CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Think lightly of yourself, and deeply of the world”

– Miyamoto Musashi
In general, people favor stability over change (Boswell, Olson-Buchanan, & Harris, 2014) and often lack the self-regulatory capacities for successful adaptation (Baumeister, Heatherton, Baumeister, & Heatherton, 1996). However, rapid technological developments and a shift towards short-term project-based work confront individuals at the workplace with high levels of uncertainty and a constant need to adapt to changes in the environment (Ployhart & Bliese, 2006). At the same time, the relative certainty and stability that was once provided by traditional leadership and predefined organizational career-paths (Savickas et al., 2009) are gradually disappearing. This might be the reason that individuals increasingly seek out professional guidance to help them to navigate through the world of work and adapt to changes confronted at the workplace (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011).

In 2012, the International Coaching Federation estimated the world-wide revenue of coaching to be 2 billion dollars annually (ICF, 2012). The Dutch association for professional coaches (NOBCO) estimated that there were approximately 40,000 professional coaches active in the Netherlands in 2011 and there is reason to assume that this number has steadily grown since. In 2015, a quick search on LinkedIn shows that more than 80,000 people in the Netherlands use the word “coach” in their professional headline. Although it is unclear whether the coaching population has indeed doubled, or whether this apparent growth is due to a different use of the word coach (or both), it does indicate that the number of people who identify themselves as coaches is on the rise. These people come from a large variety of educational and occupational backgrounds (e.g., psychology, education, human resource management; Brock, 2008). Furthermore, coaches seem to engage in a diverse array of activities which they apply in a wide variety of domains. A search via Google shows that in the Netherlands alone, there are health coaches, lifestyle coaches, business coaches, walking coaches and even breakfast coaches and horse coaches. This begs the question, what is coaching exactly? In the following section, I will shortly describe how I defined coaching in this dissertation.

**A definition of coaching in the workplace**

Coaching has received attention in a variety of scientific domains (e.g., psychology, sports; Rekalde, Landeta, & Albizu, 2015). These different domains all have their own conceptual frameworks, which has led to many different definitions of coaching. For example, Whitmore (1992) has a background in sports (racing) and defines coaching as unlocking a person’s potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them. Peltier (2010) on the other hand, comes from a psychological background and described coaching as “psychological skills
and methods employed in a one-on-one relationship to help someone to become a more effective manager or leader”. The debate on what coaching is (and what it’s not) is still ongoing. Nevertheless, the coaching literature seems to be gradually moving towards a generally accepted definition by Grant (2003) who defines coaching as “a result-oriented, systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of life experience and goal-attainment in the personal and/or professional life of normal, non-clinical clients” (p.254).

Grants’ definition has several advantages. First, it emphasizes that coaching is an intentional and systematic process that encompasses more than just having good conversations (Leonard-Cross, 2010). Also, it recognizes that coaching is mainly a facilitative process in which the coach aims to stimulate self-directed change (Downey & Downey, 1999). Thereby, it distinguishes coaching from other “developmental interactions” (D’Abate, Eddy, & Tannenbaum, 2003) such as training and/or mentoring. In training and mentoring, the trainer/mentor actively directs and guides the development of the client, and aims to train or transfer specific (and often predefined) knowledge, skills and abilities (Abbott, Stening, Atkins, & Grant, 2006). Additionally, the definition distinguishes coaching from therapy by a focus on a non-clinical population. In this dissertation, I define coaching as in the above definition by Grant (2003) and focus specifically on coaching in the workplace (or “workplace coaching”; Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010). Workplace coaching refers to coaching that is aimed at enhancing life experiences and goal-attainment in the work domain (as opposed to for example, life coaching) and that can be targeted at both executives (e.g., managers) and non-executives (e.g., employees) in organizations (Grant et al., 2010)

**Current state of the literature and aims of this dissertation**

Although the first article on coaching was published as early as 1937 (Gorby), the topic started to receive increasing attention during the 1990’s (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011). Since then, the literature has steadily grown and has mirrored the development of adjacent literatures such as the literature on therapy, mentoring, and training; At first, the literature was dominated by theoretical papers, case-studies, and cross-sectional studies. Later, qualitative studies started to emerge and only recently, the number of Randomized Controlled Trials has started to grow (see Passmore & Theeboom, in press). The majority of the existing research however, has been initiated by practitioners who are untrained in research methods and who have a specific interest in evaluating the effectiveness of the coaching models that they use in their practice (Grant, 2013). Most of the time, these coaching models are either self-developed or derived from the popular
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psychological, management and/or self-help literature, and lack a solid theoretical and/or empirical foundation (e.g., Neuro Linguistic Programming; Witkowski, 2012). Consequently, extant research has focused on a wide variety of coaching applications and outcomes and the state of the academic literature on coaching can best be described as “disjointed and fragmented” (Grant, 2013, p.17).

The scarce amount of systematic research on coaching is predominantly *summative* in nature (Ely et al., 2008). That is, this research has mainly focused on the question “*does* coaching work”. An answer to this question is important because it can provide feedback to organizations, individual coaches and coaching services. However, studies examining this question have often used different conceptualizations of effectiveness and have focused on a limited number of coaching techniques. The field of coaching is therefore in need of research that can inform the conceptualization of effectiveness and research that examines coaching effectiveness across several measures of effectiveness and coaching methodologies.

Moreover, whereas answering the question whether coaching works is important, research that examines this question still does not inform us on *how* coaching works, or, in other words, what the underlying processes are that explain coaching effectiveness. Until now, this latter question has been largely ignored. However, research uncovering the causal mechanisms and psychological processes that underlie effective coaching is crucial for the development of new approaches and refinement of existing coaching interventions. To give an example, there is an increasing amount of studies indicating that coaching approaches that build on a coachee’s strengths and successes can be applied effectively in organizations (Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2014). Yet, we currently do not know how such approaches contribute to the well-being and functioning of coachees. It might be that the positive emotions elicited by these coaching approaches (because they encourage coachees to think about positive situations) increase a coachee’s cognitive flexibility (and hence, his/her creative problem-solving capabilities as predicted by the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001, see Chapter 4). If this is indeed the case, a coach could refine the intervention in order to find ways to maximize the elicitation of positive emotions and/or think of alternative interventions that could obtain similar results. Thus, as opposed to summative research, *formative* research is needed to inform coaching practice and to enable coaches to target and time their coaching interventions more accurately.

The aim of this dissertation is twofold. First, it aims to contribute to summative research into the effectiveness of coaching by providing a systematic quantitative review of the literature, as well as more insight into the measurement
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and conceptualization of coaching effectiveness by coaching practitioners. Furthermore, this dissertation aims to contribute to formative research on coaching by investigating how coaches can help coachees to solve their problems and by providing a theoretical framework that can serve as a guideline for coaches who aim to facilitate their coachees’ behavioral change and, as an agenda for future research. A more detailed overview of this dissertation is provided below.

Overview of this dissertation

All chapters in this dissertation are centered around the general theme of coaching effectiveness. However, the chapters differ in their focus (summative vs. formative) and research methodology. The research in chapters 2 and 3 is summative in nature. Chapter 2 describes a meta-analysis with which we aimed to provide a systematic, quantitative review of the literature. Based on both a bottom-up review of the extant coaching research and relevant psychological literatures, I distinguished five different outcome categories that can be used as individual-level indicators of coaching effectiveness: well-being, coping, skills/performance, work related attitudes and goal-directed self-regulation, and included studies that examined coaching effectiveness on one, or multiple, of these indicators.

Whereas chapter 2 addresses the conceptualization and measurement of coaching effectiveness in the extant academic literature, chapter 3 describes a study that aimed to capture the practitioner’s perspective on the conceptualization and measurement of coaching effectiveness. Specifically, we aimed to investigate to which degree coaching research aligns with coaching practice in terms of the conceptualization of coaching effectiveness and to uncover how coaching practitioners balance the needs of the coachee and the coachee’s organization when assessing the effectiveness of their interventions. Therefore, we asked senior practitioners to list their coaching success indicators (CSIs). Concept-mapping and text-mining techniques were used to investigate which categories of CSIs are in the minds of practitioners, and how they rate the relative importance (from the practitioners perspective) of these CSIs.

The latter two chapters of this dissertation are formative in nature and focus on the psychological processes that underlie effective coaching. Specifically, chapter 4 describes two experimental studies that investigate the differential effects of solution-focused and problem-focused coaching questions on positive and negative affect, attentional resources, and creative problem-solving. Finally, chapter 5 introduces a theoretical framework that describes coachees’ competencies that coaches can focus on during different stages of the coaching process and how that can help to
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facilitate coachees’ behavioral change. This chapter builds on the Trans Theoretical Model of Change (Prochaska & Velicer, 1997) and seminal psychological literature on behavioral change and self-regulation (e.g., Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). A graphical overview of this dissertation is displayed below.

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To conclude, I hope that this dissertation contributes to both the development of coaching effectiveness research and our understanding of the processes that underlie effective coaching. Specifically, I hope that research in this dissertation can guide and inspire future research, and ultimately contributes to the development of an evidence-base for coaching as a human resource development and change methodology.