

An Investigation on the Role of Coaching in Strategic Leadership Development in the Academia

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Abstract

The changing and challenging situation on the market place has led many academic institutions to update and upgrade their learning methodologies. This improvement aims at helping learners to maximize their potential and achieve greater performance and become more effective, competitive and relevant in the current Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) world. Coaching has been identified as a strategic intervention in leadership development. This paper investigated the role of coaching in strategic leadership development in the academia. Existing literature was reviewed and a 3-week individual coaching program implemented with an undergraduate student using GROW model. Findings indicated three themes connected with the role of coaching in strategic leadership development including goal setting, action planning and prioritization, self-confidence and determination.

Keywords

Coaching, Strategic Leadership, Leadership Development, Higher Education, DRC

1. Introduction

The Leadership Group website provides a quotation worth mentioning about coaching from Bob Nardelli, CEO Home Depot: “I absolutely believe that people, unless coached, never reach their maximum capabilities”, (<http://theleadershipgroup.asia/service/coaching/>). Coaching has increasingly raised a lot of interests within the academia as well as in the market place in last several decades. Individuals and organizations seek to continually improve their performance for greater achievement as they pursue their goals, try to be more

effective, remain competitive and relevant on the market place. [Kimberly and Rosemary \(2006\)](#) describe coaching as a leadership development strategy in developing human capital and even improving organizational performance. Besides, [Groves \(2007\)](#) identifies leadership development, strategically implemented, as a key factor of organizational effectiveness. The concept of coaching becomes increasingly present in various sectors of society as both profit and non-profit, public and private organizations become more intentional about and heavily invest in the development of their human resource.

In the education sector, academic institutions exist to educate, train and equip future leaders to respond to challenges and bring about change in the society. [Breznitz and Feldman \(2012\)](#) posited that universities play a critical role in human, organizational and societal development through economic initiatives, policy development, knowledge transfer, teaching, and basic research. The current global society is identified as Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA; [Sinha & Sinha, 2020](#)). The market place is characterized by quick technological changes, restructuring, turmoil, and a high level of global competition ([Jyoti & Sharma, 2015](#)). Therefore, academic institutions are constantly challenged to update or upgrade their learning approaches as they develop potential leaders able to respond to organizational and societal demands. In their article about integrated learning in the Democratic Republic of Congo, [Bunduki and Higgs \(2016\)](#) argue that the formal education and preparation enables learners not only to “respond to the basic learning-related needs of their fellow citizens but are shaped into active agents of development and change in their contexts” (p. 2).

Furthermore, [Davies \(2001\)](#), reflecting on redefining the role of tertiary institutions in a reconfigured higher education system in South Africa, suggests that tertiary institutions can assist in creating and contributing to develop an entrepreneurial society as they develop entrepreneurial traits in their students. Thus, students are prepared to significantly contribute to the transformation of the society not just as ordinary professionals, job seekers or questions makers but rather as entrepreneurs, job creators and leaders. Many higher learning institutions in the world in general and in Africa in particular have found it meaningful and others should come to the realization of the need to integrate other forms of interventions that can further and better support the preparation of effective and transformational leaders able to meet both organizational and societal needs and expectations.

This study will add to the knowledge base by bringing more information on strategic leadership development effectiveness when using coaching as a developmental method. All constituents involved in the strategic leadership development process either executives, coaches, teachers, students, and workers will gain more understanding on the role of coaching in the strategic leadership development. This may ensure good practice of coaching and enhanced outcomes on strategic leadership development efforts.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the literature

review mainly related to coaching in the academia and the role of coaching in strategic leadership development. Section 3 discusses the research method, including the experiment procedure, and the theory used to implement the individual coaching program. Section 4 shows the results. Section 5 discusses the results and finally Section 6 presents conclusions including suggestions for future research and limitations of the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Coaching in the Academia

Deiorio et al. (2016) assert that on its early stage, coaching has initially been depicted in the business literature and emerged more recently, “starting in the early 2000s” (Nieuwerburgh: 2018: p. 7) in higher education publications, beginning in medical literature. In the education sector, coaching serves as a supportive intervention to help learners develop skills, behaviors and attitudes to help them maximize their potential and achieve greater results in life. Bunduki and Higgs (2016), suggest that only a holistic educational approach which includes cognitive, affective and conative competencies has the ability to develop students able to lead positive change in the community. Nieuwerburgh (2018), reflecting on Coaching in Education argues that a significant increase has been noticed in the past decades about coaching activities in the academia and a considerable impact observed on several beneficiaries mainly students.

There are different approaches to coaching, although the main focus remains on the learner’s development. Several definitions of the concept have emerged from different approaches as scholars and even practitioners reflect on and use coaching as a critical tool of leadership development. Speaking from an academic stand-point, Deiorio et al. (2016) defines coaching by describing the role of a coach. They assert that a coach is a person whose role is to assist a learner in his development to a greater achievement through a process of objective revision, needs identification and action planning and help him to be accountable. According to Stone (2007), reflecting from a managerial perspective, coaching is a continuous task of developing workers to perform their job properly. Another research has defined coaching as: a process in which the coach helps the coachee to unlock their natural ability; to perform, learn and achieve; to increase awareness of the factors which determine performance; to increase their sense of self responsibility and ownership of their performance; to self-coach; to identify and remove internal barriers to achievement (MacLennan, 2017: p. 4).

From the above definitions of coaching, few thoughts emerge as critical characteristics of an effective coaching: supportive and solution-focused relationship, developmental process, and a task to increase performance and achievement. Each author uses a specific language to explain the intervention, but one thing common through all those definitions is that coaching aims to develop the learner in order to maximize their potential and achieve greater performance in life (Whitmore). Indeed, this kind of supportive, developmental, learner-cen-

tered and performance-oriented process plays a critical role in developing learners into effective leaders able to cause societal change as a result of personal improved lifestyle and increased professional effectiveness. For the purpose of this study, coaching is viewed as a supportive relationship, solution-focused that aims to increase the coachee's performance to achieve their best academic results in the present time and become more competent and competitive in their future career. This conception of coaching, points to the notion of the strategic leadership development.

2.2. The Role of Coaching in Strategic Leadership Development

Coaching, in all its diversity, has been widely identified among the most effective leadership development methods or practices and ensures that there are sufficient future leaders for succession purposes (Dalakoura, 2010; Groves, 2007; Nieuwerburgh, 2018). Roux (2018) suggests that coaching intervention reported a positive outcome on both individual and organizational development including goal attainment. In order to identify the role of coaching in strategic leadership development, one needs first to understand what this concept is all about.

Strategic leadership development is basically a leadership development approach (Baek & Bramwell, 2016; Khan & Nawaz, 2016) which aims to strategically build human capital (Oluwatobi et al., 2016) needed for the implementation of the vision of an organization. Thus, the strategy in leadership development focuses on two components: on one side it clarifies the formulation of the vision and on the other side it emphasizes the formation of effective leaders (Groves, 2007). Rouse (2018) explains that strategic leadership is a practice exercised by top-level leaders to develop an organizational vision that can promote flexibility and competitiveness in a dynamic economic and technological environment. Strategic leaders use the developed vision to motivate, direct and create a sense of unity among individuals and even department to bring change within the organization. Rouse (2018) also states that the main objectives of strategic leadership involve to organize processes, increase strategic productivity, encourage innovation and cultivate an environment that stimulates individuals to be productive, independent and push forward their own ideas to reach their goals. And according to Sessoms (2004), a lot has been invested by organizations in leadership development programs in order to strategically develop individuals' potential to enhance their leadership effectiveness.

Maclennan (2017) argues that coaching, if provided properly, boosts people to take actions and eventually increase their productivity which is an important aspect of strategic leadership development. For these actions and productivity to be sustainable, there is a need of self-monitoring. Deiorio et al. (2016) suggest that coaching provides avenues for self-monitoring improvement and nurture proactive habits in learners as they become more reflective and develop lifelong learning skills to reach their full potential. Besides, the goal of coaching as applied in medical education, and in many other developmental circumstances,

highlights the role of coaching in enhancing strategic leadership development efforts. Through these efforts, learners create and assess their own goals, evaluate the current needs, identify potential options to respond to those needs and achieve their goals, develop an action plan and improve their own self-monitoring.

In the same perspective, [Burns and Gillon \(2011\)](#) specifically argues that through coaching, students at the undergraduate level would learn about planning, review and goal setting processes and eventually use them in their own circumstances as well as those of other people. It would also offer learners a further range of benefits including interpersonal skills and reflective abilities. Indeed, those skills are critical to leadership effectiveness and can help future leaders to perform in a way that can bring success to organizations and cause societal change. These skills are also essential for both personal and professional development because they will help individuals develop a sense of purpose at a personal or corporate level, understand the way forward, monitor the implementation of the strategy and be able to assess the progress and evaluate the achievement ([Roofe & Miller, 2015](#)). Therefore, by developing critical skills, behaviors and attitudes whether in a student or a professional; coaching enhances strategic leadership development and facilitates the preparation of future leaders and even secures an effective succession of executives within organizations ([Ellam-Dyson & Palmer, 2011](#)). It increases their sense of purpose, process, priority, innovation and eventually raises their performance and productivity for the benefit of the organization.

If strategic leadership development is about developing vision and people to achieve the vision, coaching is a powerful tool that stimulates human capital's potential and purpose from within ([Whitmore, 2009](#)) for greater achievement. [Kombarakaran et al. \(2008\)](#) assert that coaching has played a critical role in developing human resources by increasing their confidence and effectiveness in their leadership role, improving their engagement and productivity, people management, dialogue and communication, goal-setting and prioritization, relationships with other stakeholders in the organization. Those skills, paradigm shift, new perspectives, values and behaviors contribute to significantly increase leadership effectiveness on the part of the learner and eventually leads to personal, organizational and community change. Based on these empirical research data, whether in business, education or any other sector of the society, the role of coaching in the strategic leadership development is no longer ambiguous but more than obvious and appreciated by many individuals and organizations.

Although there is more clarity about the concept of coaching among scholars and practitioners and coaching activities have increased in the academic environment in the past decades due to its impact mainly on students ([Nieuwerburgh, 2018](#)), most of studies and experiences in this field have been done in the context of developed countries. Very little is known about coaching practice and its impact in the African context, especially in academic institutions of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). [Etshim \(2017\)](#) posited that, in DRC, higher learning institutions have increased in number from 764 in 2014 to 901 in 2015,

but “results revealed that the current curriculum and policies have inherent inefficiencies that do not provide new graduates with sufficient skills to easily move into and be productive in the labor market” (p. 1). So, this study is an attempt to fill this gap in the literature and suggest a pedagogical and supportive intervention that can help Congolese higher learning institutions to enhance the skills of their learners for an effective leadership experience in the workplace.

3. Method

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the role of coaching in the strategic leadership development process in the academic context. The literature review on the topic was conducted and an experimental coaching program implemented with a suitable coachee for a period of 3 weeks with 3 minimum sessions to be held. In an attempt to achieve this requirement and therefore the aim of this paper, a young female student was purposively sampled to attend this experimental coaching program. She was at her last year, completing her undergraduate program in Economics department, majoring in Agribusiness Management, in a Christian university in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This lady originates from a low-class family and with so many difficulties she managed to be the only lady to attend the higher education. In many ways, she represents the hope of her mother and the whole family. A part from that, she was going through a kind of transition from academic to profession life as she was already retained by the same university to serve as a Research Assistant. So, in addition to her willingness to participate in the program, she emerged as the best candidate among many others.

Within the 3 weeks of coaching, the GROW model, which has been identified suitable to the undergraduate level learning for providing accessible and simple process (Burns & Gillon, 2011); was used to structure the intervention. One-on-one coaching relationship was considered as appropriate to the coachee. Due to geographical distance between the coach (in Kenya) and the coachee (in DRC), the e-coaching format was identified appropriate for communication purposes. Among several e-coaching modalities, online text-based coaching was adopted (Geissler et al., 2014). The conversation was actually happening through instant messaging and WhatsApp served as a communication platform. The next section presents the research results including key themes that emerged from the content analysis.

4. Results

This study aimed at investigating the role of coaching in the strategic leadership development process in the academic context. Based on data analysis, some themes emerged in connection with the role of coaching in the strategic leadership development including 1) goal setting, 2) prioritization and action planning, 3) increased self-confidence and determination. These themes are presented in turn here below.

Goal setting

Goal setting has been proven to cause many benefits to both individuals and organizations including high performance (Shahin & Mahbod, 2007) and therefore great achievement. It also facilitates the evaluation process. During the coaching intervention, each session had clear objectives to be achieved and actions to be taken that involved both the coach and the coachee. Questions by the coachee, feedback by the coach, reflection by both parties facilitated goal setting and even action planning. The coachee demonstrated some level of purpose as she was able to share key thoughts about how she envisions her future life. In the initial meeting, at the stage of goals revision and assessment, she randomly came up with several goals that she wanted to be taken into consideration during the coaching intervention: 1) present her final paper on the first defense session, get an A result in the last year, and participate in the graduation ceremony, 2) get a good job, 3) pursue a master's degree, 4) get married (session notes, July 16, 2019).

Prioritization and action planning

Given the random list of aspirations that the coachee mentioned in the initial meeting, while both the coach and the coachee were trying to understand and agree on the goals that would be focused on during the 3-week program, a strong need of prioritization was felt. It was very crucial that a SMART goal is developed to ease the action planning step, facilitate the evaluation process and allow an effective and fruitful implementation of the plan (Lawlor & Hornyak, 2012). Through thought-provoking conversation, an agreement was found and the academic goals were considered as the top priority to be worked on during the intervention: present her final paper on the first defense session, get an A result in the last year, and participate in the graduation ceremony in early August 2019. In order to get there, the current reality was checked and the coachee was able to locate herself in relation to her goal. The coachee said she was 6 steps, from her goal, on a scale of 10 and options were explored for actions that would bring her up to 10 (session notes of July 26, 2019).

Increased self-confidence and determination

Self-confidence and determination are key factors which push learners to be positive and achieve success (Lundberg, 2008). The coachee's level of self-confidence and determination increased as a result of independent decision-making process throughout the coaching sessions, clear and SMART goal setting, a sense of priority, and an action plan that purposefully describes milestones towards the final goal. From the first to the last coaching session, both the attitude and language of the coachee became more and more optimistic and daring. This increased self-confidence and determination underpinned her successful completion of all the actions planned. The actions included to clear any financial litigation with the finance office, collect the transcripts from the registry office for all the course units completed, submit the internship report and the final draft of the major project to the Head of Department and prepare the actual presentation

session (slides, appropriate dress, anticipate questions, etc.) which resulted in a satisfactory achievement of her goal. The coachee was able to present her final paper on the first defense session and attend the graduation ceremony, though she got B as her final result instead of the targeted A.

5. Discussion

The role of coaching, among many other developmental methods, in facilitating strategic leadership development underpins great achievement of individual as well as organizational outcomes. This critical role has been widely recognized across sectors (Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Lovell, 2018; Parsloe & Leedham, 2009). This learner-centric development, taking place in a context of relationship, should be rooted in trust, respect and flexibility (Carmel & Paul, 2015). This caring context allows the learner to acquire new skills, behaviors, perspectives, attitudes to maximize their potential and grow personally, professionally and even academically under the support of a more experienced person in the area of coaching. The coaching process reflected upon in this study was characterized by trust, respect and flexibility that advanced academic performance of the coachee.

In their article on Mentoring and Coaching in Academia: “Reflections on a Mentoring/Coaching Relationship”, Carmel and Paul (2015) assert that effective intervention nurtures professional relationship for the development of individual learners and produces better outcomes if that relationship is harnessed rather than forced or coerced. Formal relationships and organization of the procedure tend to establish coercion and therefore decrease the effectiveness of the process. Thus, in developing learners, informal relationships are preferable and provide greater results than formal processes. However, based on the coaching experiment reported in this paper, the lack of a formal agreement between the coach and the coachee had a negative influence on the level of accountability and commitment on the end of the coachee throughout the process. The intervention was based on verbal agreement between the coachee and the coach which caused the relationship to be more informal.

In the Cambridge Dictionary website, accountability has to do with being “responsible for what you do and able to give a satisfactory reason for it” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/accountability>). This kind of responsibility is more effectively and sustainably established in the context of a formalized agreement because they come with clear expectations and consequences in case of failure to respect the contract. Accountability and coercion are two separate things. In the context of this study, although the coachee attended 90% of scheduled sessions, she was quite late every day. The coachee did not demonstrate a high sense of accountability and the coach did not have much authority to keep reminding her about how she was supposed to behave. According to Fiedler’s contingency leadership approach, leadership outcomes are observed to be contingent upon some situational factors notably the Leader-Member Relationship (good or bad), Task Structure (high or low) and Posi-

tion Power (strong or weak). When the leader has low power on the follower or learner, especially in the context of an informal relationship, the leader will rely much on the willingness of the follower (Miner, 2005). In this sense, depending on the nature and quality of the relationship, accountability and expectations level can be maximum, minimum or non-existent. In the context of this study, the coachee's commitment to the program was minimum. Besides, there were some homework assignments that the coachee was given to prepare the following session, but did not complete them without any explanation or satisfactory reason for doing so. Time respect and consistent commitment are part of behaviors that a learner should develop in order to be effective in their project and produce greater results.

According to Kiruhi (personal communication July 8, 2019) one of the most important differences between mentoring and coaching is that the former is generally an informal and voluntary developmental relationship, whereas the latter is formal, involves a contract. In the context of an organization, for instance, it is often required of the employees for their growth and development, especially when their performance is going down. Moreover, a formal situation would save both parties, especially the coachee from wrong expectations resulting from personal, social or cultural tendencies and other factors that can influence the procedure in a bad way. Therefore, while recognizing the place of trust and credibility in a developmental relationship, this paper suggests that coaching process should be carefully formalized so that the experience can yield better results. In this sense, conditions or terms of the contract are discussed and signed before the process begins. In other words, expectations should be well defined, boundaries clearly set and consequences in case of failure to observe the contract directly communicated to both parties involved in the agreement. Moreover, cultural situations and even the personality of the coachee should be topics of a great concern while designing the coaching process.

In examining different aspects that characterized the coaching process in this case study, it is imperative to note some observations made in connection with the online text-based coaching modality which was implemented as the mode of communication during the intervention. Recent research suggests that more empirical researches are needed to examine the effectiveness of this particular mode of delivery as there is no research that has intensively examined the effectiveness of synchronous text-based media in coaching (Geissler et al., 2014). However, few years back, Rossett and Marino (2005) pondered some benefits associated with E-coaching or distance coaching including the fact that coaching goes where the action is, technology scales support and expertise, technology makes coaching more affordable, etc. In this case study, indeed, the E-coaching, especially the online text-based method, facilitated the process in many ways notably offering convenience, shortening the geographical distance between the coach and the coachee, allowing one-on-one conversation and enhancing live discussion. Nevertheless, some challenges were observed along with this coach-

ing modality. First of all, the quality of internet connection, especially on the end of the coachee, could time to time cause some inconvenience in communication and delay the reception or delivery of messages. So, the session could last longer than initially planned and with potential distraction to interfere with the conversation.

A good quality of Internet connection is therefore required for the online text-based coaching to be a successful experience. Secondly, there is a challenge associated with chatting that was also recognized during the sessions. For instance, either the coach or the coachee could be in advance as he/she sends more and quick messages than he/she receives from the interlocutor's side. This situation can cause misunderstanding in the communication as one may overlook some messages and reply to others. The last but not least observation is that the coach realized that face-to-face coaching would work best for this undergraduate student. One of the reasons is that, the coachee has been used to face-to-face lectures throughout her education process from primary school to high education. She was used to be physically in contact with her lecturers or trainers. So, the coachee's situation, background and above all maturity should inform and determine whether an E-coaching modality is to be implemented or not.

6. Conclusion

The role of coaching in strategic leadership development has been investigated in this study. Previous studies were reviewed and a 3-week coaching program implemented in the investigation of the role of coaching in strategic leadership development in the academia. Coaching has played a critical role in enhancing the strategic development of human capital across sectors. In the education sector, in particular, coaching has been used as a supportive intervention to assist learners through their academic journey.

Findings in this study have confirmed that coaching is not only an effective developmental method but also plays a significant role in maximizing learners' potential and increasing their performance for great academic achievement and even future professional results. Outcomes such as goal setting, prioritization and action planning, increased self-confidence and determination have been found to be key contribution of coaching in the strategic development of emerging leaders who are being trained and prepared through higher education to effectively lead organizations in a way that will bring societal change. As organizations across sectors continue to tirelessly invest in the area of strategic leadership development, this paper recommends coaching as a critical method that more higher education institutions should consider to further and better support the development of their learners for greater academic results and successful leadership role in their future careers.

Further research is needed to clarify the role and impact of culture in coaching process. It would also be important to evaluate and determine the level of effectiveness between formal and informal interventions. Finally, scholars should

consider investigating more on challenges associated with E-coaching, especially the online text-based coaching and ways to maximize this coaching modality for more effective interventions.

This study is limited in several ways. First of all, the coaching model implemented in this study was an individual type of coaching as opposed to group coaching. Secondly, the participant in the experiment was a senior student who might not represent the situation of junior students in the university. This means that the findings cannot be generalized and extrapolated to some categories of students. However, despite this limitation, it is still believed that the experiment adds to the knowledge base on the role of coaching in strategic leadership development in the academia. In addition, universities may find value in the results of the study as they reflect on educational methodology in their own institutions and ways to maximize learners' potential and increase their skills for greater leadership outcomes in their future career.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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