

Tamir, L. M., & Finfer, L. A. (2016). Executive coaching: The age factor. *Consulting psychology journal: practice and research*, 68(4), 313.

Do people respond differently to coaching as they get older?

This was the question that Lois Tamir and Laura Finfer of Leadership Excellence Coaching sought to answer in an article recently published in *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*. The authors carefully reviewed a selection of psychology literature in an effort to broadly characterize the life stages of one's 30's, 40's and 50's, and in turn generate hypotheses about how these characteristics might relate to coaching and development. The authors determined that, in general, one's 30's are characterized by idealism, adherence to newly acquired rules about one's vocation, and a preference for absolutes over ambiguity. In their 40's, people are more appreciative of the often paradoxical and ambiguous nature of life, and view the world with more compassion. Finally, in their 50's, people tend to extend on the developing personal dynamics first launched in their 40's; exhibiting greater cognitive and emotional flexibility, tolerance of others, and an increased ability to reconcile seemingly contradictory content.

The authors then identified four key outcomes of executive coaching: responsiveness (how do executives appreciate and commit to coaching protocols); self-reflection (how do executives introspect and scrutinize their own values); non-defensiveness (how do executives accept responsibility for their role, and positively engage with personal evaluations and change); and degree of behavior change (to what degree did the executive achieve the objectives of the coaching engagement). Based on their evaluation of the psychology literature they had canvassed, the authors hypothesized that executive in their 30's would be less responsive, less self-reflective, less non-defensive and less changeable.

Two of these hypotheses were confirmed in the study, which showed that, for executives engaged in coaching, self-reflection and degree of change increased with age. The study also produced additional results, with skepticism, diligence and dutifulness decreased with age. The authors suggest that these findings speak to the notion that, as they age, executives engaged in coaching become more open to criticism, flexible, and less dependent on others' approval. The implications of the findings in this study are that coaching might need to be tailored based on the age group or life stage of the coachee. Coachees in their 30's are less likely to be amenable to change compared to older executives, and operate based on rigid rules and perceptions of the world. They are at a stage where they are seeking to establish themselves and will pursue this objective in a focused fashion. This is not to say that those in their 30's are not motivated to develop themselves, or are otherwise unresponsive to coaching interventions. Rather they simply are not at a stage where they are naturally inclined to introspect about themselves in depth, and may require the gentle guidance of a coaching to facilitate this act of exploring oneself.

In contrast, coachees in their 40's and 50's are more likely to accept imperfection and ambiguity. They are more inclined to engage in introspection and to more effortlessly achieve change. They exhibit greater flexibility, have less to prove, and can therefore embrace new approaches to their professional lives with genuine openness. It is a "shades of grey" stage of one's career, compared to the "black and white" nature of one's 30's. While the authors stopped short of making specific coaching prescriptions for practitioners, the principal take-home message of this article is that different or additional coaching techniques might be required to coach for the same outcomes across executives in different age groups, and for coaches to be cognizant of the career and life stage of their coachees as they modify their coaching strategies.