



IT'S TIME TO EMBRACE A MORE SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO LEADER DEVELOPMENT

Employee wellbeing is key to organisational success. So, let's change the well-worn narrative on executive coaching to help address this systemic challenge, argues **Martina Doherty**.

Employee wellbeing has become one of the top priorities for many organisations, influenced by the challenges of employee retention and worrying mental health trends. It comprises many different elements and is much more than a company policy or benefits package. Exploration of research shows two things:

- Leader behaviour is a key contributing factor to employee wellbeing, with various leadership theories proven to cultivate workplace wellbeing through the working environment, increased job satisfaction or improved employee engagement.
- Improved leadership behaviour, mindset and awareness can be achieved through executive coaching.

One could deduce that executive or leadership coaching (both terms used interchangeably) can effectively impact and improve employee wellbeing. Yet the narrative around executive coaching continues to focus on individualised leadership development, with its success primarily evaluated in terms of its impact on the coached leader. Why is that? In a world of globalisation and interconnectivity, is now the time to expand the narrative around executive coaching as a means through which to address workplace wellbeing?

EXISTING IN A WORLD OF SYSTEMS

Regardless of size, organisations are dynamic social structures made up of multiple systems of interdependent parts, and everyone exists within each level of the system – micro (individual), meso (team or group) and macro (wider organisational culture and structure).

Employee wellbeing permeates each of these levels: how an individual feels and functions as a person effects how they show up and perform in their personal role, as part of a team and as a company employee. This is highlighted in the growing body of research that links an individual's wellbeing to their engagement at work, absenteeism and productivity¹, with poor mental health said to cost employers up to £53-56bn annually – in the UK alone.²

Leader behaviour is not dissimilar, with increasing research emerging on how it effects the wider organisation, particularly employee wellbeing.³ This even extends to having an impact on employee's children.⁴ As a result, the leadership narrative has tilted towards more humanistic leading, with leaders called upon to adapt and change their behaviours, mindsets and attitudes in a drive to cultivate and sustain high levels of employee wellbeing. This is exactly where executive coaching can play a role, since it is an individualised intervention that helps leaders create and maintain positive change in their personal development, professional performance and leadership behaviour.⁵

It seems obvious that the immediate impact of coaching is direct rather than indirect; i.e., in the mindsets and behaviours of the coachees. But, to quote Peter Hawkins, 'there can never be a coachee without a systemic context'.⁶ And if you consider the dynamic social structure of organisations and the micro, meso and macro systems mentioned earlier, this systemic context of coaching makes sense. In other words, regardless of whether a leader adopts an egalitarian or hierarchical leadership style, how their behaviour and mindset changes as a result of coaching will inevitably have an impact beyond themselves. Yet in terms of quantifying this extended impact, the empirical evidence is distinctly lacking, helping keep it firmly within the domain of a leader development activity that benefits the few and not the many.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

Coaching for systemic impact is not a new concept.

- In 2012 Simon Western introduced the analytic network coaching approach, which helps coachees develop their leadership style and strategically influence the networks in which they work in order to create positive transformational change.⁷
- In 2014 Peter Hawkins argued that one of the main founding principles of coaching – that of client-centred development – had become one of its limiting beliefs, and suggested a new paradigm of systemic coaching that considered other stakeholders and their needs, which may actually be different from those of the coachees.⁸

- In 2017 Hetty Einzig called for 'Next Generation Coaching', where everything should be seen as interconnected and interdependent, with a key focus on helping leaders discover their contribution to the bigger picture and towards the greater good of the organisation and society they serve.⁹
- In 2018 Marshall Goldsmith introduced the concept of stakeholder-centric coaching underpinned by the belief that 'success isn't determined by the leader being coached, but by the people impacted by the coaching'.¹⁰

Despite these forward-thinking views on how executive coaching could or should evolve, my experience is that neither the mainstream narrative nor evaluation methodologies have followed suit.

This challenge of evaluating coaching outcomes in the language of business performance is well known. As an individualised and personal intervention, each coachee will always have a different coaching experience and different outcomes. Therefore, using objective scientific methodology to report clear cause-effect outcomes from a non-standardised intervention is difficult. This might go some way to explaining why coaching evaluation has tended to focus on coachee-specific outcomes to date – of which most are self-reported. Where peer reviews such as 360 feedback have been used, evaluation is still very much focused on coachee-specific behavioural changes, with little hard data to demonstrate broader systemic benefits. Some published research has involved more macro-level measurements, like improved ROI, yet it has been cited as having unreliable methodology and criticised for being potentially restrictive to the full range of possible outcomes achievable from coaching. This all contributes to a failure within the coaching profession to agree and demonstrate the true value of what coaching can potentially represent to organisations.

WHAT NEXT?

Executive coaching is a big business, with the global market said to have been worth US\$ 9.3 billion in 2022.¹¹ So too is the corporate wellness market – valued at US\$ 54.1 billion in 2021 and projected to reach US\$ 93.3 billion by 2028.¹² However, even with employee wellbeing high on the corporate agenda, in the current era of rising inflationary risk and economic uncertainty, many organisations are being forced to tighten budgets and make decisions about resource allocation: whether investment in either initiative continues at these levels remains to be seen. Rather than viewing each as a distinctly separate initiative with a separate budget, a more economically viable option could be adopting a more holistic approach to leader development and employee wellbeing, and creating programmes with outcomes and KPIs aligned to each other and even wider strategic initiatives. As executive coaches, we can drive that conversation by using the wealth of research available on the impact of executive coaching on leader behaviour^{13,14} and the impact of leader behaviour on employee wellbeing.^{15,16}

To expand the narrative around the benefits of executive coaching beyond the individual, there is no doubt that more empirical research is needed – research that involves multi-level, multi-method evaluation measures. Where the coaching profession has always drawn direction from other fields of humanistic engagement – such as counselling, psychotherapy, leadership development and organisational development – when evaluating systemic impact, we should continue this trend. Interestingly these disciplines also report struggling to measure the long-term systemic impact of their programmes and interventions, further validating the difficulties in trying to measure objectively a subjective, personalised intervention in a rigorously scientific way. Notwithstanding these challenges, I feel there is an as-yet

untapped opportunity for the coaching profession to communicate the broader company-wide value that executive coaching can offer – specifically around employee wellbeing. And that starts by evolving the narrative around executive coaching beyond that of a leader development activity to one with systemic organisational benefits – if delivered and measured as part of a holistic humanistic strategy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



As a leadership coach, positive psychologist and wellbeing consultant, Martina Doherty works with leaders and organisations to help them develop and get the best from their people. Using the science of positive psychology, her coaching and training programmes are designed to help leaders identify and tap into their strengths and the positive dynamics within their teams. Martina holds an MSc in applied positive psychology and coaching psychology, and she is an accredited senior practitioner with the European Coaching and Mentoring Council.

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