

Exploring Leadership Developmental Process within Executive Coaching Conversation in Malaysia

Nasreen Nawab, Mohd Mursyid Arshad¹, Ismi Arif Ismail, Zoharah Omar

Faculty of Educational Studies, University Putra Malaysia (UPM)

Email: nasreennawab@gmail.com

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Abstract: The demanding and continuous change of today's business environment drives the demand and pressure for a more effective leadership development in every organisation, especially in private organisations. In relation to this, coaching has emerged in the human resource development practice as a powerful development tool in improving leadership skills of executive leaders to drive an organisation towards success and better performance. The aim of this research is to conceptualise the learning process within coaching conversation to understand how the process is able to enhance leadership qualities within a leader. This knowledge could facilitate coaches to improve their coaching practice and making impactful changes in coaches' life. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews that involved nine informants from both coaches and coachees. Selection criteria for the coaches were individuals who have conducted executive coaching programmes extensively as part of their service for more than five years, and have reached to the highest level of professionalism as Professional Certified Coach (PCC). The coaches were selected from individuals who hold executive position in their organisations that has participated in any executive coaching programmes in Malaysia. Currently, as a newly emerged tool, the practice of coaching is evolving faster than the theoretical knowledge supporting it. As such, this study is hoped to bridge the gap, integrate and enhance knowledge on various practices and theories, as well as to deepen the understanding on the learnings in the coaching process and maximise its effectiveness.

Keywords: Executive Coaching, Coaching Process, Learning Process, Leadership Development

Introduction

Past researches have shown that organizational performance is very much dependent on the leadership and knowledge of its leader and people (McDermott, Kidney, & Flood, 2011; Agle et al., 2006; Bougae, 2005; Waldman et al., 2004). With the fast-evolving environment, leaders are

struggling to catch up with the attempt to know everything, as such companies are supporting key leaders with leadership development programmes to expedite the process and support the leaders (Turner, 2003).

Investing in leadership development is the most productive way (Killian, 2010; Cacioppe, 1998) in supporting individual development and increasing organisational effectiveness (Barner & Higgins, 2007; Bougae, 2005) in achieving the organisation's targets and improve its resilience and performance in the long run (Jonsen, 2012; Zenger & Stinnett, 2010; Killian, 2010; Barner & Higgins, 2007; Richards, 2006). This is reflected in the increasing amount of investment value committed by companies and organisations for leadership development programmes (McDermott, Kidney, & Flood, 2011; Barner & Higgins, 2007; Bougae, 2005; Martineau & Hannum, 2003; Verlander, 1999). It is important for leaders to commit time for their continuous and progressive leadership development (Mostovicz, Kakabadse, & Kakabadse, 2009) programmes to hone their leadership skills, and open their minds and perspectives to new ideas and directions (Cacioppe, 1998).

Studies have shown that most successful businesses and organisations have strong leadership programs established in their organisations. This is because successful organisations are often built on clear ideas and directions from the top which create strong foundations for the organisations' growth (Cacioppe, 1998). Most organisations are willing to invest in high potential leaders and selected individuals who potentially will bring a lot of value to the organisations (Barner & Higgins, 2007).

This research posits that leaders can be developed and leadership development is a continuous process. There are various types of leadership interventions used to improve leaders' skill sets and competencies in order to be able to adapt and respond to the needs of each organisation in different situations (Terrell & Rosenbusch, 2013), and also tailored to individual continuous development opportunities for their most integral employees (Gan & Chong, 2015; Mavor, Sadler-Smith & Gray, 2010).

Common approaches to leadership development include education, training, job rotation, special project assignments, 360 assessment and feedback, mentoring, and many others (Terrell & Rosenbusch, 2013; Cacioppe, 1998). However, the traditional approach alone is no longer adequate to develop the skill sets required to face the challenging environment and a more strategic approach is required in order to deliver change within the organisation (Jonsen, 2012). This trend has created a demand for coaching practice to emerge (Bougae, 2005) and grow rapidly over the past years.

Coaching is acknowledged as an effective management intervention to deliver the intended improvement in the overall performance and growth for leaders or decision makers to function better (Mavor, Sadler-Smith, & Gray, 2010; Zenger & Stinnett, 2010; Bougae, 2005), especially in supporting the senior management group (Chidiac, 2006).

According to International Coaching Federation (ICF), coaching is defined as "*partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential*".

Killburg (2002) offers a comprehensive definition of executive coaching which has been most quoted by other scholars:

“Executive coaching as a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to assist the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client’s organization within a formally defined coaching agreement”.

Executive coaching has gaining popularity (Bozer, Sarros & Santora, 2014) as an important developmental tool due to its dynamics which integrates multiple disciplines that are able to cater to various needs of the tremendous changing and competitive environment. Coaching is built from diverse founding theories rooted from various fields and disciplines of study including psychology, management, philosophy, social science, and many others (Argirou, 2016, Rekalde, Landeta & Albizu, 2015; Wildflower & Brennan, 2013).

The term executive refers to leaders who are in the top and upper ranks of their organizations- the CEOs, vice presidents, plant or business unit managers, and executive directors of organizations (Long, 2003)

Coaching is recognised as a fluid communication process that is always ready and open to discuss any topics that the coachee brings to the table. The strength of coaching is not based on a specific topic, but the process and technique used would allow reflection to happen in an individual and help them to analyse as well as understand their issues better. The coaching model acts as a guideline based on the individual coach preferences. A coach is not restricted to his own model, a good coach can adapt other models as the guiding principle to conduct a coaching conversation (Arnold, 2016).

Many coaches claimed that they do not use any specific model in their coaching model, and use their experience and instinct to decide the approach needed, depending on the situation (Arnold, 2016). However, Barners and Higgins (2007) argued that coaches tend to have certain inclinations towards the approach they use during the coaching process.

Indirectly, the coaching process is grounded heavily by learning theories, and the outcome of coaching is contributed based on how effective learning happens within the process (Fazel, 2013). Relating and integrating the knowledge on how coachees learn and develop their leadership skills from a coaching process is critical as to give an appropriate expectation and perspective on coaching (Anderson & Anderson, 2016) to coachees or coaching sponsors, and will allow coaches to extrapolate the best coaching practices to boost the effectiveness of the process. Progress and positive changes that are seen from improved skills, performance, behaviours, perspectives, and others are said to be the learning outcomes experienced from the process.

This study is hoped to crystallise understanding on the learning process within coaching by analysing the approach used by a coach, learning activities that have taken place from the experience and lens of a coachee, and the outcome and impact from the coaching process. This approach will be able to highlight key learning activities that trigger the change and facilitate coachees to enhance their skills and potential (Speltz, 2013).

Methods

The method used for this research is qualitative research to investigate and understand the dynamics of learning within the coaching process. The qualitative approach is suitable to address

the nature of research questions in this study that requires deep exploration into the coachee's learning experience from the executive coaching process to understand how the learning process happens within the coaching process. The qualitative research method in this study empowers individuals to share their stories, hear their own voices, and minimize influence of researcher over informants (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018) which is very much similar to the context of coaching process.

Hence, this study will describe and explain extensively on the technicality on how the learning process occur within coaching and how it helps executives to be better leaders in their work and personal space. These objectives necessitated a qualitative design approach which is inductive in nature to capture rich and subjective inputs (Merriam, 2009) from the coach and coachee in explaining their coaching experience deeply. This study is descriptive in nature as to describe the learning process within a coaching conversation drawing from the coachees' experience in their coaching program.

Case Study Approach

Case study approach is chosen as the approach for this study where coaching conversation between a coach and a coachee is treated as a bounded system due to its uniqueness and confidentiality of its process compared to other leadership development program. The study is focusing on understanding the coaching process; thus, each coaching conversation is a single process.

The case study approach is an inductive process which explains a phenomenon clearly and facilitates the researcher to understand the meaning of phenomenon (Morse & Richards, 2002). The case study method is deemed suitable to examine a process in a great extent and illustrate the complexity of the process in great detail (Creswell, 2013).

Yin (2009) earlier defined a case study process as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context", especially when the boundaries study process as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context".

Sampling

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews that involved nine informants from both coaches and coachees. This study deployed purposive sampling and snowball techniques.

Coaches were selected under the well-recognized organization, International Coaching Federation (ICF) where selection criteria for coaches have been set earlier before the selection process. Coaches must be at Professional Certified Coach (PCC) level and have conducted executive coaching programmes extensively as part of their service for more than five years.

The process of selecting the coachee is based on the snowballing technique as all the executives were the coachees of the selected coach. With the level of trust that has been built between the coach and coachee, the coach will approach their coachees and obtain their agreement and consent to participate in the study. Ultimately, the sample comprised of those who were able and willing to provide necessary information on the issues under study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In-depth Semi Structured Interview

In-depth interviews were conducted throughout the data collection process to gather information and feedback from the coachees and coaches on their experience and expectation of the coaching process that they have experienced. A semi-structured interview was used in the interview process to encourage information flow from both coach and coachee in sharing their experiences and stories. The main scope of this research is understanding the learning process on how the coachee learns with the facilitation of a coach within the coaching engagement.

In-depth semi-structured interview was appropriate in this study as the researcher may not be able to observe and interpret the coachee's feelings, behaviour, and perspective accurately from their previous coaching engagement (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The structured questions were used to gather specific and important information required from informants to be able to interpret a situation better (Merriam, 2009), and to guide the researcher to gather essential information on some specific issues or common aspects critical for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The less structured probing questions allowed informants to elaborate meaning from their own perspective. All questions were used flexibly to empower coachees to tell their stories and to allow the flow of thoughts in expressing their feelings with regards to their coaching experience (Merriam, 2009).

Findings and Discussion

The paper acts as an exploratory prompt to answer the question how coaching process develop leaders within the coaching conversation. From verbatim transcripts and significant statements extracted, findings from the in-depth interviews with views from coach and coachee indicated that the coaching conversation provide positive leadership ecosystem within the coaching conversation space between coach and coachee. This theme stand out clearly from the interview conducted. Informants indicated that positive ecosystem help to spur growth in term of leadership capabilities in coachee which include improvement in term of skills, attitudes, behaviors and values.

Coach and coachee described the following area of indirect learnings attributed from the positive leadership ecosystem;

- (1) Comfortability to open up;
- (2) Attentive and feeling of being heard;
- (3) Personalised assessment for structured improvement;
- (4) Enforce practice to instill new knowledge; and

- (5) Powerful questioning help to challenge and reframe perspective
- (6) Following through the agreed commitment

Provide Positive Leadership Ecosystem

The coaching space encapsulated two elements; psychological safety and positive relationships (Bluckert, P., 2005) that empower coachee to take ownership of their learnings and also commitment to practice and take actions.

Comfort ability to open up

Robins V. (2017) stressed that it is important to keep the coaching session as an open space for coachee to share their minds which allows the coaching relationship to flow freely. Robins emphasized that the coaching conversation needs to be about the client, not the coach. Interview with Coach 1 stated similar findings:

The other part that I think they learn is by giving, talking about their situation because the coaches listen, and ask questions and pause and look at them, by talking about that, they come to their own realisation, they come to their own solutions, they come to their own discovery, they come to their own learning, it's all part of it (Coach 1)

The assurance of confidentiality is important in any advisory relationship. This will give sense of security that the conversation will be private and not shared beyond the coaching conversation (Greenfield, D. P., & Hengen Jr, W. K., 2004). Coach 3 highlighted:

And at the same time, they get the assurance that the sensitive information is not shared outside (Coach 3)

Trust started to build up between coach and coachee when coach guarantee cast iron confidentiality level (Blackman-Sheppard, G (2004) even to the Human Resource Department which acts as the coaching sponsors that paid for the program.

When she said that whatever progress, first time or second time, there is already a progress report, so she said that she will check with me first....what...is there anything that you would like to say and would not like to say....then I started to feel ok....its not getting to HR without my consent...so its ok la...(Coachee 1)

The coaching space allow coachee to organize their thought to share issues that they are comfortable to share. However, often than not, the sharing will be able to dig into emotionally embedded issues that could be a root cause to a bigger problem (Robins, R.V, 2017). Being comfortable in a coaching session is a key ingredient in triggering meaningful learning. Coachee 5 stated that:

he sort of giving me a breakthrough ...because he make me realise that I need to talk about things...about issues...when there is any issues, its okey to talk about issues....but within certain

principles and parameters..(Coachee 5).

Coachee reached more clarity and gain better perspectives about their issues and problem when they talked about it. The conversation however must be guided with certain coaching principles as to trigger realisation on the reality of the situation and how best for coachee to tackle it. Realisations that kicks in, however need to be tied down with action plan.

Attentive and Being Heard

Robins (2017) explained that listening attentively create a sacred space where coachee felt heard. Coachee 4 stated:

He is always very attentive, eye contact. It is very important how that makes a person feel that you are actually listening (Coachee 4)

The attentiveness and understanding displayed by the coach give coachee a sense of confidence to draw a clear picture on how do they want to progress forward. They feel heard and supported in taking ownership to improve. This however depends on two elements; connection between coach and client and space for client to think (Robins V. 2017).

And also Jeff listen to the things that my grandfather's story, from A to Z. That is actually difficult, I find it difficult. After the coaching session, it is good. Not to say, you 360 change because u tend to forget sometimes (Coachee 3)

The coaching space allow coachee to share things that they avoid sharing. With experience, coach has the ability to listen to the client delicately at different depth which able to sense and acknowledging the different tones and non-verbal signals displayed by the coachee (Passmore, 2010 a, b). Coach 3 shared one of his experience:

But the one that stays, they required a lot of support especially from a coach. Imagine you're a HOD, you are scared, you are worried, these are not the things that you go running to your CEO, because your CEO hire you to do the job and not for you to tell your CEO that, hey CEO, I am scared of my life, I am afraid that I won't have a job, right? These are the things that you tell your coach...(Coach 3)

The level of understanding displayed by the coach will help to increase connectedness between coach and coachee and indirectly increase coachee's trust to share their stories (Robins, 2017).

Personalized Assessment for Structured Improvement

As coaching is a relational based approach, often than not, coaches will conduct assessment and psychometric test at the initial stage of the coaching program. According to Scoular & Campbell (2007), the test is hope to facilitate coaches hope to achieve two objectives, better understand the coachee and create awareness for the coachee in term of potential of self-growth

that they could achieve, maximizing their potential. Coachee 4 explained:

we also did the profiling on myself even before attending the coaching session, a profile was required so that my coach was able to understand what kind of person I am and yeah also my work environment (Coachee 4)

McDowall & Smewing (2009) highlighted that the assessment provided reliable and useful source of data that will support the structure of approach that coaches use for their coachee. Apart from that, the assessments trigger realisation and buy in to participate in the coaching process when coachee appreciate its findings. Coachee 5 mentioned that he was amazed with the findings of the assessment:

I was shocked to see what this wave assessment can pick up. And then we start talking about those things, what are some of the areas that I need to improve, what are my strengths, what do I struggle with and how do I deal with it...That's how I got started with him (Coachee 5)

Wolff & Santen (2017) explained that one characteristic of an adult learner is that they are often self-directed where they need to identify their gaps and knowing the areas that they need help on.

Depends, sometimes there are things that I really want to know, otherwise the coach will guide us...It can be both of us, from the coachee and coach (Coachee 3)

However, Wolff & Santen (2017) highlighted that unguided assessment often flawed and individual need support in making sense and processing the inputs into detail analysis. Only then that the inputs can be integrated into meaningful learning and development plan.

we also spoke a lot about the automatic negative thoughts and that he identified that as one of the problems. So, he was coaching me on how to overcome that and how does that help with having more self-confident in facing other people (Coachee 4)

Wolff & Santen (2017) highlighted that each individual has different background and therefore have different level of learning needs. Self-assessment facilitates coaches in identifying the needs of each coachee and identifying suitable in their coaching approach. The coach's role in the process of informed self-assessment and self-directed learning will evolve as the coaching relationship matures and the student becomes more adept with this process

Enforce Practice to instill new Knowledge

In order to make significant learning accomplished, practice need to be enforced to make sure the new learning from coaching session is translated into transfer of skills and knowledge. Practice is regarded as an additional step in training towards meaningful learning (Wolff & Santen, 2017). Coach 1 explained:

We can enforce a practise during the 6 sesssions but not after that. Right. So that is really what we feel that the coachee should do because if they don't practise they will just learn the knowledge. Without practise, they will never not remember (Coach 1)

Through this exercise, a coach will be able to reinforce actions that are performed well, correct actions that need modification, and build the learner's confidence by accomplishing discrete tasks. Coachee 1 stated:

The process actually through exercises, a simple exercise but it makes you know what kind of thinking you have, it is just a normal pictures, and asking you to describe a situation, it let you know what type of person who you are and you get to explain.(coachee 1)

Through exercises, the coach actually exposing the coachee to experience their own learning. From each exercise, coachee will review their own learning experience and understand what they have learned from it. . This process will develop coachee into proactive learner where they are capable to learn from almost all situation or experience that they will encounter in the future.

However, despite the opportunity for valuable learning experience that they could benefited from the homework and practices that was assigned to them, some coachee really find that the practice is time consuming and they don't have enough time to follow through the assignments given the short gap in between.

Actually, truthfully, not really look forward because it comes with homework, you have to do and follow through all those kinds of things. Not only the assignment but action plan, what we need to achieve and sometimes because of work, we cannot achieve it in a short period of time (Coachee 2)

Nevertheless, the moment coachee starts too able to solve problem through the homework and practices that were assigned to them, it gives them sense of confidence to solve their real problems and change their mindset to view problem as just challenges along the way. Through practice, they will indirectly acquire new competencies and learn to develop more effective learning.

Powerful Questioning help to Challenge and Reframe Perspective

The complex challenges that leaders have to face nowadays demand for deeper level of thinking and constant feedback as a need to draw insights from their action and experience which will have impact in the level of understanding of organizational issues at strategic level. Yet, Cannon & Witherspoon (2005) highlighted that most leaders lack of actionable feedback and do not know how to learn at this deeper level (Roglio & Light, 2009). Argyris (2004) highlighted that the ability to think and act effectively depend on leaders' capacity for double-loop learning which requires leaders' to critically reflect on their action and reframe their existing thought process. Referring to the findings collected from the interviews, Coach 2 stated that:

Because the questions are helping them to reframe their perspective/spectrum, so the questions are pushing them to take action, the questions are helping them to find insights (Coach 2)

Within the coaching conversation, this can be achieved through powerful questioning method that will challenge and reframe coachees perspective. Similar remarks were made by Coach 1:

The questions are very powerful, the questions challenge them, the questions make them think, the questions make them think about the impact of what they do, it really makes them have an idea about what they do is positive, negative or neutral...that the power of the question (Coach 1)

Witherspoon (2014) highlighted that coaching along a double-loop learning pathway helps leaders alter their spontaneous understanding of a particular situation. Learning occurs as leaders shift their framing and can lead to more change. This is aligned with the International Coaching Federation's definition of coaching. Coachee 1 shared her powerful questioning experience:

she is forcing me to think, maybe she manipulated my brain through her questions, I don't know but I don't care because it is working...(Coachee 1)

Powerful questioning help leaders to connect their thinking and their action, opening their mind to different perspectives that could improve their individual performance and leadership skills (Witherspoon, 2014). Powerful questioning method in coaching is built upon the concept of reflecting-in-action. The right questions asked by coaches ignite the reflection-in-action process, a concept coined by Schön (1983). Through the reflection process, coachee better understand their action and thought process for a particular situation and start designing alternatives (Kegan, 1998).

Absolutely, he was asking the right question that mattered a lot...(Coachee 4)

Brownell, J., (2010) explained that one way to facilitate understanding is through asking appropriate questions and questions could serve variety of purpose. They can serve as clarification, probe, perception check or to control the direction of the conversation. Robins R.V. (2017) highlighted that during the coaching process, clients tend to share issues that they are comfortable to share, however they might not have the right ability to explain in depth. This gap could be fill with the powerful questioning method which help coachee to structure their reflection and realization.

Following through the Agreed Commitment

Robins R. (2017) highlighted that coaching process empower coachee to take full responsibility over their own development. This helps to improve their confidence level knowing that they are capable of changing their behaviours and becoming the improved version of themselves. Inputs from the interview recorded that Coachee 2 highlighted that she was taking ownership of his

progress, following through from the coaching session. Coachee 2 stated:

Yes, the whole thing. I am following through the whole thing, I come up with an action plan, follow through and I apply in whatever project and goal that I am doing. It goes back to the coaching session because without my coaching session, I won't get a mentor and everything started from the coaching session (Coachee 2)

Witherspoon (2014) highlighted that coaching could be deployed in the redesign phase in double loop learning where the coach facilitates the coachee to make adjustments and produce new ways of thinking in helping the coachee to improve their leadership effectiveness.

Therefore, we space the session a bit more later on, where it's more about follow up and minor adjustment and then raising the challenge progressively so that they can go into higher level (Coach 2)

During the following up session, the coach would listen to the coachee's feedback and help to make adjustments to revise underlying assumptions, core values and basic beliefs that would influence the way the leader thinks and acts. This would help the coachee to improve and progress forward.

Yes, I will have a list of action plans and he will follow up and ask me for what kind of projects that I am working on, I will tell him some things and we will talk about it and then will provide some coaching on how I could do it better (Coachee 4)

The act of following through gives the coachee a warmth feeling that the coach really cares and being there for them beyond the coaching session. This psychological effect extends the coachee's commitment to believe in themselves and committed to achieve their targets. Coachee 4 shared follow-up gestures by his coach to encourage him to keep making progress:

he will send me sms to ask and check, how things going? Can you give me an update? Do you need any help? What are the help available? (Coachee 4)

The coach does not offer solutions but instead follows up to emphasize the need for the coachee to take ownership of their own progress. At the beginning of coaching, the coachee needs nurture and support to take action as to break their old mindset and limiting beliefs that hold them from realizing their full potential.

Conclusions

Leaders seek support of coaching because they want a coach to assist them to make sense of the ambiguity of a situation that they are facing without being judged and not dilute the charisma that they are presumed to have with their level of position. The worry of being judged prevents leaders from openly talking about issues and challenges that they are facing which leads to a lack of feedback that works as an input for further improvements.

As such, a coaching process is seen as an ideal platform to support leader's development as the coaching conversation provide a space where leaders could seek for support in term of deep thinking without being pressured to make constant decision. This space acts as an explorative and integrated thinking platform where coached could speak up their mind and being vulnerable without being judged. With a guarantee of confidentiality, leaders feel safe to be vulnerable and disclose their deepest fear and concerns. This positive leadership ecosystem increased the ability of a leader to truly understand themselves, in term of the ability to accept their strengths and their perceived weaknesses. .

Although not compulsory, conducting assessment before coaching could increase coacher's buy in for the coaching program. Coached seems impressed when the assessment conducted are able to discover new things about them that they have not shared openly with other people surrounding them. This situation is ideal to create bonding and trust between coach and coached and excite them with some level of technicalities to demonstrate the dynamic and complexity of coaching.

The main element that differentiate coaching conversation from conventional talking and downloading problem is where coaching conversation is very much in a reflective dialogue mode facilitated by powerful questioning. The powerful questioning techniques help coached to understand their issues from various perspectives. The feelings of confidence and sense of ownership provided from the process provides coached the ability to change their worldview to be more enabling. They are becoming more open in processing their belief, feelings and actions. This gives the leaders the opportunity to maximize learning from their rich experiences and improves their learning agility.

Positive leadership ecosystem that is created within the coaching space encouraged coached to be more open to talk about their problems which indirectly help them to understand their situation better. Apart from that, supportive gestures where coach's follow through the commitment agreed upon by coaches provides assurance that coaches genuinely care and interested about coaches' positive improvement and progress.

However, the key success factor lies in the coaching conversation between a coach and coaches. The facilitated coaching conversation appears to be somehow a transformative process which facilitate personalized individual transformation. The coaching conversation allows coaches to explore any assumptions and beliefs that they hold within them, and articulating the values it carries in their given situation. It is interesting to understand how coach connect powerful emotions from previous experience and integrate it into the reflective dimensions which will route into increased awareness and realization that leads to change. It might be interesting to draws learning on how the coaching conversation is carried out to triggers coaches to undergo transformational learning journey through coaching process

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Role of informed self-assessment in coaching