

Athanasopoulou, A., & Dopson, S. (2018). A systematic review of executive coaching outcomes: Is it the journey or the destination that matters the most? *The Leadership Quarterly*, 29(1), 70-88.

As coaches, we universally understand and appreciate the power and impact of coaching. In our coaching practices, we have all witnessed the learning, adaptability and positive changes in developmental trajectories that are afforded to our clients in the context of coaching engagements built around trust, rapport and a mutual aspiration toward the client's overall growth. For almost all of us, as our experiences attest, the question of *whether* coaching works has already largely been answered. What remains an open empirical question, and what has driven so much of the scholarship that has emerged around coaching, is *how* and *why* it works. With so much persistent variability characterizing its practice with respect to the training, professional history and discursive approaches of individual coaches, there continues to be a lack of clarity around much of the specific benefits of coaching, as well as a lack of consensus around what are the outcomes that matter most and how they might be quantified.

Andromachi Athanasopoulou and Sue Dopson - at the University of London and Oxford University, respectively - sought to shed light on this current gap in our understanding by endeavoring to assess the industry across three simultaneous dimensions of coaching: (1) the *who* - i.e. the coach and who they are, (2) the *what* - i.e. what is the coach's agenda or framework, and (3) the *how* - i.e. what approach or modality do the coaches employ. In a comprehensive review article recently published in *The Leadership Quarterly*, the authors asked two broad questions prior to conducting their review: (1) *How* are coaching outcomes researched and *what* are the strengths and weaknesses of their research designs? and (2) *What* do we know about coaching outcomes and how and *why* do social/contextual factors affect these outcomes?

In concluding, the authors make six broad evidence-based recommendations for coaching practitioners: (1) Coaches should curiously inquire about the social context the coachee occupies prior to the beginning of the coaching session. That is, they should understand the rituals and routines, systems, structures, and power dynamics which characterize the organization, and use this information to shape the nature of the coaching session. Such a background understanding of social context can produce outcomes which connect the coachee's development across the individual, group/departmental and organizational levels (2) Coaches should explore the perceived 'demands' of the coachee's job, and seek to establish whether these are based on constraints or choices, and whether they are real or imagined (3) Coaches themselves should be mindful of their own background assumptions and views about leadership in general, and determine whether these positions are in alignment with both the coachee's and the coachee's organization. This makes it easier to have meaningful, mutualistic discussions about the social and contextual challenges facing the coachee within their organization (4) Assessment instruments such as 360-degree feedback surveys should be administered - carefully and developmentally - in concert with a coaching engagement. Such instruments should ensure at least a partial focus on the coachee's strengths, and not merely on their deficits. Reviewing feedback from others about what they appreciate in the coachee can set the stage for a greater sense of empowerment on the coachee's part (5) Coaches should explore how their perceived social desirability, and the relational benefits they feel they may reap from being coached, relate to their inclination and motivation to mastering new leadership skills, seeking new knowledge, and embracing a personal ethos of achievement in general. Coaches should explore how whether social perceptions and social success influence the coachee's capacity for achieving key coaching outcomes, and should also mindfully self-reflect on whether these same forces influence their own approach to mastery and knowledge acquisition (6) Practitioners should explore ways that coaching can be integrated with other leadership development initiatives - such as management training and other leadership programs - in order to produce stronger developmental outcomes than coaching as a standalone practice.