

Hui, R. T. Y., & Sue-Chan, C. (2018). Variations in coaching style and their impact on subordinates' work outcomes. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 39(5), 663-679.

Change and complexity are perhaps the most reliable constants in organizational life. The ability of individuals to navigate an ever-changing organizational landscape is one of the most prized developmental milestones among leaders and employees aspiring toward superior job performance. Relatedly, the benefits of executive coaching are perhaps never more apparent than when they manifest in a coachee's improved capacity to accommodate change and leverage it for improved personal performance. But change in and of itself is insufficient in the currency of executive development. The resulting change must also be accompanied by an improvement in one's ability to *adapt* to that change: to change *oneself* in lockstep with a relevant change in the external environment. As coaches, we, too, must adapt our approaches to coaching to meet the adaptability requirements of those with whom we are participating in a coaching relationship. Management scholars from two different universities in Hong Kong recently endeavored to find out which approaches to coaching might best lend themselves to facilitating *adaptive performance* - defined as "task-performance-directed behaviors individuals enact in response to or in anticipation of changes relevant to job-related tasks" - on the part of coachees in the context of a supervisor-subordinate relationship. The authors were also interested to see whether such differences in coaching approaches also had different effects on task performance and job-related anxiety. The study drew from a large sample of Chinese participants across a variety of industries and organizations, and collected data over multiple time waves. The study was recently published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.

In the study, the authors employed two different approaches to coaching within a supervisor-subordinate relationship to guide their hypotheses: *guidance coaching* and *facilitation coaching*. Guidance coaching refers to coaching for which the supervisor acts as a role model: employing clear feedback and expectations on the part of coachees, and using verbal persuasion and behavioral modeling to promote new knowledge and capabilities and guide improvements in job-related behaviors. Facilitation coaching, in contrast, is about direct empowerment of the coachee themselves: supervisors encourage subordinates to guide themselves through the exploration of possible solutions to relevant job tasks, and create the conditions through which supervisors are stimulated to develop self-mastery of job behaviors. The authors hypothesized that facilitation coaching would positively contribute to adaptive performance, while guidance coaching would negatively impact upon it. The rationale behind this difference was that facilitation coaching ought to promote deeper learning among subordinates: prompting them to explore and analyze solutions on their own, rather than merely readopting a proven strategy as communicated to them by their supervisor. This kind of deep learning should, as the authors hypothesized, bring out a responsiveness on the part of subordinates, such that they can adapt their performance more reflexively when confronted with changes in the job environment than could someone who was guided extensively by someone else in the face of such change. Conversely, the authors also hypothesized that facilitation coaching would be *negatively* related to task performance (and guidance coaching positively related to it), and that facilitation coaching would be negatively associated with the subordinates' job-related feelings of anxiety (i.e. facilitation coaching ought to alleviate or mitigate job-related feelings of anxiety).

And so it turned out: facilitation coaching was indeed predictive of adaptive performance on the part of the subordinates within the coaching relationship, as per the authors' hypotheses. This finding was consistent with the notion that an exploratory mindset on the part of the subordinates being coached by a supervisor lends itself to enactive learning: whereby one must develop skills and strategies which generalize across a range of experiences. Guidance coaching on the other hand, dependent as it is on observational learning and a more tethered relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate they are coaching, did not positively predict adaptive performance; also as the authors hypothesized. These findings were reversed in the case of regular task performance. Interestingly, the authors' hypotheses regarding the relationship between facilitation coaching and job-related feelings of anxiety were also supported. The authors note that this finding lends further support to the proposition that facilitation coaching is an approach which empowers the person being coached and gives *them* the requisite sense of control for improved adaptive performance: arming them with the personal repertoire required to negotiate ever-changing demands in the organizational environment.

While the authors pointed out the limitations of their study, and encouraged future research initiatives to shore up their findings, these results contribute substantively to the existing canon of work which underlies the tremendous advantages afforded by facilitation-based approaches to coaching. While guidance-based approaches may bear some short-term fruit in terms of reducing errors and encouraging rapid uptake of learning, as well as exposing those receiving coaching to task conditions in which optimal performance can be benchmarked, they are nevertheless approaches which constrain autonomy and self-mastery for the subordinates in question. Facilitation-based approaches put the senses of control and mastery within the purview of the subordinate themselves - the buck stops with *them* with respect to how their performance in a job role can be changed and adapted to suit changes in the environment. Playing the long game, supervisors in coaching roles can use facilitation coaching to better prepare their subordinates for the complexity of organizational life, as well as giving them a toolbox through which they can develop their own developmental tools.