Coaching for positive leadership development in organizations

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter covers:

- Readiness for individual and organizational change
- Identifying the stakeholders
- Picking a positive leadership model, eg MLQ360
- Assessing strengths through MSF
- Ensuring uniformity of delivery
- Socializing the model and aligning to strengths
- Goals – setting positive goals with business relevance
- Evaluation – measuring success using formative and summative outcomes
Key components of coaching for PLD in organizations

This chapter is about putting what we have already learned about assessing and developing strengths in a leadership context into practice. The process begins with determining the readiness of both the individual and the organization for a strength-based approach to leadership development. Despite the inherent appeal of the approach, not all organizations will be engaged by such a methodology. There are numerous factors that may mediate readiness, but some key ones include how a strength-based approach aligns with current (implicit and explicit) models of leadership already extant in the organization. What are the assumptions around a strength-based approach? Are these largely positive, negative or neutral?

Readiness to change and develop

Readiness for change and development is something that should be assessed prior to the beginning of any leadership development process. The reason for this is simply to do with managing the limited resources organizations have at their disposal for people development and ensuring the organization gets a sufficient return on their development investment. It is a popular myth that everyone is ready for and can benefit from leadership coaching. A myth that is regularly debunked by the variable effect sizes in coaching and leadership outcome studies, by the between-participant variance seen within the evidence base and by the everyday experience of those involved in the leadership development business who experience the range of engagement, responses and outcomes to fairly uniform leadership development processes. At the organizational level, too, support for the leadership development initiative is vital if changes are to be successfully transferred into the workplace. Key variables here again include how the participants will be supported in terms of time to consolidate
developmental insights, what opportunities will be provided to consolidate learnings and how the programme will be integrated into the existing learning and development framework. The two concepts of change and developmental readiness have been proposed to articulate this construct more fully.

The concept of developmental readiness has been put forward as a potential predictor of effective outcomes in leadership development (Avolio and Hannah, 2008; Hannah and Avolio, 2010). This combination of motivation and ability to change is potentially seen as a prerequisite for effective engagement in the leadership development process. Developmental readiness is a more focused element of the broader construct of change readiness (Franklin, 2005). This broad construct brings together a number of underlying concepts, including beliefs about the possibility of change, willingness to experience discomfort in the pursuit of change, and awareness of potential areas of focus.

Developmental readiness has been defined as ‘both the ability and the motivation to focus on, make meaning of and develop new and more complex ways of thinking that position you to more effectively assume leadership roles’ (Avolio, 2010). The concept was partially derived from the literature on stages of change (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1982) which suggested that, in any change process, individuals go through the stages of precontemplation (unaware of the need for change), contemplation (thinking about change), preparation (getting ready to make the change) and action (actually doing the requisite behaviours). Clearly suggesting leadership development to someone who is in the precontemplation stage is unlikely to be met with engagement or enthusiasm. In addition, the sheer variability of responses to leadership coaching, even when as many of the coach and organizational variables are held as constant as possible, does suggest that the coachee is bringing their own behaviours, qualities and mindsets that are having a significant impact on coaching outcomes. Developmental readiness is seen as a potential prerequisite of successful leader development, in that it attempts to identify and assess key individual criteria for the change inherent in positive leader development to occur.
At this stage in the development of the concept of readiness for change and development, assessing individual readiness for change is a matter of practitioner skill and experience rather than the reliance on the administration of a reliable and valid psychometric. Some typical questions include:

**Individual readiness questions**

- Are you prepared to experience discomfort in the pursuit of enhanced leadership effectiveness?
- What's your motivation for engaging in this leadership development process (LDP)?
- How will this process change the way you think of yourself as a leader?
- What resources do you have to sustain and support your development?
- What type of goals have you set yourself in terms of engaging with this LDP?
- How will you encourage others to give you the necessary developmental feedback?

**Organizational readiness questions**

- How aligned is the strength-based approach with existing leadership development philosophies?
- What is the prevailing mindset around leadership development? Is it growth or fixed?
- Is the executive leadership team a sponsor? Are they participating?
- How will the process be supported internally?
- Are there any other competing change initiatives under way at this time?
- How will this process be integrated into the Learning and Development framework?
Mapping the stakeholders

It has been argued that for coaching to be effective, we need coach, coachee and organizational factors to be in alignment (see Figure 7.1 on page 127). This usually means there are a minimum of three key stakeholders in the coaching process:

- **The coachee**: Key factors include how committed are they to the process, are they ready, do they have the resources, what’s their history of self-development, do they take responsibility for their development?

- **The line manager**: Key factors include how transparent have they been with the coachee, is their leadership style compatible with a coaching approach, how sensitive are they to change, how supportive are they of the coachee, what’s the quality of the relationship with the coachee?

- **The HR sponsor**: Key factors include where is the coachee in the talent pool, what is the talent philosophy of the organization, are the line manager and HR sponsor aligned, where are the boundaries of confidentiality, how does coaching connect to other talent development opportunities?

At the start of any coaching engagement it’s important to map the stakeholders in the process. This is especially true if the coaching has a remedial element to it.

Selecting a strength-based leadership model

Once readiness to engage in leadership development has been assessed, it’s time to pick a conceptual model that will support the assimilation of the strength-based approach. Ideally the model is closely linked to the assessment process chosen to identify strengths (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4). Factors impacting on this selection include reliability and validity, compatibility with existing leadership models, the seniority of the coachees and the model’s sensitivity to change. Ideally this is a model that will lend itself to a repeat assessment at the end of the intervention to evaluate outcomes and ROI.
Identifying strengths in the individual through MSF

In assessing strengths, it is advisable to utilize both a self-report measure and a multi-rater to ensure there are no blind spots in the diagnostic process. Whilst multi-rater instruments are generally very effective at circumventing the biases of self-report, the range and objectivity of raters is another important consideration. It is generally effective here to combine both individual preferences in rater selection and include mandatory criteria like all direct reports to ensure the coverage is broad and representative. This ensures high quality feedback that will enhance the strengths awareness process.

Feedback is a key component of coaching in organizations. Its purpose is multifactorial, to raise awareness, to identify strengths and weaknesses, to calibrate self–other ratings, to understand different ratings by levels in organizations and to gain insight into the developmental readiness of both the individual and the organization. The most commonly utilized feedback is multi-source feedback (MSF), otherwise known as 360-degree feedback. MSF is increasingly popular in organizations and routinely used in leadership coaching interventions. Its ubiquity suggests that it is worth spending some time on both how to interpret and maximize the utility of MSF data.

MSF data depends on a number of assumptions that have been subject to intensive scrutiny in the research literature. Firstly there is an assumption that other-ratings are valid predictors of performance and carry in them some additional information that is not available to the coachee. There is significant evidence for this, in that numerous studies have shown that individuals tend to overrate themselves, known as leniency bias (Atkins and Wood, 2002). Of even greater concern is that there is evidence to suggest that those who are objectively rated as performing poorly on a task show the greatest tendency to overrate themselves (Dunning et al., 2003). These findings have led to intensive interest in the area of self–other alignment and what it means for interpreting MSF data. Interestingly, there do appear to be some areas that are more accurately assessed by the individual, although these are normally characteristics with low observability, eg anxiety or self-esteem. In
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considering feedback on strengths, it is worth considering how observable this might be to others and how easy it might be to evaluate. Intrapersonal strengths by definition are more private, whereas interpersonal strengths should display a significant degree of public manifestation.

Socializing the coachee to the strength-based model

Organizations and the leaders within them will come with a variety of prejudices as to the meaning of a strength-based approach to leadership development. Areas to cover in your initial discussions with both the organization and the coachee include:

- A strength-based approach does not deny the presence or relevance of weaknesses.
- There is significant evidence for the link between strength-based approaches and enhanced leadership effectiveness.
- Strengths can be both leveraged directly and applied to addressing weaknesses.
- The type of strengths you develop matters. You will get more benefit from enhancing states and skills than you will addressing traits.
- There are multiple benefits to strength-based approaches beyond enhanced leadership effectiveness, including engagement, positivity, well-being and goal attainment.
- A strength-based approach is much more engaging for the coachee and therefore facilitates readiness and participation.

Ensuring the coachee is ready for each session

What does the coachee need to do in terms of preparation to maximize the gains from each session? Ideally, they will reflect, review and act. Reflection on the previous session is achieved through considering questions like:
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- What strengths did you identify?
- What strengths do you overuse?
- What strengths do you underuse?
- What strengths work well together?
- What situations bring out the best in you?
- What actions can you take to further leverage your strengths?

Focusing on where changes are made allows the coachee to review progress and monitor change. What are they noticing in terms of:

- The strengths they’ve identified?
- How they are applying those strengths?
- How they are utilizing their strengths – not over- or underplaying?
- The type of goals they are setting themselves?

Finally, they need to have acted on the insights from the previous session. So if they have identified an overused strength, what have they done to alert themselves when this is happening? If it is an underutilized strength, where else have they found to apply this strength and what was the outcome? Ideally the coachee should come to the session with this preparation. When I am meeting my own mentor, I prepare an e-mail of topic areas beforehand and send it through to give them a chance to prepare.

Ensuring the process supports the content

There is a long-standing debate in other areas of applied psychology (eg psychotherapy) about the relative contributions of technique and process in terms of delivering sustainable change (MacKie, 2007). The technique in this case is the strength-based approach to leadership coaching and the process is how this coaching is delivered, that is, what non-specific qualities the coach brings to the process (eg challenge and curiosity). Perhaps because of the psychological origins of many coaching techniques, a number of assumptions including the
importance of common factors, like the coaching relationship, have been adopted somewhat uncritically into a coaching format. Consequently, it has taken a while for concepts like accountability and challenge to embed themselves in coaching models. A notable exception to this is the FACTS model (Blakey and Day, 2012).

The FACTS model of coaching

FACTS is an acronym for:

**Feedback** – does the coach provide challenging and direct feedback to the leader?

**Accountability** – does the coach hold the leader accountable for actions they commit to?

**Challenge** – does the coach challenge the leader in a constructive way and encourage them to experience the discomfort that change involves?

**Tension** – how does the coach hold in tension in the process to ensure key issues are fully explored without damaging the underlying relationship?

**Systemic thinking** – how does the coach remain focused on both the situational factors impacting the leader and the leader’s response to these factors?

The FACTS model itself evolved out of the financial crisis that created a demand for coaching focused on organizational need rather than individual preference. The FACTS model implicitly challenges the mindset of more traditional coaching approaches that can be generalized as high support and low challenge. Applying this to strength-based leadership coaching, we can have a positive methodology augmented by a more challenging delivery process to ensure optimum outcomes. Concurrently, the FACTS process guards against one of the criticisms of strength-based approaches, that is, focusing only on the positive and avoiding difficult conversations (see Chapter 10 for a further elaboration of this issue).
Ensuring uniformity of delivery – coach variables

When applying a strength-based leadership coaching intervention across the top tier of an organization, how do you ensure a reasonable degree of uniformity in the delivery of the leadership coaching process? This is a significant issue as, due to concerns over confidentiality and a reluctance by the coaching profession to endorse specific factors related to superior outcomes in leadership coaching, there is relatively little transparency in individual coaching engagements. Consequently, it is not uncommon for participants to have a significantly different experience, despite being part of the same coaching process. There are a number of ways to bring a degree of uniformity to what can be a very heterogeneous process. Firstly, coaching training in the chosen methodology is essential prior to beginning the intervention. This will ensure that at least the core concepts are universally applied and with a degree of systemization. Training can include the more conceptual areas, like models and frameworks, to the more operational, like number of sessions, types of goals, development planning and organizational objectives. The leadership coaching process can also be manualized (MacKie, 2014) to really encourage adherence to the strength-based protocol. Manualization involves writing down the key components for each coaching session for both coach and coachee to encourage adherence to the protocol. The challenge here is to maintain openness and receptivity to the emergent needs of the coachee, whilst utilizing the manual to provide structure and rigour to the process. The possible coach, coachee and organizational variables that can affect strength-based leadership coaching are summarized in Figure 7.1.

Ensuring strategic goal alignment

The effectiveness of the leadership coaching will, of course, be enhanced if there is good alignment between the business and individual goals and objectives. This is one of the key criteria for goal
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**FIGURE 7.1** Technique and process factors in strength-based leadership coaching

Coachee Characteristics
- Developmental readiness
- Self-awareness
- Ambition
- Career stage

Coach Characteristics
- Credibility
- Protocol adherence
- Strength-based training
- Systemic awareness

Organizational Characteristics
- Supportive manager
- Coaching culture
- Opportunities
- Organizational readiness

Process Variables
- Alliance
- Rapport
- Challenge
- Empathy

Strength-Based Coaching Methodology
- Strengths identification
- Positive goal setting
- Strategic alignment
- Strengths development
- Career/transition
- Committed actions

Outcome Domains
- Transformational leadership
- Strengths awareness
- Performance
- Insight
- Promotion
- Positive affect
- Retention
- Confidence
- Extra effort

Selection (see Chapter 6) and also an important topic for the coach briefing prior to the beginning of the programme. This can be supported by the encouragement of goal selection around self, team and organization, or through embedded linkages in the development plan that connects organizational competencies or objectives to the individual development goals. Table 7.1 shows a sample goal selection process. In this example, ‘develops others’ is the obvious choice for strengths development.

**Goal selection from the MLQ360**

Once you have discussed your strengths from the MLQ360, you need to converge on some goals for the coaching. Normally 2–3 are ideal for this duration of coaching.

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Consider the following questions:

1. What I am energized/enthusiastic about changing?
2. Which goals are aligned with the organizational imperatives?
3. Which goals are aligned with my values?
4. Which goals are mastery-orientated?
5. Which goals will help me manage better the challenges I face?

Table 7.1 shows an example of the transformational leadership strengths of an individual leader derived from the MLQ360. In this case, developing others is the strength to develop further, as it combines a high skill level, an intrinsic interest in developing this strength, and is aligned with the organizational need.

### TABLE 7.1  Strength development options from MLQ360

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength/Competency</th>
<th>High Skill</th>
<th>Passion/Energizing</th>
<th>Organizational Need</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Builds trust</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts with integrity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspires others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages innovation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops others</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Ensuring visibility of change

The visibility of change is a critical matter in leadership coaching, especially for those whose self–other alignment is poor. There is significant evidence that change is perceived differentially within an organization (MacKie, 2015b) and these changes are to some degree mediated by the self-awareness of the coachee. Individuals who overrate themselves
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compared to other raters can be at risk of derailing (ie suffering a significant setback in their career) and may be less receptive to feedback, but the gap between self and others can also act as a motivator to change. Individuals who underrate themselves when compared to others are often self-critical and perfectionistic and can be sceptical of the evidence that others perceive them to be more effective than they see themselves (Nowack and Mashihi, 2012). Overraters tend to self-correct over time and this effect can mask gains made in leadership coaching. Consequently, the ratings of others in terms of change can be highly validating.

There is also some evidence to suggest that raters at different levels focus on different aspects of the leader, with supervisor ratings being more closely correlated with external performance criteria, whilst direct reports (those reporting directly into the participant) focus on more interpersonal and relational criteria (Nowack, 2009). In reviewing repeat MSF surveys it is important to incorporate this tendency into the analysis. It is also important to mediate a discussion between the coachee and their line manager as to how changes in leadership behaviour will be observed. Sharing the coachee’s development plan is an excellent medium through which to facilitate this discussion.

Ensuring the sustainability of change

There is concerning evidence (Baldwin and Ford, 1988) that much of the learning that occurs in a training environment is not effectively transferred to the workplace, and the learnings that are transferred can be rapidly eroded over time. The support provided for those coachees who have been through a leadership coaching process largely depends on the degree of coaching sophistication of those around them. Line managers and peers who have undergone a high level of coach training themselves are best placed to provide support for coachees following a programme. This is where individual coaching can link effectively with previous programmes, especially those that include a Manager or Leader as Coach element. At the very least, the line manager of the coachee needs an awareness of
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the coaching process, the goals established and the outcomes achieved. This is best achieved through the ongoing involvement of the line manager throughout the coaching process – known as three-cornered coaching (Standards Australia, 2011). This typically involves a three-way discussion with coach, coachee and line manager at the beginning of the coaching programme to clarify goals, periodic alignment sessions between coachee and manager throughout the coaching process, and a further three-way discussion to review achievements and consider next steps at the end of the programme.

The coaching goals can then be integrated into the organizational development plan and periodically reviewed as part of the existing performance review process. There is no doubt that the broader the disclosure of the coaching goals, the greater the probability of maintaining focus and gains on them.

Ensuring reliable and valid outcomes and ROI

Connected to the above issue of training transfer and sustainability is the issue of ensuring that reliable and valid outcomes and a healthy return on investment (ROI) are achieved from a strength-based leadership coaching process. While the potential domains on evaluation after leadership coaching are vast, the psychometrics used in the strengths identification phase are the obvious measures to repeat after the end of the coaching programme. I would argue that these measures, by necessity, have to include multi-rater feedback around a well validated leadership measure like the MLQ360. However, these instruments give data on leadership changes, which may be attributable to coaching but not on subsequent performance improvement in the coachee’s team and the organizational metrics on which their performance is judged. Finally, the timing of any evaluation needs to be considered. Reactions to coaching can be assessed almost immediately, but what will this tell you about skill acquisition of performance improvement? Other changes in terms of increased leadership capability, leading to enhanced
follower engagement, leading to additional discretionary effort in followers, leading ultimately to enhanced job performance (however measured) will inevitably take time to work their way through an organization.

The evaluation of training interventions in organizations, including leadership, has traditionally been dominated by the Kirkpatrick model that suggested change could be monitored and evaluated at four discrete stages or levels (Kirkpatrick, 1959, 1977). Level 1 captured the reaction of the participant to the leadership programme and usually involved ratings of client satisfaction. Level 2 involved assessing what the coachee learned from the coaching programme. This attempted to measure changes in specific knowledge, skills or attitudes that could be attributed to the coaching programme. Level 3 focused on behavioural change, including leadership behaviour. Finally, Level 4 related the results of the coaching programme to the attainment of organizational objectives. The summative models of evaluation have evolved since Kirkpatrick first suggested his criteria and additional levels looking specifically at ROI have been added (Hamblin, 1974). The benefits of the Kirkpatrick model are that it offers a framework for the evaluation to occur within and emphasizes that subjective self-assessment alone is insufficient for effective evaluation. Kirkpatrick’s four-stage process is viewed as a ‘taxonomy of outcomes’ rather than a scientific model of evaluation (Holton, 1996).

Subsequently, two types of evaluation have emerged in the leadership evaluation literature: summative evaluation, which looks at the completed outcomes of the leadership intervention, and formative evaluation, which consists of process-orientated questions that focus on programme improvement (Ely et al, 2010). This is a useful distinction as it ensures that the method of delivery is evaluated alongside the traditional Kirkpatrick taxonomy. Ely et al (2010) suggest the summative evaluation framework can incorporate much of the Kirkpatrick taxonomy with Level 1 being expanded to include the client’s perception of the coach’s competence and their satisfaction with the client–coach relationship. Level 2 is expanded to include self-awareness as well as increased behavioural flexibility. Level 3 remains focused on leadership behaviours and is ideally incorporated...
into a pre- and post-coaching 360-degree feedback process. Finally, Level 4 remains focused on results but includes the impact on peers, direct reports, and other stakeholders, as well as the total return on investment (ROI).

In addition to the traditional summative process, Ely et al. (2010) stress the need for a formative evaluation to improve the quality of the training intervention. This focuses on process rather than outcome criteria and helps to identify any implementation barriers to attaining the leadership coaching objectives. They include coachee expectations, the competence of the coach, the quality of the client–coach relationship and the coaching process itself. It also provides the coachee the opportunity to provide feedback on the elements of the process and method they found most effective. The coaching method can be divided into specific and non-specific factors depending on the preferences of the coachee and the theoretical orientation of the coach. Specific factors might include elements of strength-based coaching, whilst non-specific factors includes elements like empathy and rapport. Client variables can include both organizational and coachee factors given that the organization provides the context in which the coaching will occur (see Figure 7.1).

Another interesting debate that has influenced the evaluation of training and coaching research is that of common versus specific factors previously mentioned (McKenna and Davis, 2009). The common factors position asserts that there are common processes at play across coaching engagements and that these can form the basis of effective evaluation. Common factors are seen as mainly occurring in the coaching relationship and involve qualities like expectancy, empathy, rapport and positive regard. These are hypothesized to be significantly more influential than any specific technique and therefore tend to minimize the significance of specialist training in the coach (MacKie, 2007). The specific factors position reverses the relative importance, placing the specific coaching technique as the key orchestrator of change and the relationship factors as necessary but not sufficient for sustained behavioural change. My position on this is that the specific factors are crucial in leadership coaching, while common factors provide
the platform for delivery. My own research (MacKie, 2014) demonstrated that protocol adherence was predictive of positive leadership change suggesting that the specific factor, in this case strength-based leadership coaching, was critical in enhancing transformational leadership.

**Conducting a leadership coaching evaluation**

*Formative evaluation questions*

Formative evaluation looks to examine the process of coaching and ascertain what worked in terms of its delivery and what could be improved for the next iteration (MacKie, 2015a). Areas that are typically examined include:

**Coaching process**

Did the coach...

- spend time building rapport with you?
- inspire confidence that they could assist you?
- understand your role and industry?
- seem committed to your development?
- employ a balance of challenge and support?
- hold you accountable for your actions?

**Coachee qualities**

Did the coachee...

- actively choose to participate?
- prepare for each session?
- collaborate in the agenda setting?
- try out new strategies and approaches?
- engage their line manager in the coaching process?
Organizational factors

Did the organization...

- display a coaching culture?
- provide developmental opportunities?
- facilitate skill transfer?
- integrate coaching into the learning and development framework?
- model a growth mindset?

**Summative evaluation questions**

Summative evaluation examines traditional elements of coaching and training evaluation, including the individual and team impact of the coaching programme. Areas examined include the knowledge, skills and abilities that the coachee will transfer back to the workplace.

Individual programme impact

Did the leadership coaching...

- enhance your knowledge of leadership?
- bring a new awareness of your strengths?
- generate greater positivity and optimism?
- provide greater flexibility and innovation?
- facilitate the empowerment and development of others?
- promote greater commitment and engagement?

Team programme impact

Did the leadership coaching...

- generate a positive climate in your team?
- clarify the team’s vision and purpose?
- promote greater role clarity?
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- improve stakeholder management?
- help motivate team members?

Using multi-source feedback in leadership coaching evaluation

MSF really is the gold standard in leadership coaching evaluation. Not only does it overcome the limitations of self-report data, but it also specifically targets those who should be positively impacted by a leadership coaching intervention. This is the equivalent of a Level 3 Kirkpatrick evaluation, which is the closest most programmes will get to demonstrating performance improvement, given that job performance is so difficult to individually quantify in most roles.

Summary and conclusion

This chapter is about effectively delivering a strength-based leadership coaching programme within an organization. It is not sufficient to master the technique of strength-based leadership coaching in order to deliver a successful programme. It is essential that both the individuals and organization are ready for change and that stakeholders have been engaged and appropriately socialized to the model. In addition, the process of raising awareness in the coachee requires the careful administration of multi-rater feedback instruments to ensure reliable and valid data on the coachee is collected. The individual preparation of the coachee makes a significant difference to the effectiveness of the programme and this in turn is a function of the internal support they are experiencing. Coach variables are also crucial in ensuring a successful programme. Coaches need to be well trained in the strength-based methodology and capable of remaining aligned to that approach throughout the programme. They need to manage the coaching process effectively, bringing a balance of challenge and support to the coaching engagement. Finally, the gains made in coaching need to be effectively transferred to the workplace and evaluated so that the return on investment is apparent to the organization.

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Some questions to consider

- Is your organization ready for a leadership coaching programme? How do you know?
- How would you socialize the client to a strength-based approach?
- Who are the key stakeholders in this coaching engagement?
- What are the necessary elements of an effective coaching process?
- How might a formative evaluation improve the coaching process?

References


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