Coaching Evaluation: Getting the Measure of Measurement

How to get the most value from Executive and Leadership Coaching

Coaching measurement can be a controversial topic. How do you measure the impact of a conversation, especially when the key parties involved may be looking at the impact from very different perspectives?

Typically the sponsor wants to see impact on organisational results. The coachee generally wants to enhance their contribution and sense of success (which can take many forms).

Finally, the coach typically wants both—to see a flourishing of potential based on increased self-awareness and personal effectiveness, and to see a positive impact on the organisation’s performance.

In a perfect world…

So if great coaching is about supporting the achievement of all these desired outcomes, then it makes sense that good evaluation of Executive Coaching measures the impact that a coaching programme has had on:

- The organisation’s performance;
- The delivery of the executive’s responsibilities; and
- Their self-awareness and personal skills.

We’ve all been told, and possibly experienced, that what gets measured gets done. It follows that a good set of measures will help to ensure that the right things get done well. It’s also important to note that the more senior the coachee, the wider one might expect their impact on the organisation to be.

So the range of outcomes measured for them would ideally reflect that scope.

It is not an exact science. Yet attempting to define anticipated outcomes as clearly as possible at the outset of a programme can, and will, significantly facilitate the evaluation process. The sponsor, the coach and the coachee will know what is being aimed at. The very act of exploring outcomes focuses the mind from the start, aids prioritisation and helps surface core obstacles.

Nevertheless, there are some challenges with this comforting logic that HR professionals and coaches alike can prepare for, once they are aware.

In the real world…

Emergence vs. the plan

Many desired outcomes discussed at the outset of coaching won’t always survive intact as initially defined. Relax— this isn’t a problem. The initial attempt to clarify desired outcomes often stimulates a rich process of refinement and personal discovery. This process gradually unfolds to reveal inner roots that may include limiting beliefs, unhelpful learned behaviours and the need for new skills that don’t align with the coachee’s natural preferences.
These can then become the clear focus for the coaching, with the support tailored specifically to address them.

The deeply personal learnings can be linked to a tangible contribution to the role and beyond with greater ease, if derived from early robust conversations about desired impact at the levels of role and organisation.

**Numbers or opinions?**

At the end of a programme, the final session is often given over to evaluating progress made and clarifying any future goals beyond the coaching.

Where outcomes are explored and revisited along the way at the levels of individual, role, and organisation, then the evaluation process is usually pretty straightforward. As to the question of balance between qualitative and quantitative measures, to give the canny accountant’s reply, “it depends…”.

For some professions (like accountancy) numbers are king. In others, feelings and perceptions rule. In the world of coaching both matter – and so it’s helpful to “do” quantitative measures with things where numbers make sense, and “do” qualitative measures where they are appropriate.

As previously mentioned, this is not an exact science. Many factors can affect impact, some beyond awareness and some may be unrelated to the coaching. We don’t have the luxury of having a parallel universe without coaching with which to conduct a controlled experiment. So we must use common sense and allow the coachee and the sponsor to make astute observations to decide what they see as changes and benefits from coaching. They are, after all, the experts in their system and themselves.

Measuring the impact on the organisation is sometimes the easiest for them to quantify – did that deal succeed, did that sale come through – what was it worth? Did the crisis get averted – what would it have cost had it not?

Both coachee and sponsor will have a good sense of this.

Measuring the impact within the role is often a mix of quantitative and qualitative. Some easy-to-measure numbers might derive from objectives such as team retention rates, productivity, sickness and absenteeism. Whereas some qualitative impacts might be derived from e.g. shifts in 360º feedback, comments on the leader’s behaviours, colleague opinion survey results, or such things as the level of collaboration and healthy conflict in the coachee’s team.

The coachee’s self-assessment of impact on their personal awareness, their sense of capability and confidence is typically heavily qualitative and subjective. This is as it should be and such perceptual measures are equally as valid as those that can be quantified.

**Beyond outcomes**

Outcomes for the coachee are not the whole story – another focus for evaluation can be the delivery and experience of the process itself. The responsibility for managing the process belongs to the coach. They need to have a way to evaluate their own performance in helping create the coaching experience for the coachee.

Evaluating the coachee’s experience of the session: The coachee wants to feel supported, understood, safe, respected, to be paced and empowered. Each individual needs to be dealt with differently to have those needs met. An important role of the coach is to tune into those needs and get it right. How do they know if they have?

Firstly feedback from the coachee. It is widely recognised as good practice to do a mini-evaluation at the end of each session by simply asking “How was it for you?”
This is an important practice that builds trust and encourages transparency and authenticity. It also gives the coach immediate feedback with which to adapt and flex their approach in the next session to best meet the coachee’s needs.

Secondly, personal reflection of the coach themselves after each session, tuning in to themselves to sense how it went for them. Notes taken now are valuable to bringing to supervision sessions.

Reflecting on, and supervision of, managing the coaching process and one’s behaviour as a coach: Supervision is thankfully now a typical expectation within the coaching profession. It is part of how coaches “walk their talk” of commitment to personal awareness and growth. Various modes are possible. In each the coach is in effect subjecting themselves to a rigorous peer-evaluation, albeit in a safe supportive environment.

One to one supervision from a qualified supervisor: this is most common and arguably the most thorough and important mode for a coach to engage in.

Another popular mode of supervision, not intended to replace but to supplement the above, is coach peer groups. These can have an action learning format, or possibly work in triads with rotating roles of observer, coach, and coachee.

Evaluation – going beyond measurement

A word about the magic of evaluation. The process of asking the coachee about the impact of their coaching has some positive unintended consequences. Effects that go way beyond measurement of tangible impact on performance and yield rich benefits that pay dividends in many less tangible ways.

It invites the coachee to go “meta” to themselves and observe the impact of any new choices and learning on themselves, their role and the organisation.

Original learnings in earlier sessions are revisited and further embedded. New insights are often gained with the added benefit of hindsight, and the coachee typically realises the value of new choices they have made that have helped them get more of what they want. This builds sustainability of the impact of coaching.

Recognition of achievement helps coachees celebrate their success, something perhaps counter-cultural in some countries. Reviewing success for evaluation purposes safely, and legitimately, gives coachees the opportunity to recall it and the permission to enjoy it. This helps build a virtuous circle of positive reinforcement.

And finally, and often quite powerfully – looking back on their journey helps the coachee construct a positive narrative about who they are now and where they have come from, about what they now bring to their roles and organisation, and about how they are powerfully capable of achieving the outcomes they commit to, because they’ve been doing it already.

Beyond the programme

Neither is the programme the whole story. Life goes on beyond it and so does coaching impact. Increasingly, evaluation at points of six, twelve and over eighteen months following a programme, is of interest to providers and purchasers of coaching alike.

Where this kind of long-term evaluation is being practised it is proving that there is often a more extended impact and greater return on investment than originally anticipated - which is good news for everyone.

Not only that, it provides the coachee yet a further opportunity to reflect on the positive changes they have made, celebrate their success and refine even more powerfully their personal narrative.
Final words

Whilst clearly complex, coaching evaluation doesn’t have to be complicated. Just keep the following in mind…

- Three levels (individual, role and organisation)
- The three key stakeholders (coachee, sponsor and coach)
- Being prepared for emergence
- Taking care to consider both the coaching process as well as its outcomes
- And the value of evaluation beyond the programme.

All these can make evaluation a highly effective tool in deepening the impact of coaching both for the individual and the organisation.

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To find out more about Executive Coaching as well as coaching evaluation and measurement at The Oxford Group visit our website.