 1966). For example, job satisfaction may have increased among all second-year associates in the Firm during the observation period, not only for those who experienced coaching. When control groups and random assignment are not possible, as in the present study, the use of both qualitative and quantitative data from multiple sources (e.g., coaches and coachees) increases confidence in results. Another limitation of this study is that only the perceptions of coachees and coaches were utilized. No objective measures, such as standardized testing or billable hours, were available to calculate learning or coaching's impact on job performance. While several reviews document the validity of self-ratings for psychological assessment (e.g., Shrauger & Osberg, 1981), self-report measures are subject to bias and should ideally coincide with other empirical verification to allow for convergent validity and discriminant validity (Campbell and Fiske, 1959). Furthermore, a number of measures in this study were limited to post-test only measures. While retrospective studies –

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identified as having only one measurement time at the end of the coaching period – is common among coaching studies (Evers et al., 2006; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001), they may suffer from hindsight bias. That is, respondents' memories may have influenced the entered data, resulting in actual facts and situations not being accurately reported. Utilizing a more robust design and measures, such as adding a longitudinal assessment 6 months after the coaching intervention or supplementing self-reports with 360 degree feedback data, would help eliminate related concerns.

Implications

This study demonstrated that coaching may directly impact all aspects of an employee's learning: cognitive, behavioral, and affective. Influencing the "head, heart, and hands" of an employee can have potentially profound implications for both the individual and the organization. For example, the present study revealed that coaching may raise an employee's perceived organizational support. The importance of securing high POS among professional workers is well documented (Loi et al., 2006), and given that law firms employ various strategies to induce commitment from their members (Loi et al., 2006; Wallace, 1995a), it appears that coaching may be a good option. Coaching could be particularly useful to this population given that promotion from associate to partner represents a significant income and career advancement for lawyers (Nelson, 1988; Wallace, 1995b; Wholey, 1985) and that internal labor markets commonly exist in law firms (Loi et al., 2006). In other words, future partners are often located "in-house" and investing in the career development of associates may reap long-term benefits. However, this possibility remains to be investigated. Of particular interest is whether or not an increase in POS translates into increased productivity or retention rates in an intense work environment like a law firm. Some coachees may gain self-awareness through the coaching process that they are not a good fit for the organization. Future research can examine if this potential decrease in motivation and increase in attrition is offset by a potential increase in productivity and satisfaction of coachees who are a good fit in the organization and remain.

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