Translating Research and Evidence

How the Health ‘Leader-as-coach’ benefits health leaders, their teams, peers, organisation and the system

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ABSTRACT

One of the main ways which health leaders at all levels can be developed on a daily basis has been neglected by clinical leadership research, and by the research community generally, relating to the leader consciously using evidence-based coaching skills to positively impact their direct reports, team members, peers, organisations and the wider system in the context of their vocational role, as ‘Leader-as-coach’.

This paper summarises the research on the role of ‘Leader-as-coach’, and translates the learning from this into the practice of clinical leadership development.

Line managers are increasingly expected to use a coaching approach and are in an ideal position to do so. While there are many similarities with professional external coaching, the behaviours of the ‘Leader-as-coach’ are also not identical and multiple ethical issues can arise.

There is no consistent academic definition to describe the behaviours of coaching in the context of a leader’s vocational role, nor yet specific competencies for training or supervision purposes.

The outcomes are summarised from the known literature in this field. Individual and system challenges are then discussed and conclusions are drawn about what this research means in practice for clinical leaders and their systems.

**1.0 Introduction**

Improving population and individual health outcomes requires effective leadership of individuals, teams, organisations, and systems by clinical and public health leaders (1–4).

Four systematic reviews have explored the impact of medical leadership development interventions on improving skills development and/ or technical and conceptual knowledge, and demonstrated benefits at individual, clinical, and organisational levels (4–7). These systematic reviews describe intervention methods ranging from large group didactic lectures, interactive plenary seminars, to individual (one-to-one) coaching and mentoring. Greater efficacy was found for interventions addressing individual learning needs compared with a generic approach. An amplified positive effect was seen when multiple interventions were used in combination(4–7).

There is now a significant and growing body of evidence that one-to-one leadership coaching in the workplace, when provided by an external ‘professional coach’, delivers a wide range of improved outcomes, which is of relevance for medical leadership development. Nine international systematic reviews and/ or meta-analyses on workplace coaching have been published since 2010 (8–16), with consistently positive outcomes across a number of variables at multiple levels: the individual leader receiving coaching (cognitive, meta-cognitive, affective and skills outcomes); and in the team, organisation and system (including greater satisfaction in their direct reports’ and others’ work engagement, organisational commitment, psychological empowerment, reduced strain, and reduced turnover intentions).

A scoping review of the evidence base for coaching for doctors is currently in process with a specific focus on leadership coaching (17), however one of the main ways which clinical and health leaders at all levels can be developed on a daily basis has been neglected by clinical leadership research, and by the research community generally. This relates to the leader consciously using evidence-based coaching skills to positively impact their direct reports, team members, peers, organisations and the wider system in the context of their vocational role (i.e. their ‘day job’): the leader is then behaving as ‘Leader-as-coach’. Such coaching behaviours can be applied in both formal and informal ‘corridor coaching’ conversations by the ‘Leader-as-coach’, including: with their direct reports; wider team members; colleagues; appraisees; mentees; educational supervisees; when leading their team(s); and also to shape the wider organisational and system culture.

This paper summarises the research on the role of ‘Leader-as-coach’, including important skills, practical and ethical distinctions between the ‘Leader-as-coach’ and the ‘professional coach’, in order to then translate the learning into the practice of clinical leadership development.

**2.0 History and definitions of the ‘Leader-as-coach’**

Managers have regularly taken the roles of teacher, mentor and/ or instructor, ‘training’ their employees on the job. Over the last 15 years, managers and leaders have been encouraged to use a more ‘facilitative, coaching style’ with their employees, as human resource functions have emerged and evolved and in response to the evidence base of adult learning and development (18).

A recent (2023) survey from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (19) found that in 41% of organisations, managers now ‘support informal learning and development, eg through coaching’. CIPD’s Factsheet on Coaching and Mentoring (20) states that ‘managers are most likely to take the main responsibility for delivering coaching’, ‘typically embedded into one-to-one meetings and performance conversations’. The Factsheet explicitly raises the issue of whether managers can effectively coach their own staff, given the power relationship and the need for impartiality in the coaching relationship. While there are many similarities with professional coaching, the behaviours of the ‘Leader-as-coach’ are not identical. This means that the literature relating to coaching effectiveness cannot be automatically applied to leaders using coaching skills in their vocational roles. Lawrence states that there is ‘little evidence’ to support the assumption that “‘executive coaching’ and ‘managerial coaching’ are indeed the same thing” (18).

Like other complex concepts (such as leadership, coaching, development, training), there is no single consistent academic definition to describe the behaviours of coaching in the context of a leader’s vocational role. Indeed, multiple definitions of coaching in the context of vocational roles co-exist, and make research in this field challenging. Terms including: ‘managerial coaching’; ‘manager-as-coach’; ‘team coaching by the internal team leader’; ‘employee coaching’; and ‘Leader-as-coach’ are all commonly used to represent the practice of vocational coaching (as opposed to external coaching from a ‘professional coach).

Without clear definitions, it is challenging to both measure impact and to synthesise findings, as well as to develop suitable training and supervision processes for the ‘Leader-as-Coach’.Two definitions of the ‘Leader-as-coach’ are presented below:

*‘A supervisor or manager serving as a coach, or facilitator of learning, in which he or she enacts specific behaviours that enable his/her employee (coachee) to learn and develop.’* Ellinger et al, 2011 (21)

*‘A developmental activity in which an employee works one-on-one with his/her direct manager to improve current job performance and enhance his/her capabilities for future roles and/or challenges, the success of which is based on an effective relationship between the employee and manager, as well as the use of objective information, such as feedback, performance data, or assessments.’*

Gregory & Levy, 2011 (22)

Hagen (2012)(23) suggests that all commonly used definitions imply a learning process through which the individual (or team) is ‘helped to perform better’. Lawrence (18) lists over sixteen definitions from the literature: noting that some describe a facilitative process, others a more directive process, and others do not refer to process, only outcomes. This is also found in the broader coaching literature as scholars have sought to move from understanding ‘whether’ coaching works (outcomes) to ‘how’ coaching works (process) (13). Lawrence also comments that some definitions focus on specific, measurable, skills and competencies which he has summarised. He notes that some definitions place more emphasis on relationship skills (such as empathy, facilitation and relationship building), and others on more directive behaviours (such as recognising performance, goal setting and advice giving).

While all definitions are aimed at supporting or improving the employee’s performance, the context in which the coaching behaviour takes place is likely to be relevant to understanding the nuances in the different definitions. Brief informal ‘corridor coaching’ interventions are likely to focus on the Leader’s use of listening, facilitating and questioning behaviours. When the Leader and employee are engaged in longer, planned, coaching conversations, then a broader and deeper set of Leader coaching behaviours is likely to be used, requiring additional skills such as relationship building, goal-setting, use of feedback, managing ethical issues around power and confidentiality in order to provide a more holistic approach to employees’ personal and professional development in the short and longer term. Leader coaching in practice is therefore not in itself ‘one thing’, as opposed to other less complex constructs which can be more readily reduced and defined to for operational purposes.

In the context of this paper, the term ‘Leader-as-coach’ will be used to refer to the conscious use of coaching behaviours by a leader or manager in the course of their vocational role when working with an employee in a one-to-one context. The employee may be a direct report, appraisee, supervisee, a matrix or project report, team member, informal mentee or in other similar forms of relationship within the same organisation or system. The behaviour may be ‘spontaneous, daily, without plan or end date’ (24) ie deployed in the moment in an ad-hoc manner such as a brief ‘corridor coaching’ conversation or in a more planned way such as in a scheduled one-to-one meeting, or series of ‘coaching sessions’.

**3.0 Ethical Issues, Training and Supervision for the Leader-as-Coach**

Ethical issues arise for the Leader-as-coach, and the more formalised the context in which the Leader is using coaching behaviours, the greater the potential for ethical issues to occur.

Unless the Leader-as-coach is trained and supervised in the conscious and ethical use of their coaching behaviours in the context of their vocational role, then the Leader may be at risk of maleficence, ie causing harm to their direct report and/or their professional relationship (25). Whilst the Leader’s use of coaching skills in non-critical situations to encourage an employee to identify their own solutions to a particular workplace challenge is of relatively low risk from an ethical perspective, the conscious and planned use of coaching behaviours to manage certain work-related situations including performance issues (especially if they have become considerable) raises significant ethical concerns.

Leaders and managers generally have at least a degree of legitimated positional power over their employees – they may expect compliance with certain requests, and in theory they can use coaching to serve their own self-interests. The Leader-as-coach can learn methods to narrow the power differential gap when working with their employees, however eliminating the power gap altogether when coaching a direct report is unlikely – careful attention to ethical conduct by the Leader is essential in this context.

Knowing and setting professional boundaries is fundamental for any coach including the Leader-as-coach. Without appropriate training and supervision in the use of coaching behaviours, the Leader could inadvertently step into inappropriate areas of their employees’ personal lives or psychology, as found in a recent study by Ben-Hador (25), again raising ethical concerns.

The majority of managers and Leaders are unlikely to be formally trained in coaching skills or ethical issues, and are not professionally supervised in their use of coaching behaviours. They may be unclear of when they are role switching between ‘coaching’, ‘mentoring’, ‘directing’, and ‘training’ an employee, raising ethical issues of the employee’s consent. Even when a Leader is choosing to consciously use coaching behaviours, the employee may not be consciously ‘aware’ of the Leader’s approach. This may not always be an issue such as in lower-risk ‘corridor conversations’ - and in reality, managers appear to rarely hold pre-planned scheduled ‘coaching meetings’ (26). However, research has found a discrepancy between the prevalence of coaching behaviours reported by managers compared the prevalence of managerial coaching reported by their employees (managers report a higher prevalence of their use of coaching behaviours) (21). More recent research has found that employees do recognise managers’ coaching behaviours, though the relative prevalence of different types of coaching behaviours differs between manager and employee (27). If the Leader is not trained in ethical issues and is not consciously using coaching behaviours in an ethical way then it is unlikely that the employee will have actively consented to this way of working.

**4.0 Reported outcomes from the ‘Leader-as-Coach’ evidence base**

Despite the flourishing of leadership coaching research using external professional coaches, there have been a small number of literature reviews conducted in the area of ‘Leader-as-coach’ (18,21,23,26,28), and no systematically synthesised reviews.

Lawrence notes the limitations of researching this field (18). These relate to:

1. Inconsistent definitions of coaching behaviours used by the ‘Leader-as-coach’ with resulting inconsistent measurement scales of coaching behaviours;
2. Inconsistent measures of impact (self-assessment of performance by the ‘Leader-as-coach’, and of assessment of the ‘Leader-as-coach’ by others)
3. Differences in methodology (surveys, case studies, etc.)
4. Variations in the ‘level’ of seniority of the ‘Leader-as-coach’
5. Variations in the context of the intervention (e.g. quality improvement teams, sales teams, high-tech organisations) and the size of the organisation

Despite these challenges, it would appear that ‘Leader-as-coach’ behaviours may, in some forms and contexts at least, have a positive impact on outcomes, (18,21,23,26,28,29) as follows:

**4.1 Benefits for recipients of coaching by a ‘Leader-as-coach’** **(‘coachees’)**

* enhanced job satisfaction
* improved commitment to the organisation and citizenship behaviour
* improved individual and team learning and effectiveness
* improved role clarity
* enhanced individual and team performance
* increased willingness to take risks and try new things
* improved ability to cope with change and to become ‘agents of change’
* increased confidence
* improved communication
* reduced stress
* optimised potential
* greater perception of manager’s trustworthiness
* more pro-active career commitment, self-management, and professional development

**4.2 Benefits for the individual ‘Leader-as-coach’**

* Positive leadership development and own personal and professional growth
* Better people management skills (individuality, managerial style-approach, trust-rapport, leadership, communication, to ask questions)
* Learns to develop employees & learns to engage employees (strengthened relationships)
* Learns personal growth (vulnerability, self-awareness, self-improvement, empathy)
* Learns management role skills (delegation, hiring, accountability, realistic expectations, what did not work, learning from and with their staff)
* Learns job satisfaction (management impact on job satisfaction, learns job satisfaction thro perceived personal accomplishment)
* Learns management skills (management style, to trust employee, to solicit feedback)
* Gratification, satisfaction and joy from seeing employees grow and develop from facilitating their learning

**4.3 Benefits for the team from internal coaching by the ‘Leader-as-coach’**

Team coaching is a term used to describe a form of team development (30) originally conceptualised by Hackman & Wageman (2005)(31) to describe how a team leader can coach their own team to improve its overall effectiveness, through a mixture of eclectic interventions, (including team facilitation); process consultation; behavioural model and developmental coaching(30).

Additional benefits are seen when the ‘Leader-as-coach’ is also able to use team coaching behaviours, however coaching one’s own team by a leader is considered to be extremely challenging (28): goals and targets need be collectively developed, team members need to be placed in their roles to effectively complement others, regular feedback needs to be provided, and the leader is required to manage often complex dynamics between team members. Perhaps for this reason, a subspecialisation of external professional coaching, ‘team coaching’, has emerged.

**4.4 Key differences between the ‘Leader-as-coach’ and the ‘Professional Coach’**

Some of the key differences between the ‘Leader-as-coach’ and the ‘professional coach’ are outlined below, based on DiGirolamo & Tkach (26), Lawrence (18), and McCarthy & Milner (32).

The client of the ‘professional poach’ chooses whether or whom to work with in a coaching relationship, and usually sets the agenda and the goals. For an employee receiving coaching from their manager, the ‘Leader-as-coach’, employee and /or organisation may set the agenda and/ or feel the need to ensure goals are aligned with organisation strategy at the expense of the employee’s own development. The employee rarely has choice over their choice of manager, and may not have choice about whether to work in a coaching approach with their manager, thus may not be giving informed consent to work in this way.

Confidentiality within the limits of the law is explicit with a ‘professional coach’ and is clarified during the contracting process. The ‘Leader-as-Coach’ needs to be highly skilled in creating psychologically safe coaching relationships given the potential conflicts between organisational needs and employee confidentiality. Confidentiality and its limits may be implied rather than formally discussed in a managerial coaching relationship, however with training the Leader-as-Coach can learn to pro-actively discuss the level of confidentiality offered, can discuss with the employee how to proceed if a third party needs to be involved (ideally through the efforts of the employee or through seeking permission for the manager to involve someone else). In addition, a coaching conversation can be paused by either party if a potential issue is arising before deciding whether to proceed further (32).

The issue of power in any coaching relationship is important. Whilst professional coaching starts with an assumption of equality, issues of power however subtle, can be at play in both directions. A ‘Leader-as-Coach’ may have positional power over their employee which can compromise the ability of the employee to feel psychologically safe in the coaching relationship: this can be mitigated through the Leader-as-Coach sharing responsibility for their employees development and to place emphasis on the Leader’s willingness to listen and be open to the employees ideas (in (32)).

Loyalty for a ‘professional coach’ can be complex: in a one-way contract with the client it is more clear however in two-way contracts (such as when the ‘professional coach’ is engaged by the employer) the professional coach can be challenged ethically regarding their duty of care. ‘Professional coaches’ follow the ethical code of their coaching professional body – whereas loyalty and ethics for the ‘Leader-as-coach’ are frequently to the organisation rather than their coachee.

The Leader-as-Coach is more likely to undertake ‘role switching’ between the different ‘hats’ (33) that the Leader wears. This may cause role conflict for the Leader, and may be confusing for the employee, as well as raising consent issues, if the Leader is not aware and signalling/ gaining consent for the change in role. A ‘professional coach’ may also use mentoring and training interventions but switches role less often, and only in service of and with the consent of their coachee.

A professional coach working one-to-one with a client is not usually also involved in coaching the whole team, nor directly involved with other team members, unless this is part of a broader ‘team coaching’ intervention involving the professional coach. The Leader-as-coach who is a team leader is likely to be working closely with other members of the team and therefore has a complex set of relationships to manage, again raising ethical issues and the need for support and supervision for the Leader-as-coach.

Coaching conversations are largely informal and in the moment with a ‘Leader-as-coach’, compared to pre-planned with a ‘professional coach’, they may occur as a behaviour undertaken by the leader without conscious ‘contracting’ or exploring consent of the employee.

Whilst not every Leader-as-coach needs detailed psychological training, Lai & McDowall’s 2014 systematic review concluded that a background in psychology is an essential requirement for a professional coach due to the need to understand and manage coachees emotional difficulties and to facilitate their motivations to change (34). Training and supervision are needed for the Leader-as-coach to manage their own wellbeing and any ethical issues as outlined in section 3 above.

**5.0 Individual and system challenges facing the ‘Leader-as-coach’**

Despite the positive evidence for the impact of ‘Leader-as-coach’ behaviours, it does not happen as regularly as it could, and multiple barriers exist (18,21,22,28). These include a perceived lack of time, lack of skill or training, fear of the employee’s reactions, fear of damage to the relationship, lack of organisational support, lack of ongoing coaching supervision, feeling that coaching is ‘another thing to do’, or lacking the mindset and thinking style to work in this way (18).

It should be noted that although lack of time is one of the most commonly reported barriers, a recent study of four UK National Health Service (NHS) nurse-managers trained in coaching skills (35) found that although lack of time was cited as a barrier, nurse-managers use of coaching skills resulted in better relationships and empowered staff, saving managers time in the longer term.

Organisational culture may impact all these barriers, reducing the impact of effectiveness of their leaders and employees (18). For an organisation or system to realise the benefits of using coaching skills, changing behaviours need to be seen as a socio-cultural agenda for an organisation and system, and not solely an individual leader’s responsibility. Lawrence and others believe that building a ‘pro-coaching culture’ must be aligned with organisational strategy, and part of a wider culture change programme if it is to have wider impact at scale (18). The ‘Leader-as-coach’ can be an advocate for this, though will need support from colleagues at all levels for the benefits to be fully realised as part of a more system-level approach to improving the outcomes of the employing organisation.

**6.0 Conclusions**

The challenges faced by health care and public health providers around the world remain complex and challenging. Health leaders who develop coaching skills in their vocational roles and consciously choose when to use them as ‘Leader-as-coach’, are likely to enhance their own effectiveness, the effectiveness of others (including direct reports, teams, appraisees, mentees, educational supervisees, peers, extended team members, peers and colleagues), and to contribute to improved outcomes for the organisation and wider system.

The acquisition of new, evidence-based coaching skills for leaders requires carefully designed training programmes which specifically address the learning needs of the ‘Leader-as-coach’, rather than diluted versions of professional coach training. Whilst coaching professional bodies such as the European Mentoring and Coaching Council and International Coaching Federation have developed competency frameworks from novice to experienced coaches (36,37), there are as yet no specific competency frameworks for the ‘Leader-as-coach' nor adaptation of their respective ethical frameworks for this context. Coaching professional bodies could assist through the development of evidence-based competencies and curricula for the ‘Leader-as-coach’.

Health Leaders who wish to use coaching skills would benefit from evidence-based training in coaching skills in order to to make conscious choices about their ways of working with an employee, to be more skilled at using coaching behaviours when appropriate, and also able to navigate complex ethical challenges in order to positively both avoid harm and to do good in terms of employee and wider outcomes. They will need the opportunity to try out new behaviours, receive feedback and reflect on their learning over a period of time, and to receive the support of coaching supervision. The trained ‘Health Leader-as-coach’ may seek to influence the culture of the organisation and system, and to support other Leaders who are using coaching skills.

The ‘Health Leader-as-coach’ thus requires a supportive organisational context and culture to ensure that the benefits of working in this way can be realised. Healthcare and public health organisations who wish to enhance their effectiveness may benefit from a strategic approach to developing a ‘pro-coaching culture’ as part of their wider organisational or system strategy,

While there is a need for leadership development programmes and coaching to develop senior leaders who are able to lead in the complex environments ahead (4–7), there may be an opportunity to improve the processes of the thousands of formal and informal conversations (in person, through email, text messages, meetings, and other forms of communication) which take place by individuals and leaders and their teams, organisations, and/or a systems on a daily basis in clinical and population health environments. The emerging literature on the Leader-as-Coach referred to in this paper suggests that many of these conversations could benefit from being more ‘coaching orientated’. Further research is needed in a health context in order to understand the potential for the ‘Health Leader-as-Coach’ to positively impact health outcomes more rapidly and at scale.

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