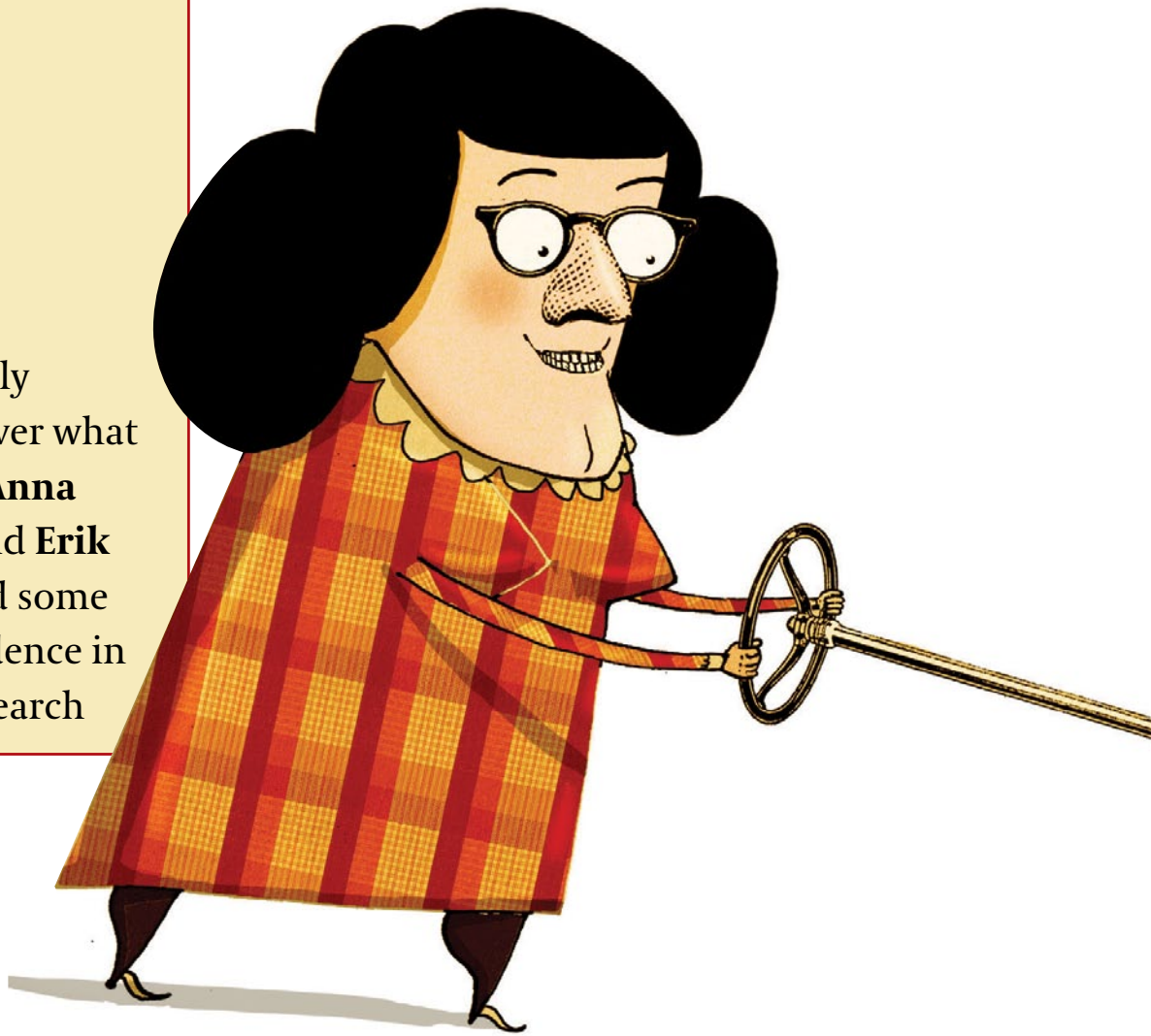


Are we sure as coaches we truly know and deliver what clients want? **Anna Duckworth** and **Erik de Haan** found some surprising evidence in their latest research



# THE TIES THAT BIND

**W**hat's really important for each of our unique clients? What makes a difference to the success of executive coaching? Our latest research, which reveals some fascinating and statistically significant results, confirms that the answer lies in the quality of the coach/client relationship.

This was not a surprise given previous qualitative studies. But there were a number of surprises in

the rest of our research. For example, there were no particular patterns relating the success of coaching to client personality preferences. Nor did there appear to be any correlation between outcome and the strength of the relationship according to the coach.

#### **Our research**

Our findings from an interim sample size of 152 professional business clients and 31 experienced coaches, all engaged in paid executive coaching contracts, are

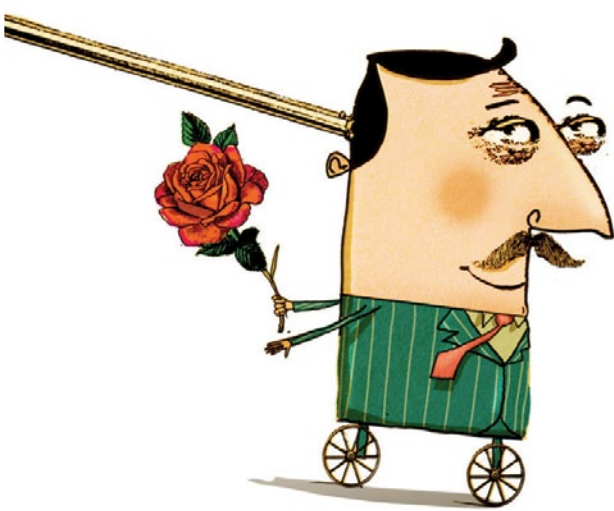
the latest in an ambitious research project we launched in autumn 2007. For the first time at Ashridge, we set out to collect quantitative data from clients, both on the coaching outcome and on their coaching relationships.

For this latest tranche of the research, we sought around 30 experienced coaches with willing participant clients who knew their Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) profile. We designed and piloted a survey questionnaire for both parties so we could analyse

individual relationships from both perspectives.

Key areas of interest included:

- Measures of the outcome (as judged by the client).
- Quality of the relationship (judged by both client and coach and measured for the client by an adapted version of the Working Alliance Inventory – WAI).
- Personality profiles of coach and client (measured using previously established MBTI profiles).
- Types of coaching interventions as perceived by clients and the



self-efficacy of the client (measured using another well-established and substantiated tool).

### What we looked at

Here's what we measured in terms of outcome for the client:

- Adding value.
- Impact on performance at work.
- Helping you achieve what you want.
- Overall coaching experience.

With permission, we adapted the WAI. Very few coaches are aware of the WAI or how useful it can be. It is a well-established tool in therapy and counselling for obtaining a reliable measure of the quality of the client-therapist relationship. It measures the quality of the coaching relationship by task, bond and goal.

## “ Strong relationships are more likely to lead to coaching success than clever interventions ”

All experienced coaches know that each client is shaped by a multitude of things, of which innate personality plays only a part. Nonetheless, most of those we spoke with believed they provided a better service when they shaped their coaching to suit the different personality types.

We chose the MBTI profile to characterise the personalities because it is the most widespread personality profiling tool in business and is very well-substantiated by research.

In terms of types of coaching intervention, we explored what clients currently get and the extent to which they valued different interventions. We used John Heron's six descriptions of client interventions: to be advised, informed, challenged, supported, helped to make discoveries and encouraged to release emotions.

We also asked questions biased towards either side of two of the personality dichotomies – two questions around 'doing' or 'being' and a final one about goal focus.

The self-efficacy of the client was measured by another well-founded tool supported in the literature.

Data was gathered from the coaches about their coaching preferences and whether they adapt their style, consciously or not, to suit client personalities, and on how they viewed the quality of their coaching relationship with each client.

### What were we looking for?

We wanted to see whether our quantitative data would provide statistically valid evidence in support of the research showing that the quality of the relationship

was vital to the success of coaching.

For this, we looked to see how the measures of outcome as viewed by the client depended on the quality of the coaching relationship measured using the WAI. We also looked to see how that outcome related to the coach's view of the relationship and whether the coach's intuitive view compared usefully with the client's recorded view. We expected to see some positive correlation in both.

We explored the significance of client personality type differences with respect to outcome. Do certain personality types respond better to coaching generally? We went on to explore the impact of different combinations of personality in coach and client, to assess whether, for example, it is better to match or mismatch elements of personality in client and coach. Previous research by Scoular and Linley<sup>1</sup> indicated that a mismatch in MBTI 'temperaments' leads to a better outcome for the client. We hoped to replicate and substantiate their findings.

In the next analysis, we explored how the outcome was affected by the different kinds of interventions the clients received in coaching. This produced some fascinating comparative information showing what the client found to be most useful – and of little or no use. We went on to explore how what people wanted from coaching varied depending on the different aspects of their personality type.

Finally, in this early inspection of the data, we looked at the impact of the self-efficacy of the client on the coaching outcome. We also took the opportunity to answer some other interesting questions, such as

whether men and women perceived the effectiveness of their coaching similarly, the extent to which the client's perception of support from their organisation supports the coaching outcome and the relationship between outcome and the client's prior expectation.

### What did we find?

We were thrilled to find that our data shows a statistically significant, moderate to high correlation between the quality of the relationship as assessed with the modified WAI and the outcome for the client. In contrast, there appears to be no correlation between outcome and the strength of the coaching relationship as assessed by the coach!

Similar results have been reported in therapy and counselling but it still seemed surprising that the coach's view of the strength of the relationship could be so different to that of the client.

We then looked to see what the personality information for the client might tell us. To our surprise, we found no particular patterns relating the success of coaching to client preferences. All personality types seem to appraise it equally highly, which is interesting in that we had expected the more 'touchy-feely' or 'intuitive' managers to have a higher regard for it.

Contrary to our expectation, and bearing in mind the previous



“ It is great to see that all personality types seem to benefit equally from coaching ”

research, we found no statistical evidence for particularly stronger or weaker combinations of personality in the coach-client relationship. There are several possible reasons, and we shall present these with our full findings.

We were keen to find out how our clients rated our different coaching interventions and looked to see whether there was any statistically significant correlation with outcome for each. Often, in this kind of study, if clients value their coaching, they rate highly everything the coach does. However, what was fascinating here was the pronounced differences in results for different interventions.

Three of the six interventions described by Heron produced statistically significant positive correlation with the coaching outcome. The strongest positive correlation was for “my coach to help me make discoveries”, the

second was for “my coach to challenge my thoughts and actions” and the third was for “my coach to support me”.

The three other interventions (“providing information”, “encouraging the release of emotions” and “offering advice or plainly told what to do, by the coach”) had no statistically significant correlation with a positive coaching outcome. If anything, the impact of advising and telling appears to be slightly negative for the client.

We also found statistically significant correlation with outcome when the clients experienced meaningful progress on their issues during critical moments of insight or realisation, when they got significant growth around outcomes/doing or behaviours/being, and when they received explicit focus on their most important goals.

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Finally, we found a significant weak correlation between the outcome and the self-efficacy of the client, which also ties up with established results found from the use of the self-efficacy diagnostic and outcomes within therapy.

Interestingly, we found that both men and women appear to rate their coaching equally highly. Perhaps not surprisingly, we found a statistically significant weak correlation between the extent to which clients believe their organisational context supports the coaching objectives and the coaching outcome. We also found some correlation between outcome and clients' prior expectation.

## Key findings

- The quality of the relationship between coach and client, as rated by the client, is what makes all the difference to the success of executive coaching.
- Building strong relationships is more likely to lead to coaching success than introducing clever interventions.
- All MBTI personalities appraise coaching in a similar manner (highly).
- Coaching's success is not dependent on the coach-client combination of personality types.
- Helping the client make discoveries is the most successful intervention as perceived by the client, followed by challenging the client's thoughts and actions, and supporting the client.
- Providing information and helping with releasing emotions are seen to be less beneficial, and advising or telling the client what to do is least related to perceived outcome.
- Different personality types value different aspects of coaching.
- The self-efficacy of the client has little relationship with outcome.
- Men and women rate coaching equally highly.

## Implications for coaching

It is perhaps too soon to draw conclusions but it is difficult not to respond to these early indications.

The results using the adapted WAI, which gave the strongest positive correlation with outcome of all aspects explored, provide quantitative evidence that a strong coaching relationship is the most powerful key to coaching success. So, building strong relationships is more likely to lead to coaching

Following on from this, we looked to see whether the client figures supported our expectation that clients of different MBTI personality preferences would value different things in their coaching. As statistically significant results, we found that clients with a preference for 'extraversion' (E) tended to say that they would place more value on the coach helping them release emotions, significant progress by step-by-step change and significant growth around outcomes/doing, than those with a preference for 'introversion' (I).

Clients with a preference for 'sensing' (S) expressed more of a wish for support from the coach

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and significant progress on issues via step-by-step change than clients with an 'intuition' (N) preference.

Those with a 'feeling' (F) preference for making decisions said they would value more support, help with releasing emotions and progress through step-by-step change than clients with a 'thinking' (T) preference.

There were no statistically significant differences in what 'judging' (J) and 'perceiving' (P) types said they would value.

success than clever interventions. This can be hugely encouraging for newly qualified coaches.

The other very significant conclusion is that coaches seem to have a pretty biased view of the quality of the coaching relationship and possibly also a weak sense of coaching outcome. One option might be to use this adapted WAI as a key to assessing and improving our coach/client relationships.

It is great to see that all personality types seem to benefit

equally from coaching. This might reassure many coaches (with an abundance of N and F preferences) and also their managerial clients (with an abundance of S and T preferences) that those who like detail and logic will value it just as much as their colleagues.

Since our results about the impact of matching or mismatching coach and client personalities were different to previous research, they are worth further thought.

We repeated the data analysis after removing clients of those coaches who said that they modified their natural style once they knew the personality profile of their client. We found nothing of significance.

Analysis in this area is not straightforward because our coach sample illustrates what previous research has shown – a strong bias in the distribution of coaches towards N rather than S personality types.

A possible reason for the difference in results is that the previous research was based on 30-minute sessions with unknown clients, so the relationship was very new, whereas our data comes from established coaching relationships. Most of the experienced coaches in our survey said they consciously or automatically adapted their style to suit their client, so it may be that, as the relationship grows, the coach senses what style a client needs for the best outcome.

The results for the different types of interventions as perceived by the



“ The results appear to confirm what coaching theory repeatedly tells us: advising or telling the client what to do is not helpful ”

client speak to us about how we might improve our practice to help them. We need to add a strong word of caution here – the client’s perception of an intervention may be different from that of the coach – and different again from that of an independent observer.

The results appear to confirm what coaching theory repeatedly tells us: advising or telling the client what to do is not helpful. A combination of what feels like challenge, support and helping to make new discoveries seems the most potent. In addition, a sense of progressing on issues through critical moments of insight or realisation shows a much stronger correlation than progress through step-by-step change. There is also positive correlation when clients feel explicit focus on their most important goals.

Because this link with positive outcome has been made using clients’ own perceptions of our interventions, we can use the results as a powerful platform to

start individual conversations about what we could do more or less of with each of them in future.

The different results for what people with different MBTI preferences say they would value in their coaching help us build on the theory of using MBTI preferences in coaching presented by Hirsh and Kise<sup>2</sup> and to consider further how we might consciously adapt our coaching to suit different needs.

For example, while the intervention “helping to release emotions” produces no statistically significant correlation with outcome for the sample as a whole, it seems that clients with E and F preferences would value this more than those with I and T preferences.

Finally, there may be ways that we can anticipate and predict how effective coaching is likely to be for prospective clients, based on indicators such as prior expectation, how far their organisation will support their coaching goals and their own self-efficacy. Heads-up information like that could be useful in all sorts of ways. ■

## References

- 1 Anne Scoular and Alex Linley, “Coaching, goal setting and personality type: What matters?”, in *The Coaching Psychologist*, 2(1), pp9-11, 2006.
- 2 Sandra Krebs Hirsh and Jane Kise, *Introduction to Type and Coaching*, CPP Inc., 2000.