Does executive coaching work? The questions every coach needs to ask and (at least try to) answer

Rob B Briner
Some of The Questions

1. What are the general claims made for executive coaching and what it can achieve?

2. What claims do I make as a coach to my clients about the effectiveness of executive coaching and my coaching practice?

3. What do I know about the size and quality of the evidence-base for the effectiveness of coaching?

4. What do I know about what this evidence tells us about the general effectiveness of executive coaching?

5. What does my experience of coaching tell me about the effectiveness of coaching?

6. Does coaching work (given particular outcomes) better than not doing coaching?
Some more of The Questions

7. Does coaching work better than doing something else which might be cheaper and quicker?

8. If coaching is effective, are these effects sustained over time?

9. Are the effects of coaching worth having in terms of clinical or practical significance?

10. What are the costs of coaching? Does it have any negative effects?

11. If coaching does have negative effects can these outweigh the positive effects?

12. What are the ethical issues, if any, raised by your answers to these questions?

13. What are the professional and practice implications, if any, of your answers to these questions?
The underlying logic of evidence-based practice

- Practitioners in any field routinely make decisions and judgements (e.g., about interventions)
- Those decisions are based on evidence of various types
- Using evidence that is not relevant or valid is likely to lead to bad decisions and bad outcomes
- The more valid and relevant evidence that is used the better the decision and outcome is likely to be
Some common misconceptions around EBP and coaching

- Coaching is already an strongly evidence-based practice. *Lots of evidence but little good evidence about effectiveness (see later)*

- Evidence means quantitative ‘scientific’ evidence. *No. Evidence just means information – like the use of ‘evidence’ in legal settings – anything might count if it’s valid and relevant*

- Evidence-based practice means practitioners cannot use their professional expertise. *No. Expertise is another form of knowledge which can be as valid or relevant as any other*
Where does the idea of evidence-based practice come from?

- What field is this?
  - “a research-user gap”
  - “practitioners do not read academic journals”
  - “the findings of research into what is an effective intervention are not being translated into actual practice”
  - “academics not practitioners are driving the research agenda”
  - “the relevance, quality and applicability of research is questionable”
  - “practice is being driven more by fads and fashions than research”
Evidence-Based Practice in medicine

1960s  Emergence of Evidence-based Practice: Fairly inconspicuous for 30 years

1991  British Medical Journal: Where is the Wisdom?
Only 15–20% of medical interventions were supported by solid medical evidence

1992  British Medical Journal: Scandal of Medical Research
Many practices do more harm than good

1993  Cochrane Collaboration formed

1995  Smith and Sackett launch ‘Journal of Evidence-based Medicine’

1995  BBC TV program: Medicine was driven more by fads and fashion than research

1996  By the end of the year most British Doctors had heard of EBP: British Minister of Health – new mission to pursue EBP
Evidence-Based Practice *in other fields*

1998 Education
1998 Probation service
1999 Housing policy
1999 Social care
1999 Regeneration policy and practice
2000 Nursing
2000 Criminal justice
2005 Management?
2003 Coaching?
International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring

hosted by the International Centre for Coaching & Leadership Development at Oxford Brookes University Business School
Grant (2005)

- An evidence-based approach to coaching can make the difference between the often overhyped coaching that tends to be adapted from personal development and motivational programs and professional coaching that draws on solid theory and research. Yet, if there is so little peer-reviewed coach specific literature, how can we have evidence-based coaching?

- It refers to the intelligent and conscientious use of the *best current knowledge* in making decisions about how to deliver coaching to clients, and in designing and teaching coach-training programs...
Evidence-based coaching: Flourishing or languishing?

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- The meaning of “evidence-based” not discussed
- What practicing in an evidence-based way not discussed
Evidence-based coaching?

- The expression “evidence-based” used quite a lot but...

- Used to refer mostly to the idea that there needs to be more research on coaching that is used by practitioners

- This is only one part of evidence-based practice

- Little discussion of what evidence-based coaching would be in practice
Evidence-Based Coaching

By Bret, April 3, 2012 9:34 pm

In this article I’d like to discuss the importance of Evidence-Based Coaching (EBC) and what EBC means to me. Many of you might have read up on the topic of “Evidence-Based Practice” (click the link to read about it on Wikipedia). Many fields have adopted this approach to decision-making and typically it relies upon the research, meaning that the literature tends to dictate one’s practices.

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In this article I’d like to discuss the importance of Evidence-Based Coaching (EBC) and what EBC means to me. Many of you might have read up on the topic of “Evidence-Based Practice” (click the link to read about it on Wikipedia). Many fields have adopted this approach to decision-making and typically it relies upon the research, meaning that the literature tends to dictate one’s practices.

If we stuck to this definition for EBC, then I would strongly disagree with sticking to this approach. Why? Strength & Conditioning research is very young, and there’s so much we don’t know. Many coaches say that S&C is “an art and a science,” but to me it’s all science. In other words, I believe that any “art” a coach describes could easily be turned into a cool study, in which case it would then be labelled “science.”

We therefore must rely upon all forms of evidence in our decision-making, and the practice of EBC involves carefully considering the quality, relevance, and importance of each piece of evidence in order to formulate a decision. EBC should be fluid and flexible to accommodate new-found evidence.
About Sam

Sam Leahey is a Personal Trainer working primarily with athletes in the Philadelphia and surrounding area. His clientele is based mostly out of Optimal Sports and Health Club. Prior strength and conditioning employments include Springfield College and American International College and before that working at Equinox Fitness Club as a Tier 3 personal trainer. In earlier years he sought tutelage from some of the most credible, successful, and high quality coaches, trainers, and physical therapists in the United States. Through these diverse mentorships as well as his own real world applications, Sam possesses the unique ability to combine his backgrounds in academics, athletics, and extended mentorships to create highly effective programs for optimal health and performance to athletes and clients of all backgrounds, ages, and abilities.

Sam took on his first client in 2004 at a typical Gold’s Gym in Cranston Rhode Island and has since worked with a wide demographic both through internships and his own employments. These demographics range from general fitness clients to high school, collegiate, minor league/semi-pro, professional, and Olympic level athletes. Furthermore these demographics were spread over both collegiate and high school settings as well as private training facilities and commercial gyms around the country. He has been a guest author on Eric Cressey, Michael Boyle, Bret Contreras, Patrick Ward, Mark Young, and Robbie Bourke’s websites as well as being published by www.T-Nation.com, www.StrengthCoach.com, and Personal Trainer Development Center. Currently he publishes a free
“Evidenced-based” is a term coming into fruition more and more these days in the coaching profession. The intent behind this push is to hold coaches accountable for a professional and higher quality practice. However many unaware of such things misconstrue “evidence-based” to be some abstract and mystical way of thinking or coaching. This is simply a misunderstanding/interpretation of what being “evidence-based” actually means. I suspect this piece will be the demythologization for said individuals. Coaches assume “evidence = research.” This is incorrect; therefore a discussion is needed that in the end will gain us a novel appreciation and clarity that hopefully makes us better at what we do.
Science Evidence
- Biologically Plausible

Athlete/Client Evidence
- Values
- Preferences
- Circumstances

Optimal & Professional Coaching Decisions

Research Evidence
- Levels 1-5

Coaching Experience(s) Evidence
- Acute
- Chronic
What is evidence-based practice?

- “Evidence-based management is about making decisions through the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of four sources of information: practitioner expertise and judgment, evidence from the local context, a critical evaluation of the best available research evidence, and the perspectives of those people who might be affected by the decision.” (Briner et al., 2009, p. 19)
Evidence-based coaching

- **Element 1:** Practitioner expertise and judgement. *The coach’s own experience and judgement.*

- **Element 2:** Evidence from the local context. *The organization and the client.*

- **Element 3:** Critical evaluation of best available research evidence. *Published (and maybe unpublished) coaching research.*

- **Element 4:** Perspectives of those who may be affected by intervention decision. *The views or preferences of the organization and the client.*
Some immediate problems...

- Coaches already have a ‘solution’
- Clients already have an ill-defined ‘problem’ which they already believe coaching may fix
- Coaches are, on the whole, employed to do coaching
- Coaches are usually freelance – if they want income they need to do what the client wants (unless have a large potential client base)
- Little opportunity or demand for individual coaches to engage in full-on evidence-based practice (diagnosis or assessment, large range of possible interventions)
- Though doing more evidence-based practice possible
One of The Questions

- What are the general claims made for executive coaching and what it can achieve?
General claims...for example

- We help people [through coaching] ... increase their leadership capacity.
- Coaching positively impacts the bottom line by retaining people and fulfilling their potential as growth happens.
- We are experienced coaches and have helped hundreds of people to ... find more fulfilling work.
- Coaching is ... a proven, practical way to achieve your goals more quickly and effectively than you would otherwise do.
- [Coaching] ... helped individuals and businesses achieve their goals at the highest levels.
Some of The Questions

- What do I know about the size and quality of the evidence-base for the effectiveness of coaching?
- What do I know about what this evidence tells us about the general effectiveness of executive coaching?
- Does coaching work (given particular outcomes) better than not doing coaching?
But what about the evidence?

- Whether or not [coaching] does what it proposes, however, remains largely unknown because of the lack of empirical studies. Some also question whether executive coaching is just another fad in the long list of fads that have occurred in consultation and business. (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001, p.205)

- To improve our understanding of whether these professional coaching relationships really make a difference, though, much more rigorous research is needed. (Feldman & Lankau, 2005, pp.842–843)

- ... what is immediately vital is evidenced-based evaluation of coaching...it requires evidence-based research of the highest quality. Only then can one begin to make honest and accurate claims about what it can offer. (Adrian Furnham, 2007)
Some views of the evidence-base

- It is imperative that as psychologists we develop an evidence base to support and extend this work. We need to know what works, why, and for whom ... An evidence-based approach is the foundation on which our future success will be built, and the yardstick against which it will ultimately be measured: without this evidence base, we risk becoming pedlars of the latest self-help fashion, a situation that would serve neither us as professionals nor the people who we strive to serve. (Alex Linley, 2007)

- the development of coaching specific theory and evidence-based practice is a major challenge facing academics, researchers and practitioners. (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007, p.241)
Some views of the evidence-base

- The literature search failed to reveal any randomised controlled outcome studies which examined the impact of executive coaching conducted by professional executive coaches. (Grant, Curtayne & Burton, 2009, p 396)

- I’m aware of no research that has followed coached executives over long periods; most of the evidence around effectiveness remains anecdotal. (Ram Charan, 2009)

- ...we would hope to see by 2015 a detailed meta-analysis of coaching as an intervention drawing on 40-100 RCT peer reviewed published studies. (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011, p 80).
The coaching evidence-base narrative

- Quite a lot of coaching research has been done.
- Relatively little of it is good-quality research about coaching outcomes.
- We don’t really know with any degree of certainly or precision whether coaching as an intervention works in longer-term with non self-report outcomes compared to other interventions.
- More of this sort of research is urgently needed
The coaching evidence-base narrative

- Without research that demonstrates its benefits, coaching as a profession and activity may wither and die (though many HR practices are without demonstrated benefit)

- But don’t worry – more and better research is being done all the time.

- Pretty soon we will have enough RCTs and coaching outcome studies to do a meta-analysis
This narrative is weird/unusual

- There are many areas of OP and HRM where extremely popular practices lack good quality evidence for there.
- Both researchers and (more so?) practitioners tend to claim that the evidence is good or at least promising and growing.
- Why are many coaching researchers and some practitioners prepared to openly admit ignorance?
Some of The Questions – with answers

- Does coaching work better than doing something else which might be cheaper and quicker? *We do not know.*

- If coaching is effective, are these effects sustained over time? *We do not know.*

- Are the effects of coaching worth having in terms of clinical or practical significance? *We do not know.*

- What are the costs of coaching? Does it have any negative effects? *We do not know.*

- If coaching does have negative effects can these outweigh the positive effects? *We do not know.*
Using evidence and information

- How can individual coaches critically evaluate the quality and relevance of their own experience and judgement?
- What (valid) tools and techniques are available to get information (and perspectives and preferences) from organizations and clients and how can that information be critically evaluated?
One of The Questions

- What claims do I make as a coach to my clients about the effectiveness of executive coaching and my coaching practice?
**Excerpt 1:** Ensure that clients ... are given ample opportunity to understand the nature, purpose, and anticipated consequences of any professional services ... so that they may give informed consent... *But what is nature, and are the purposes and consequences of coaching? How is informed consent possible?*

**Excerpt 2:** Psychologists should ... (iii) Remain abreast of scientific, ethical, and legal innovations germane to their professional activities ... *Do coaching psychologists remain abreast?*
**Excerpt 3:** Psychologists should: ... (i) Avoid harming clients ... *Do we know enough about if, when and how coaching is harmful?*

**Excerpt 4:** Psychologists should: Be honest and accurate in advertising their professional services and products, in order to avoid encouraging unrealistic expectations or otherwise misleading the public. *Given the available evidence is coaching often mis- or over-sold?*
Some barriers to evidence-based coaching

- Dangerous plausibility
- Motherhood and apple pie (just obviously wonderful things beyond question or criticism)
- Clients don’t seem to want it (beyond feel/believe good)
- Vested interests
  - Coaching industry
  - Particular techniques
- Reverse causal logic
- It’s like the enlightenment never happened
The dangerous plausibility of coaching

- ‘...a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial or supervisory authority and responsibility in an organisation, and a coach who uses a range of cognitive and behavioural techniques in order to help the client achieve a mutually defined set of goals with the aim of improving his or her professional performance and well-being and the effectiveness of the organisation.’ (Grant et al., 2009, p. 396)

- Definitions of coaching imply effectiveness, success, and positive outcomes

- What’s not to like?

- How can it possibly not work?

- How can it possibly go wrong?
Motherhood and apple pie stuff

- Trying to help people is never wrong
- Impossible to think about downsides
- Cannot question motives of the helper
Reverse causal logic: Coaching *does* work because why otherwise...

- are coaches paid to do it?
- do business buy it?
- do individual clients pay for it?
- do individual clients come back for more?
- do coaching qualifications exist?
- are there conferences on coaching?
- are lots of books published about coaching?
- are so many people employed to do it?
- does it keep growing?
- are there so many coaching businesses?
It’s like the enlightenment never happened

- When applying it to human beings and their relationships, I start to find this whole "evidence-based" stuff difficult to pin down and hard to apply to the messy human situations...

- I believe utility is a good measure of effectiveness. I don’t believe people use things if they don’t find them to meet a particular need.

- People can judge for themselves whether coaching is effective.

- Coaches can ask clients whether their coaching is working for them and this is good evidence.

- Most humans can sense their impact on others to some extent and surely you can’t dismiss all of that as invalid.
Some of The Questions

- What are the ethical issues, if any, raised by your answers to these questions?
- What are the professional and practice implications, if any, of your answers to these questions?