

The long-term impact of coaching in an executive MBA program

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this qualitative study is to conduct an exploratory investigation of the impact and sustainability of coaching on career and leadership development of students and later, alumni, in an Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) program.

Design/methodology/approach – The sample for this qualitative study consisted of 14 alumni of an EMBA program at a private university in the Southwestern US who graduated between January 2012 and May 2019. Eleven alumni participated in the focus groups, and three alumni participated in personal interviews.

Findings – The open coding of the data resulted in three emergent themes (personal development by overcoming personal deficiencies, coaching translates to learning about leadership and coaching motivates sustained change) that confirmed the positive long-term effect of coaching as part of an EMBA program.

Practical implications – By participating in an executive coaching engagement, the EMBA students learned a development process that they could repeat for themselves after graduation and transfer to others. In addition, the EMBA students were able to leverage knowledge gained from the coaching experience for the development of others.

Originality/value – While the positive impacts of coaching are well-documented, its long-term impact on EMBA students/alumni has not yet been studied. This study builds on other evaluative studies to identify the benefits of executive coaching.

Keywords Coaching, Long-term effects of coaching, Coaching outcomes, Leadership development, Executive coaching, Executive education, Transformative adult learning, Sustained change, Executive MBA

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Preparing individuals for leadership roles within an organizational setting emerged at the top of the list of chief executive officers' concerns by the [Conference Board \(2010\)](#). This scarcity in the leadership pipeline was based on broad demographic trends of current leaders retiring and downsizing and is an ongoing concern. According to a study by [AACSB and SHRM \(2020\)](#), employers indicated that developing the next generation of organizational leaders is one of the top three human capital challenges their organizations face with a lack



of leadership strength. Employers identified the top five areas as priorities for leadership competency:

- (1) people management;
- (2) business acumen;
- (3) communication;
- (4) coaching/training; and
- (5) knowledge/innovation.

The study also challenged business schools to rethink their approach to leadership education to bring more personalization and relevancy to their offerings.

When business schools were asked to select up to three leadership development activities at their school that were most effective, they found that coaching/mentoring was first at 58% (AACSB & SHRM, 2020). In addition, an initial study found that when multisource feedback (e.g. direct reports, peers and manager) was provided to coachees regarding their leadership behaviors, the ones who received follow-up coaching grew in their leadership development over time, although not significantly (Nieminen, Smerek, Kotrba, & Denison, 2013). Nevertheless, the self-ratings of the coached participants increased over time, whereas the self-ratings for the uncoached participants slightly declined, indicating a longitudinal effect of self-rated leadership behaviors from those who received executive coaching (Nieminen, Smerek, Kotrba, & Denison, 2013).

Hence, the purpose of this qualitative study is to conduct an exploratory investigation of the impact and sustainability of coaching on the career and leadership development of students and later, alumni, in an executive MBA (EMBA) program that included a coaching experience as part of the degree program. Given the objectives of this study, qualitative research that applies an inductive approach to analyze the data is appropriate because it helps summarize textual data, establishes links between the data and research objects and develops a framework from the data analysis (Thomas, 2006). The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

RQ1. How do the EMBA alumni describe the impact of the coaching experience while attending the program?

RQ2. How do the EMBA alumni describe the impact of the coaching experience after graduating from the program?

This article is organized as follows: a literature review on relevant coaching research, a description of the research design, followed by the research findings. Finally, a discussion section and conclusion are provided.

Literature review

In this section, the existing research and recent developments in executive education, leadership development and coaching are summarized. In addition, executive coaching is described as a learning practice. The guiding framework is informed by one primary theory – Mezirow’s transformative learning, which Cox (2015) aligned with coaching.

Executive coaching/leadership development in business schools

Since its emergence in the 1980s, executive coaching has gained visibility among organizations as an effective tool to enhance leadership skills and improve the performance of employees (Burt & Talati, 2017; Boyce, Jackson, & Neal, 2010). Leadership or executive

coaching is emerging as a best practice for overall leadership development (Ely *et al.*, 2010; International Coach Federation, 2009; Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020).

Executive coaching is trending, being included in more academic MBA programs (Coates, 2013; Mura, 2003; Ostrowski, 2019). The Graduate Management Admissions Council Corporate Recruiter Survey (2006) results suggest that while MBA graduates are strong in quantitative and analytical skills, they often lack interpersonal and leadership skills. One strategy used at Vanderbilt University's EMBA program listed on the respective university's website is using executive coaches to encourage the development of a learning mindset to leveraged continued experiential learning. By being open to learning from experience (both successes and failures) and engaging in reflection, lessons learned can be applied to future events and managers can learn to lead (Abrell, Rowold, Weibler, & Moenninghoff, 2011; Kets de Vries *et al.*, 2009; Ladyshevsky, 2007; Moye & Allen, 2007; Vohra, Rathi, & Bhatnagar, 2015).

Executive coaching as transformative learning

Transformative learning theory informs adult learning and coaching because it shifts thinking (Mezirow, 1990, 1997, 2000; Ciporen, 2015; Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2014). In addition, Askew and Carnell (2011) conclude that reflective learning leads to perspective transformation and fills an important gap in coaching theory. Mezirow (1990) proposed that people go through several steps of transformation:

- experiencing a disorienting dilemma;
- self-examination;
- critical assessment of assumptions;
- recognizing discontent and the process of transformation is shared;
- exploring options;
- planning a course of action; and
- reintegrating new perspectives & behaviors, self-confidence.

However, not every learner may experience them as clearly as Mezirow describes them or in a linear fashion. Each of these steps can be facilitated by the coach and may be customized to each learner (Cox, 2015). Similar alignment can be seen with the role and responsibilities of the coaches in the EMBA program. Table 1 outlines Mezirow's stages of transformative learning in the first column and shows how the steps of the EMBA coaching process align with those stages in the second column. The third column highlights the primary EMBA student learning activities and curriculum complementing the coaching process.

Experiencing a disorienting dilemma. It is sparked by an "opening" described in coaching as an opportunity to work with a coachee. Mezirow (1990) describes such conflicts or openings as "disorienting dilemmas," which is the first phase of the transformation process where "the learner becomes coachable" (Cox, 2015, p. 33). In executive coaching, the disorienting dilemma can happen during the debriefing of 360 assessments when the coachee is surprised by the difference between the expectations of the feedback and the reality of others' perceptions. Often these are rediscovered by students in a leadership workshop that this EMBA program offers at the start, focusing on critical life events that helped shape their leadership styles.

Mezirow's stages	Coaching process	Student learning activities and curriculum	Sample participant quotes (coded #'s)
Experiencing a disorienting dilemma	Debrief of Korn Ferry 360 and assessments Coach helps identify "disjunction between actuality and expectation" Seeks "openings/conflicts" result personal values and beliefs, leadership style Coach facilitates learning and provides emotional support	Self-assessments (Myers-Briggs, strengths deployment inventory, Korn Ferry Assessment of Leadership Potential or innovator mindset)	During the debriefing of 360: "Had rough spots where she (my coach) really put things in perspective for me on why I needed to adapt or why I needed to look at some of my weaknesses and relate to how my leadership was perceived." #1
Self-examination		Explores feelings of fear, anger, guilt, shame or helplessness concerning the dilemma	He (my coach) helped me focus on the negative feedback and my deficiencies that I wanted to ignore. He focused me on personal development & people skills. #7
Critical assessment of assumptions	Monthly coaching sessions to process feelings and assumptions related to the dilemma	In-residence seminar First semester courses (strategic vision, ethical business decision-making, innovation & entrepreneurship)	My skills grew in unexpected ways...we (she & coach) looked at how to deal with conflict management related to overcoming an illness (cancer). #5 My coach was a sounding so that I could figure out my own solutions to new perspectives about myself and my leadership style. #14
Recognizing discontent and process of transformation is shared	Coach challenges decision-making, feelings and actions "Normalizes" predicament, reduces isolation Coach suggests dilemma may be interpreted with outmoded frames of reference Provides springboard to new solutions Coach and client research and cocreate potential new strategies	Experiential learning Second semester courses (Managing & leading people, negotiations, advanced financial management, business analytics for managerial decisions)	We (she & coach) became close fast, and that closeness allowed me to trust her enough to work through the feedback I received on my 360. I now value feedback—good or negative—as a gift. Now, I am always asking for feedback... #1
Exploring options for new roles, relationships, perspectives & actions	Use assessments, curriculum and readings as resources Explore relationship strategies Leverage emotional Intelligence	Collaboration with peers on 3 team projects. Practice new behaviors. Team norms/noncompliance plan Conflict resolution 3rd semester courses (supply chain & operations strategy, legal environment of business, accounting)	Worked with coach to focus on how to engage people versus being so tactical. I focused on being more people-oriented and listening to others. My coach's objectivity was a plus and building trust with her. I could take action on something practical... #3
Planning a course of action	Coach and client collaborate to create a leadership development plan Reflect on practice of new leadership skills	Goal setting 4th semester courses (leadership in a complex world, personal leadership development, strategy in a dynamic environment, marketing)	My coach helped integrate the pieces of the puzzle—our conversations helped me connect my strengths with my challenges and formulate a plan. #4
Reintegrating new perspectives & behaviors, self-confidence	Final evaluation w/ repeat 360 assessments and peer team feedback reports Encourage reflection on learnings Prep development goals for the future	Travel abroad (w/ reflection paper) Peer team feedback reports Repeat 360 assessments 4th semester courses (global environment of business, leading for innovation) Course grades and faculty feedback	Coaching opened me up to new perspectives about myself and my leadership style. #14 5 of 7 students reported "ROI" re career enhancement—salary increase, advancement, etc. 2 students changed careers/industries — "gained self-confidence with new self-perception."

Note: Adapted from Cox (2015)

Table 1.
Mapping
transformation
learning theory to
coaching and
curriculum

Self-examination. Here, the coach explores the depth of the coachee's feelings concerning the disorienting dilemma. These feelings could include fear, anger, embarrassment or even helplessness, for which the coach might provide emotional support.

Critical assessment of assumptions. In this EMBA program, coaches were expected to hold monthly coaching sessions or touchpoints to process feelings, assumptions and significant insights for the learner. "Challenge [by the coach] is important during this phase to provoke the disequilibrium that creates learning and development" (Cox, 2006, p. 33). Gray (2006) suggests that the coach can be a role model for critical reflection and a committed colearner.

Recognizing discontent and process of transformation is shared. Here, the coach can offer a perspective to normalize the current predicament to reassure the coachee and reduce their feelings of isolation. This can be a turning point that leads to a transformative experience when they realize that other people have faced similar challenges and have solved them. This increased understanding can provide a platform for exploring new solutions. Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) suggest that the coachee already has the answer within them, and the coach leads them on a guided discovery with powerful questions to identify the next steps.

Exploring options. The coach and client research and cocreate potential new strategies. They might refer to information in their leadership assessments, curriculum and reading resources that focus on strategies for building relationships, including emotional intelligence constructs.

Planning a course of action. Here, the coach and coachee collaborate to create a leadership development plan. This is based on the new perspectives reached in Step 5 and can include learning new knowledge, experimenting with new roles and relationships, building competence and reflecting on the practice of new leadership skills with the coach. Mezirow (2000) describes acting as a key step in the transformative learning process.

Reintegrating new perspectives & behaviors, self-confidence. This last phase includes a final evaluation, often with a repeat of the initial 360 assessments with the same stakeholders to gauge improvement. The results of three different peer team feedback reports are also reviewed. There are required reflection papers on learnings, accomplishments and development goals for the future.

In summary, critical reflection and discourse are the primary means to foster transformative learning. Mezirow's (2000) cognitive/rational theory of transformative learning focuses on making meaning out of experiences, which are filtered through meaning perspectives or habits of mind. Cox and Jackson (2011) and Bachkirova, Cox, and Clutterbuck (2011) describe transformation as a long-term evolutionary process where individuals fully develop their whole person. This process is known as intensive reflection, whereby in the process of examining their underlying assumptions and considering alternative courses of action, students are actually "changing conceptual meanings, altering internal perspectives, and modifying future behaviors" (Peltier, Hay, & Drago, 2006, p. 6).

Coaching is also inherently a reflective process (Jackson, 2004), and it underlines the importance of reflecting, reframing and questioning (Starr, 2003; Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 1998) with coaching activities that invite the client to look again at how they think, feel and behave. The effectiveness of coaching can be assessed using both proximal and distal outcomes (Bozer *et al.*, 2015). Proximal outcomes result in immediate changes in behavior, attitudes and cognition of the coachee and result in positive feelings toward the organization. Distal outcomes refer to individual and organizational success as an outcome of coaching. In this study, students reported both immediate and long-term benefits of the EMBA program and its coaching element.

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study was an exploratory investigation of the impact and sustainability of coaching on the career and leadership development of students and later, alumni, in an EMBA program that included a coaching experience as part of the degree program. The qualitative approach was chosen because of its grounding in the study's research questions and by answering "why?" and "how?" questions (Marshall, 1996).

The EMBA program was 16–18 months in duration, depending on the graduation year, which provided both foundational leadership knowledge as well as experiential and individualized learning experiences in the form of executive coaching. Learning outcomes from this course included understanding critical leadership skills and the student's ability to use those in their own personal leadership efforts effectively. Students completed multiple personality instruments and multirater surveys to help identify skill gaps and areas of development. Through a partnership with their coach, the students received an extensive overview of these results and identified action plans to address selected leadership competencies. Monthly coach/student discussions and updates were facilitated through face-to-face, phone and email contact. Standard coaching protocols were followed to maximize alignment throughout the process among the participants. Meetings were held at specified intervals to share feedback and review students' progress toward goal attainment. Where necessary, revisions to the action items were enacted, and the coaching engagement culminated with the documentation of results, lessons learned and future development efforts.

Sample and data collection

A qualitative, focus group and interview-based approach allowed us to elicit the perceptions and opinions of the study participants (Creswell, 2013). The population for this study was alumni of an EMBA program at a private university in the Southwestern US who graduated between December 2008 and May 2019. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, a demographics survey using Qualtrics was sent to 279 alumni to collect demographic information and postgraduation career and professional development outcomes. Respondents were asked about their progression in terms of job promotions, changes in title and salary increases. Additionally, survey respondents were invited to participate in a qualitative focus group study. Those who were unable to participate in the focus group were invited to conduct an individual interview.

A total of 98 (35.13%) alumni responded to the survey, of which 11 alumni participated in the focus groups and 3 alumni participated in personal interviews. The three alumni who participated in personal interviews did so because of their unavailability for the scheduled focus group sessions. The collected raw data in the form of focus group sessions and interviews from the respondents represented the graduation years 2012, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018 and 2019. While only a limited sample of 14 alumni of the 98 initial survey respondents (14.29%) ended up participating in the qualitative study, the participants were diverse in demographics (i.e. graduation year and gender) and attitudes, which provided dynamic and varied information.

The appropriate sample size for the qualitative component of this study is based on the ability to adequately address the research questions without it being too large that it confounds in-depth analysis (Sandelowski, 1995). The interview responses confirmed the themes that emerged from the focus group sessions. Hence, data saturation was attained by the focus group sessions. A qualitative, interview-based approach permitted eliciting the perceptions and opinions of the participants and allowed for inductive reasoning (Creswell, 2013). The data collected in the two focus group sessions and the three personal interviews

followed the same procedures. The focus group sessions were the primary data collection method. Focus groups were chosen because they allow interactions between participants, which usually reveals more about the participants' points of view than personal interviews (Creswell, 2013). The three personal interviews were used to allow participants who wanted to participate in the study but were not able to attend the focus group sessions to participate in the study.

A semistructured open-ended interview guide was used and follow-up questions were posed based on the answers provided by the participants. The focus group session and the two interviews were initially planned to occur face to face. However, because of the COVID-19 outbreak, the focus group sessions and the interviews were conducted via Zoom. Zoom allowed for recording the audio and produced audio transcriptions, which were used to analyze the data.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed by open coding, allowing themes to emerge from the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Initially, notations next to the data were recorded that seemed relevant for addressing the research questions. Next, the notations were grouped based on common themes and compiled in a separate memo (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During this process, the researchers used reflexivity to ensure that their beliefs did not influence the coding process (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, several strategies were applied to ensure the credibility of the findings. Initially, the researchers independently coded the data to avoid common rater biases (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Jeong-Yeon, & Podsakoff, 2003). For triangulation purposes, coding results were compared to cross-validate findings and discuss discrepancies (Cox & Hassard, 2005). The themes that emerged from the data are discussed next.

Results

The findings of the 98 alumni who responded to the demographics survey indicated that 77.6% had new career opportunities since graduating from the EMBA program. For 39.8%, these new career opportunities were within the company they were employed at during their participation in the EMBA program, whereas 38.8% reported new responsibilities added to their current roles. Another 31.6% reported obtaining a position with a new company after graduation. A total of 17.3% started their own business. Table 2 depicts the survey participants' demographics in more detail.

The 14 alumni of the EMBA who participated in the focus group and interview-based data collection of this study (i.e. 11 focus group participants and three personal interview participants) consisted of 3 females and 11 males. While the sample consisted of 79% males, the gender distribution is representative of the students in the EMBA program. The participants graduated from the program between 2012 and 2019, which resulted in qualitative data collection over a period of 1–9 years post-coaching. Table 3 depicts the participants' demographics who participated in the focus group sessions and the personal interviews in more detail.

Three themes emerged from the interview data:

- (1) coaching results in personal development by overcoming personal deficiencies;
- (2) coaching translates into learning about leadership; and
- (3) coaching motivates sustained change.

			Coaching in an executive MBA program
Characteristic	<i>n</i>	(%)	
<i>Gender</i>			207
Male	69	70.4	
Female	26	26.5	
Not reported	3	3.1	
<i>Age</i>			
1946–1964	15	15.3	
1965–1981	67	68.4	
1982–2000	13	13.3	
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>			
African American or black	9	9.2	
American Indian/other Native American	1	1.0	
Asian or Pacific Islander	1	1.0	
Caucasian or white (other than Hispanic)	71	72.4	
Hispanic	8	8.2	
Other	5	5.1	
<i>Work experience in years</i>			
12 < 20	22	22.4	
20 < 30	38	38.8	
30 < 40	26	26.5	
40 < 48	7	7.1	
Not reported	5	5.1	
<i>Graduation year</i>			
2008	1	1.0	
2009	6	6.1	
2010	5	5.1	
2011	5	5.1	
2012	9	9.2	
2013	12	12.2	
2014	9	9.2	
2015	11	11.2	
2016	0	0.0	
2017	10	10.2	
2018	12	12.2	
2019	11	11.2	
Not reported	7	7.1	
<i>Manager experience in years</i>			
2	1	1.0	
4	2	2.0	
5	1	1.0	
6	2	2.0	
7	1	1.0	
8	4	4.1	
9	1	1.0	
10	8	8.2	
11+	73	74.5	
Not reported	5	5.1	
<i>Career opportunity since graduation</i>			
No	17	17.3	
Yes	76	77.6	
Not reported	5	5.1	
<i>Type of career opportunity</i>			
Job promotion within the company where I was employed as an EMBA student	39	39.8	
New responsibilities added to my role	38	38.8	
Position with a new company obtained after graduation	31	31.6	
Started my own business	17	17.3	
Other	6	6.1	
<i>Salary increase since graduation</i>			
Yes	81	82.7	
No	4	4.1	
Not reported	13	13.3	

Table 2.
Demographics of
survey participants
(*n* = 98)

Table 3.
Demographics of
focus group and
interview
participants (*n* = 14)

Participant	Gender	Graduation year
Participant 1	Female	2015
Participant 2	Male	2019
Participant 3	Female	2012
Participant 4	Male	2019
Participant 5	Female	2014
Participant 6	Male	2018
Participant 7	Male	2015
Participant 8*	Male	2014
Participant 9*	Male	2014
Participant 10	Male	2018
Participant 11	Male	2014
Participant 12	Male	2014
Participant 13	Male	2012
Participant 14*	Male	2017

Note: *Personal interview participants

Other studies have captured the outcome of “personal development by becoming aware of personal deficiencies” through self-assessment and especially the 360-degree feedback process. The discovery of individuals’ unique leadership styles and new “career” options identifies new benefits of the coaching process. The fact that many alumni were motivated to keep their own leadership development process going in the long term as well as help others by designing and facilitating leadership activities/programs was a surprising and welcome outcome.

Theme 1: Coaching results in personal development by overcoming personal deficiencies

I was forced to sit down with my coach and look at what are some of the skills are that I need to improve. Even post-graduation, I question myself – am I performing even now on those? The coaching experience was valuable personally, professionally, and academically. Participant #4

It [coaching] opened up my eyes to my own insecurities and my own biases taught me how to be more tolerant of others. Participant #6

Although the leadership focus and the setup of the EMBA were the initial reasons for the EMBA graduates to sign up for the program, they reported that the personal development aspect based on the coaching element ultimately became a significant differentiator of the program. The second positive result the EMBA graduates reported of the coaching experience was overcoming personal deficiencies as they embarked on a personal development journey with their coaches. The coaches helped alumni identify their weaknesses and helped them find ways to overcome those. In addition, alumni learned to appreciate all feedback, whether good or bad.

Theme 2: Coaching translates into learning about leadership

A lot of what I focused on was a lot of personal development and of course that evolved into leadership development as well. Participant #5

He [coach] was able to really help me translate and take some personal characteristic traits and turn that into something that I can work on it to communicate more effectively. Participant #9

Coaching was a rich part of the program and is a differentiator. It adds great value to the process of learning about leadership. Participant #14

The coaching experience resulted in personal growth, as noted in Theme 1, and also resulted in the development of leadership skills and strategic thinking. Developing a strategic mindset and effective communication skills were the leadership skills most important to the alumni. In turn, the personal growth and the development of leadership skills based on the coaching experience resulted in increased self-confidence that positively influenced career progression.

Theme 3: Coaching motivates sustained change

"I found it [coaching] to be so helpful" that she applied the learned material and created an internal leadership program at the police department at which she was employed. Participant #1

My coach forced you to be accountable to your plan. It was about "following through" and getting results, which is important in the Operations area. I've been able to go back and revisit them and polish some of those tangible skills. Participant #7

Having now gone through the coaching process and, you know, coaching employees and, and knowing what my strengths are in that field, not as a professional coach, but just in helping employees kind of achieve different things. Participant #8

The evidence from the EMBA graduates' responses suggests that the coaching produced a change in both the short and medium terms. As mentioned earlier, the demographics survey indicated that 77.6% had new career opportunities since graduating from the EMBA. For 39.8%, these new career opportunities were within the company they were employed at during their participation in the EMBA, whereas 38.8% reported new responsibilities added to their current roles. Another 31.6% reported obtaining a position with a new company after graduation. A total of 17.3% started their own business. The quantitative data indicated career growth reported by the alumni. However, to determine whether the reported growth was solely based on the obtained degree or whether other factors played a role, such as the coaching experience, the qualitative focus groups were conducted to explore the alumni's career growth in more depth.

The qualitative data support the quantitative data findings and indicate that the results can be attributed, at least partially, to the coaching experience. Overall, the EMBA graduates indicated that the coaching experience resulted in a chain reaction of positive events. All focus group and interview participants ended up progressing in their careers. Except for two, all switched their employer to make the career progression, with two even switching the industry. The study participants reported several long-term actions to support their professional development and that of others. These actions included career changes, coaching fellow employees and creating coaching programs within their organization or serving as a self-employed coach. The EMBA graduates also reported regularly using leadership development materials and processes from the program for self-development and mentoring others.

Discussion

The participants' comments (coded) show an alignment with both the steps of Mezirow's transformation theory and Cox's suggested coaching roles and responsibilities as they were fulfilled by the EMBA coaches. The alignment can be seen in column four of [Table 1](#). These illustrative quotes from the original focus group and interview transcripts show how the coaches helped the students focus on their personal development and adopt new perspectives. Some referred to the close relationships they developed with their coach that enabled them to hear challenging feedback or how they acted as a "sounding board" that

helped the students figure out their solutions. These highlights help show the transformative learning journey the students traveled with their coaches' support.

The interview participants described how the received coaching motivated them to make long-term behavioral changes in the workplace as well as career changes. In addition, the findings suggest that participating in coaching can demonstrate the development process itself and that once learned, managers can be motivated to leverage it to develop others. Throughout the focus group, alumni expressed a high level of satisfaction with the coaching process, the helpfulness of their coach in seeing blind spots and hidden talents and their assistance in formulating a tactical action plan to address development opportunities. Through self-reflection, feedback and open analysis, learning can occur, and there is a positive change in feelings of self-efficacy and confidence as expressed by alumni.

The participants described a process they experienced as they went through the coaching experience. The learning experiences the coachees of the EMBA program described appeared to be triggered by receiving critical feedback from their coaches and 360 assessments in facilitated conversations, which then required a period of time for self-reflection to deeply examine long-held assumptions about themselves and the world (Garvey-Berger, 2011). These reflections profile individuals who were able to resolve fundamental challenges, gain clarity, develop new perspectives and then experience an acceleration of growth and development, confirming the learning aspect of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000).

The findings further indicate that the coaching undertaken in the studied EMBA program produced change not only in the short term through the course of the program but also led to sustained change. The actions the EMBA graduates reported post-coaching and postprogram support the long-term effects of coaching and appeared to be self-directed. The study participants reported an enhancement of career progression or reinvention with accompanying increases in salary as well as an expanded scope of roles and responsibilities. More interestingly, participants reported a continuation of adult learning and application of key activities introduced in their coaching engagements, which may give evidence of the long-term impact of the coaching experience. These actions included creating and teaching in a leadership program for a local police department, building the personal confidence to change careers, as well as using leadership development materials and processes from the EMBA program on a regular basis for self-development and mentoring others. This is a particularly notable latency effect as the process experienced by the coachees focused very specifically on the individual's own personal leadership competency development. Developing leadership in others was not an explicit goal of their experience. Several individuals reinvented their careers, including starting their own businesses to moving from tactical to more strategic roles in their existing companies.

Implications for practice

The findings of this study indicate that to achieve transformative learning, the content taught at the EMBA program goes hand in hand with the executive coaching experience. Business schools can improve by complementing their curriculum with individualized learning experiences where students can discover their strengths, develop their limitations and reflect on creating their personal leadership philosophy. By participating in an executive coaching engagement, findings indicate that the students learned a development process that they could repeat for themselves after graduation and transfer to others. Graduates do not just take away a degree but have internalized a transformative learning journey.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The sample consisted of EMBA students who graduated from the program between January 2012 and May 2019, which resulted in data collection over a period of 1–9 years post-coaching. While the data from these students confirmed that executive coaching continues to have a positive influence on the graduate even years after graduation, the sample does not constitute a longitudinal design. Longitudinal observations of the coachee are ideal for determining not only the presence or emergence of delayed effects after the coaching experience but also to determine the sustainability of the outcomes in a practical setting (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Bozer *et al.*, 2015). Hence, a recommendation for future research is to collect longitudinal data upon graduation and multiple times over the months and years postgraduation to track the progress of the students, both within their study of leadership and within their career growth.

Conclusion

By providing qualitative data of EMBA graduates at a private university in the Southwestern US over a period of 1–9 years post-coaching, evidence was provided of the impact that coaching can have in the development of managers who are growing into leaders both in the short and medium term. While it would be expected that completing an MBA would provide the business acumen to facilitate career progression, the participants note that the competency development process and, specifically, coaching were the contributing factors to their enhanced leadership growth. In addition, the findings suggest that participating in coaching can demonstrate the development process itself and that once learned, managers can be motivated to leverage it to develop others, yielding a multiplier effect of the original coaching experience.

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