



**Francine Campone**  
individual coaching & coaching development

## Currents in Coaching Research Newsletter

### The Active Ingredients of Executive Coaching

Why does coaching seem to work? Are there "magic ingredients" which increase the likelihood of success in a coaching engagement? D. Douglas McKenna and Sandra Davis look to psychotherapy outcome research to initiate a dialogue about the answers to these questions.

While the authors recognize that there are important and significant differences between executive coaching and psychotherapy, they note that the article is premised on the assumption of sufficient functional similarity to justify generalizing study outcomes from psychotherapy to coaching practice. McKenna and Davis note that similar generalization of these study outcomes is currently being applied in medicine and education with good effect. They are also clear that the article is not intended to encourage coaches without psychotherapy training to cross boundaries and practice beyond the scope of their skill and knowledge.

In several places, McKenna and Davis argue that the training and education of industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists make this group particularly qualified as executive coaches. While the stated agenda of the article is "to begin a dialogue...with I-O colleagues who coach executives...about how we can capitalize on decades of psychotherapy outcome research to become extraordinary coaches..." (p. 245), the summary of outcomes research and the authors' recommendations for application in coaching can be of benefit to all coaches, regardless of background.

#### *The Four Ingredients*

The research cited in the article comprised thousands of studies and meta-analyses of psychotherapy outcomes. Four factors were identified which are "active in all effective therapeutic interventions, regardless of the theoretical orientation or techniques...employed by the therapist." (p.245)

The first of these comprises client/extra-therapeutic factors. This grouping includes the client's personal characteristics as well as characteristics of their environment or social system. This set of factors is also shown to be the strongest "active ingredient" accounting for 40% of outcome variance, making it the strongest predictor of psychotherapy outcomes. Client characteristics include the client's capacity and readiness to change, the client's coping style, and personality type (internalizer vs. externalizer). Extra therapeutic factors include the client's history and experiences, social and organizational systems and support systems. This factor also includes actions taken by the client outside of the therapy session. When generalized to a coaching context, McKenna and Davis advise that the coach needs to understand and be able to activate these aspects of the client and the client's environment. This includes gauging the client's

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### Researcher's Haiku

the year turns-  
on the harp's gold leaf  
summer dust

*Elizabeth Sauré Lamb*

(Readers are invited to e-mail their researcher's haiku - original or otherwise-for inclusion in future issues. Your feedback on this issue is welcome, too!)

### References

D. Douglas McKenna & Sandra L. Davis. (2009) Hidden in plain sight: The active ingredients of executive coaching. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* (2) pp. 244-260

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readiness and capacity for change and meeting the client at the appropriate stage. Internalizers tend to prefer insight-oriented and interpersonal interventions while externalizers tend to be symptom and skill focused. Thus the style of coaching should be suited to the client's preferences.

The second factor, relationship, accounts for 30% of variance in effective psychotherapy outcomes. Specific aspects of relationship building include successful involvement of the client at the outset of the relationship and collaboration in building an alliance based on agreement about goals and tasks for the engagement. Less concrete but no less important is the coach's ability to "forge an affective bond" with the client- to create a relationship in which the client feels understood and accepted. In coaching, this points to the importance of the coach's empathy and ability to manage his or own reactions to a challenging client. Customizing the coaching engagement, goals, tasks and style to the client's needs is an equally important implication for this factor. Maintaining the relationship is equally critical, which includes monitoring and getting feedback from the client and initiating repairs when the relationship has been damaged in some way.

The third factor-expectancy, hope and placebo effects-accounts for 15% of the variance in psychotherapy outcomes. This points to several aspects of the coach's behavior. Coaches can build the client's expectancy and hope by communicating their belief in the client's ability to make change, helping the client develop multiple options for making change (pathways thinking) and reinforcing agency thinking (the client's belief in his/her own ability). The credibility of the coach is essential in activating this set of factors. McKenna and Davis advise coaches to "treat hope as a cognitive variable" and to keep in mind that their level of faith can activate the client's.

Theory and technique come in as the fourth of the "active ingredients", accounting for 15% of variance in successful coaching outcomes. Theory, according to the authors, structures the way therapists and coaches thinking about the causes and effects of a client's problem and possible strategies for remediation. The importance of knowing the models and methods used in therapy or coaching lies in knowing how to best use the theory and techniques to activate or strengthen the other three ingredients. Such activation may include determining how best to engage and motivate the client, active the client's internal resources, build effective support networks and environments and promote hope.

The authors conclude with some principles for practice which reflect the four factors. These include authenticity and integrity in the use of theories and models; use of one's own expertise as a guide for drawing out the client's best thinking; maintaining a spotlight on the client's strengths and capacities as they relate to the challenges; and checking in regularly with clients about their perceptions of the bond and relationship.

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