

Challenging Organisations and Society

reflective hybrids*

Different Cultures, Different Rhythms

Karin Lackner

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Christian Heinrich

Telephone-Based Management Coaching Advantages and Limitations

Abstract

One of the consequences of globalization is a change in communication patterns. The dislimitation of space and time requires alternative devices of communication. Direct communication modes are replaced and supported by virtual technologies. In some organizations telephone-based management has become the most common communication mode in global intercultural environments.

The paper is based on a qualitative research study describing some of the advantages and limitations of telephone-based management coaching. Using a research design with three stakeholder groups – telecoachees, telecoaches and Human Resource professionals – the benefits and challenges of telecoaching were examined from the perspectives of nine subjects. The research results suggest that telecoaching is an effective and adaptable coaching format providing prompt support for managers in pressing, problematic situations. The lack of visual cues in telecoaching shifts the dyad's entire attention to the auditory communication channel. As a result, compensation of the unavailable visual cues by verbal information seems to take place, confirming the equilibrium theory. Limitations were observed in topic choice, visualization of structural interrelations, and building trustful coach-coachee relationships at the outset of telecoaching. The findings suggest that coaching via telephone may be more cost-efficient than face-to-face coaching. A neglected factor in the cost calculation of coaching initiatives seems to be the opportunity cost effect.

Key words: global management, coaching, telecoaching

1. Introduction

Coaching is a global phenomenon, with over 47,000 active professional coaches (International Coach Federation, 2012, p. 7). Particularly focused on the management level, coaching has been mushrooming in recent years. Over the last few years, many modified and mainly technology-assisted coaching formats popped up and have become established on the coaching market. The Sherpa Coaching Report 2012 (US) shows that 41% of global executive coaching takes place in person (phone: 31%, webcam: 14%, high-definition video: 3%, and email/text: 11%). The survey was conducted in 2011 with 1,100 respondents (60% executive coaches, 14% business coaches, HR professionals and coaching clients 15%, life coaches 8%, and other professionals provided 3%) (Sherpa Coaching 2012, p. 16). The coaching industry has been growing with this focus on technology.

2. Organizations in Need

New societal phenomena and cutting-edge innovations in technological development (e.g., individualization, acceleration of the pace of life, willingness to take risks, computerization, and virtualization) challenge the hierarchical control mechanism in organizations existentially. Traditionally, organizations are built to last. They develop their own life, a corporate culture, individuality and contrasting manifestations and try to maintain this status. New developments of any kind clash with organizational conservatism and resistance to change. The consequence is that the former stability is under significant pressure and begins to erode. The common hierarchical organized division of competencies contradicts these necessities and leads to action lags or wrong decisions (Heintel / Krainz, 2000, p. 14). On the other hand there is a dynamic of constant transformation forcing the organization to react to permanently

changing situations and environments. Especially when organizations decide to globalize, new challenges the organization has to cope with arise. Increasing unsettlement due to redesigned structures causes additional need for direct communication that cannot be provided for any longer. The communication partners are too far apart from each other.

Organizations have more and more difficulty to maintain an intentional and consistent image. Interpretations are usually media-mediated and show aspects of morality valued by society (Aderhold / Rückert-John / Wetzel, 2008, p. 25). Critical media reports engender negative impacts on the binding effect between employees and organizations. To counteract this effect, organizations initiate bond stability measures to enhance the significance of organizational members' engagement and performance. Such strategies (e.g., mission statements, strengthening of solidarity, and utilization of family metaphors) appeal to everybody's moral and work attitudes with the aim of providing unenforceable benefits. It is evident, however, that growing external observation tendencies of organizations have been taking place. The resulting downside provides nervousness and existential fear with the consequence that organizations show vigorous willingness for internal change on the basis of external observed change (Aderhold / Rückert-John / Wetzel, 2008, p. 18).

What makes the situation particularly problematic is that the internal pace of change in organizations cannot keep up with the dynamic development of the environment (Wimmer, 1999, p. 31). This discrepancy calls for an internal increase of the capacity to act in combination with the ability to reflect. Corporate management is compelled to develop suitable innovations, production-oriented improvements, and new marketing concepts or to enforce project management¹. The structural changes in the economy are inevi-

¹ Project management is an organized counter reaction to inefficiency of hierarchical systems. To draw together workers from various departments across the hierarchy might represent a commensurate synthesizing of complexity but it is also in direct contradiction to the established hierarchy. Thus, project management is the management of this contradiction. It is both an indication as well as a form of coping with a universal crisis caused by previously developed hierarchical work and problem-solving organization (Heintel and Krainz, 2000, p. 2).

tably altering structures of work. Future workers are forced to focus more on functional requirements of modern communication and factor in unstable and swift change in expectations (Aderhold / Rückert-John / Wetzel, 2008, p. 19). At the individual level, the post-modern discomfort finds its origin in the homelessness caused by the pluralistic structures of modern society. Peoples' lives are characterized by high mobility requirements and increasingly nomadic symptoms (Schelkshorn, 2004, p. 2). Especially for globalized organizations, as well as for their staff, stable orientations, long-term career strategies, loyalty and commitment are receding, increasing the need to re-define employee loyalty and dealing with staff. Eventually, the pressure for change, weighing on organizations, is based on their power erosion and the increasingly questioned individual and societal inequality.

The coaching industry reacts to the organizations' dynamics with similar dis-orientation, offering new coaching formats primarily based on technology. One of these new modes is telecoaching.

3. Telecoaching Characteristics

Telecoaches' required body of knowledge and coaching skills are identical with the core requirements of face-to-face coaching. Because of nonexistent visual cues in telephone-based management coaching, the telecoach's voice, pace and tone play an outstanding role and may be interpreted by clients as indicators of the telecoach's empathy and understanding (Ormond / Haun / Cook / Duquette / Ludowese / Matthews, 2000, p. 67)². Murdoch claims that through the missing distractions of visual and olfactory data in telecoaching sessions (e.g., environment, scents, clothing, facial expressions, and movement of body) the voice may deploy its full potential (Murdoch, 2009, p.

² For listeners, the height or depth, melody and rhythm, volume and tone of a voice, the breathing, pause technique, and clarity of pronunciation are crucial factors to form an opinion about a communication partner. In general, clear voices are perceived more effectively and faster but are often rated as immature and overly emotional. In contrast, a deeper tone of voice represents the speaker to be more trustworthy and competent (Amon, 2003, p. 243).

134). Telecoaches' skills in clear phrasing and familiarity with telecoaching peculiarities are essential for successful coaching. Active attentive listening is the telecoach's most important task in telecoaching since the client's voice reveals their actual feelings, concerns and inner convictions (Amon, 2003, p. 244). Just as in face-to-face coaching, the match and fit of the client-coach pair are of particular importance to the partnership and the success of coaching outcomes. In distance coaching the coach must be even more deliberate and diligent in ensuring that rapport is established from the onset (Boyce / Hernez-Broome, 2009, p. 156). To mitigate the concerns of coaching via telephone, some coaching clients (e.g., managers and HR professionals) see the ideal formula in blended coaching³ arrangements, tapping into the capabilities and advantages of telephone and face-to-face coaching⁴.

Human voices carry crucial paralinguistic information that allows the identification of individuals and the recognition of emotional condition (Latinus / Belin, 2011, p. 143). Minute variations of acoustic parameters corresponding to affective states enable listeners to perceive nuances of a conversation partner's emotional and motivational situation (Belin / Fecteau / Bédard, 2004, p. 129f.). In telephone conversations, the interlocutors set context with only their voices, split from the rest of action-prompting communicative activities with distinct communication principles⁵. Turn beginnings in telephone calls

3 Blended coaching is defined as a coaching format combining forms of face-to-face with distance coaching (Geißler, 2008, p. 8).

4 A survey of telecoachees by Scheid exhibited that the assessment of the implemented telecoaching processes was more positive when the respondents had at least one face-to-face meeting in the course of the coaching process, regardless of

5 "Any telephone speaker must accomplish the beginning of each turn precisely as the partner stops talking. This is complicated because there are lots of times when the current speaker might be finishing. At each of these transition-relevance places the current speaker might stop, or might continue. The next speaker's job is to speak as soon as the current speaker's turn is finished, but not to speak if the current speaker is continuing." (Hopper, 1992, p. 99)

are fundamental and most often finely coordinated producing smooth turn transitions that establish the actual rhythm of communication⁶.

For productive coaching engagements, a key factor is building and maintaining trustworthiness (Boyce / Hernez-Broome, 2009, p. 161). High degrees of trust, rapport, collaboration and commitment between the coach and the client result in positive coaching results (Boyce / Jackson / Neal, 2010, p. 914). However, the formation of interpersonal trust between the coach-client dyad may be difficult to develop as neither side can accomplish the coaching relationship alone. Furthermore, the non-verbal behaviors associated with trust building are considered as vital to realizing effective accomplishment, which may cause an additional obstacle in telecoaching environments (Boyce / Jackson / Neal, 2010, p. 161).

4. The Survey

This research project was designed as a pretest study for further investigations endeavoring to explore management telecoaching by capturing thematic complexity. Against this background, all major stakeholders of telecoaching systems (telecoachees, telecoaches, and HR professionals,) were asked to participate in this analysis to contrast the key players' diverse views, experiences and evaluations⁷. The set of studied representatives (nine evenly distributed interview partners) provides a definite structure to frame the research question, enabling preliminary conclusions on management telecoaching processes and thus phrase and draft further research projects.

⁶ The two more problematic possibilities in turn taking are gaps and overlaps between turns. A gap occurs when the "next speaker fails to speak precisely upon a current speaker's completion." (Hopper, 1992, p. 99) If both interlocutors start to speak at the same time an overlap ensues that may be perceived as interruption. (Hopper, 1992, p. 99)

⁷ Line managers and other resource allocation professionals are out of scope for this research project.

5. Research Results

The group-specific results are introduced to illuminate the interviewees' assessment of telephone-based management coaching and provide rationale for using coaching via telephone in the corporate sector.

Telecoachees: all three interviewed telecoachees have first-hand experience with telecoaching, receiving between 10 and 20 hours coaching via telephone. Two interviewees were previously coached in face-to-face settings and were able to compare the two coaching formats. The telecoachees' commentaries are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of Key Interview Results – Telecoachees

Research Categories	Telecoachees (TeleCees)
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • time-efficient sessions • more cost-effective than face-to-face coaching • empathetic coach-coachee relationships • high flexibility without time constraints • low cancellation rate of telephone appointments • delivering “just in time” support • easy to assure quiet and convenient coaching environments

Research Categories	Telecoachees (TeleCees)
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TeleC's proficiency of active listening and interpreting TeleCee's pitch dynamic and voice modification • producing smooth turn transitions; overlaps and silence during the conversation has to be managed skillfully by the TeleC • establishing trustworthiness • inappropriate for presentation coaching and coaching in non-verbal communication
Logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR offers a choice of qualified TeleCs • participation in TC is voluntary • opinions about the impact of TeleCs' gender vary • sound quality is an important prerequisite of TC • with good mobile connection, cell phones may be an option for TC

Telecoaches: the three interviewed telecoaches have longstanding experience in telephone-based management coaching with 200 to 1,500 telecoaching hours. Depending on the telecoachees' needs, the interviewed telecoaches also offer telecoaching services before and after standard office hours; telecoaching is rarely conducted on weekends. The telecoaches' statements are illuminated in Table 2.

Table 2: Overview of Key Interview Results – Telecoaches

Research Categories	Telecoaches (TeleCs)
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anonymity avoids stereotyping and visual distraction • face-to-face encounters with TeleCees are not necessary • TC is time-efficient and limits traveling expenses • low opportunity cost⁸ • TeleCees realize targeted coaching objectives more rapidly • flexible scheduling ensures continuity • easy rescheduling of appointments • provides prompt support in pressing problems
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR may lack incentives to change existing face-to-face coaching arrangements • traditional coaches perceive a threat of loss of importance to the clients • difficult to improve coachees' presentation skills and body language

⁸ Opportunity costs are costs of an alternative that must be forgone in order to pursue a certain action and can be described as sacrifice related to the second best choice available. Opportunity cost are not restricted to monetary costs: lost time, pleasure or any benefit that provides utility have also to be considered. Related to coaching opportunity cost are the costs that arise when the client due to coaching is not able to carry out productive work (Borlinghaus R., 2010, p. 62).

Research Categories	Telecoaches (TeleCs)
Characteristics and Future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to build trust initial phase in TC is important • equivalent strength of coach-coachee relationship in face-to-face and TC • more fragile and delicate relationship in TC than in face-to-face coaching • at the outset, meeting intervals are more frequent • same-gender and mixed gender coach-coachee relationships are treated equally • face-to-face coaching will go from being the rule to being the exception

HR Professionals: all three HR interviewees have long-term experience in HR management; one HR professional works intermittently as internal coach. The HR professionals' commentaries are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Overview of Key Interview Results – HR Professionals

Research Categories	HR Professionals
Benefits of TC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more cost-effective compared with face-to-face coaching (avoidance of traveling expenses and reduced coaching time) • higher level of efficacy and faster results • fewer cancellations of TC appointments; higher planning reliability • able to arrange short appointments to clarify pressing questions

Research Categories	HR Professionals
Challenges of TC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TeleCees' initial attitude toward TC is negative to neutral; TeleCees' may feel held in less esteem because of TC format • restrictions of TC may lie in strategic problem solving and support of presentation techniques • individual learning styles of prospective TeleCees determines suitability for TC • TC is an inappropriate coaching format for top managers
Administration and Future of TC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TeleCs must have accredited, certified coaching qualifications including employment in a large corporation • TeleCs are more challenged technologically • personal meetings between TeleCs and TeleCees are important to build mutual trust • frequency and duration of TC sessions are comparable with face-to-face coaching courses • HR offers TeleCees a selection of coaches; the final decision rests with the TeleCee • importance of incorporating male and female TeleCs; HR professionals do not strive to balance sex ratios of TeleCs in coaching pool • selection of TeleCs is primarily based on the TeleC's positive track record, the right cultural fit and personal style • TC will achieve widespread market penetration

6. Discussion of Telephone-Based Management Coaching

The study data are outlined in Table 4 by stakeholder group and characteristics of the advantages and limitations.

Table 4: Overview of Research Findings – Advantages and Limitations

Characteristics		Telecoachees	Telecoaches	HR Professionals
Advantages	Cost Efficiency	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
	Effectiveness	✓✓○	✓✓✓	✓✓○
	Flexibility	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓○
	Anonymity	✓○○	✓✓✓	○○○
Limitations	Individual Learning Style	○✓○	✓○○	○○✓
	Resistance and Trust Building	○✓✗	✗✗✗	✓✓✓
	Topic Choice	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
	Visualization	✗✗✓	✓✓✓	○○✓

* Each symbol represents the opinion of one interviewee about the characteristic:

✓ Yes

✗ No

○ Not Addressed

6.1 Advantages

The interviewed stakeholders commented consistently on the advantages of telephone-based coaching. Because of the homogenous picture and high level of agreement, these results seem to be robust. The three most important advantages of telecoaching based on this sample were:

Cost Efficiency: from a cost perspective, telephone-based coaching is favorable in comparison to face-to-face coaching; telecoachees, telecoaches and HR practitioners all commented on the financial advantages of the telephone format. Although coach and customer expenses for one telecoaching hour are comparable to hourly rates of face-to-face coaching, the difference in costs results from reduced or non-existent travel costs (time and expenses).

In addition, telecoaching is associated with low opportunity cost. Scarcity of resources (e.g., time) necessitates trade-offs, which can result in opportunity cost. The opportunity to choose which times will be devoted to self-development frees the manager / coachee to minimize the opportunity cost. They can balance their focus between core working hours when they are able to interact with colleagues and direct reports and non-core working hours in less demand or not spent in proximity to other employees.

Another factor in cost containment is the low rescheduling and cancellation rate of telecoaching sessions. Research subjects noted that telephone appointments are convenient and cancellation is rare in comparison to the cancellation of face-to-face appointments. The rescheduling of new telecoaching appointments is easily arranged on short notice. As a result, the coaching process can be maintained at regular intervals ensuring intensive work on the telecoachee's development.

Effectiveness: telephone-based management coaching is both time-efficient and effective. In comparison to face-to-face coaching, telecoaching shows the same or similar results in the same or less time. Telecoaches' statements about the higher effectiveness of telecoaching are not surprising; coaching services via telephone represents their business and source of income. However, in this research two of the three HR professionals observed a higher level

of efficacy as telephone coaching allowed faster results and better planning reliability. One HR practitioner emphasized that the high satisfaction with telecoaching resulted in changes to the company's coaching policy so that coaching via telephone is the format of first choice. The positive assessment of effectiveness is reinforced by telecoachees' high satisfaction rate of being coached via telephone.

Although not confirmed in the literature, the three telecoaches shared the opinion that the perceived anonymity and lack of physical appearance in telecoaching is an advantage for both coaching partners. Telecoachees are able to rapidly realize their targeted coaching goals in telephone conversations due to less distraction and the dyad's ability to immediately come to the point. Mutual stereotyping and visual and other sensual distraction do not interfere with the coaching process, resulting in positive emotional disinhibition effects and focused work. The telecoaches' observation is reinforced by the telecoachees' perceptions that people open up more easily to conversation partners when they do not feel they are being observed. In other words, telecoaching provides a comfortable psychological communication distance for telecoachees, leading to task-oriented and uninhibited conversation.

Flexibility: as a flexible coaching format, telecoaching is individually adjustable and need not intrude in time or location. Telecoachees, telecoaches and HR professionals all commented on the advantages of scheduling immediate telecoaching appointments without being constrained by fixed times. Managers on business trips and expats abroad for a limited time have the option to receive coaching support from their trusted coach via telephone. In this vein, the maintenance of coaching ensures a progressive coaching process without impairing the coachee's motivation due to postponements and cancellations. If required, telephone coaching allows setting up telephone appointments in close succession in case of telecoaches' time restriction or individual requirements. Especially in pressing and problematic situations, telecoachees can contact telecoaches on short notice asking for immediate support. In addition, an advantage associated with telecoaching, emphasized

by all telecoachees and telecoaches, is the free choice of location (e.g., office, hotel, or home) from which to conduct telecoaching.

6.2 Limitations

Based on the interviews with the three stakeholder groups the core advantages of telecoaching were straightforward. In contrast, the limitations of telecoaching show more variation.

Individual Learning Style: visually-focused people may tend to miss or ignore information presented aurally. Reaching telecoachees who prefer visualizing information might be more challenging and result in a decreased engagement and commitment. Knowing telecoachees' predominant learning style, telecoaches might adapt their coaching techniques to address more appropriately the communication partners' learning style (e.g., by employing computer visualization software). None of the three telecoaches participating in this research project seemed to concern themselves with individual learning style.

Resistance and Trust Building: all interviewed telecoaches disagreed with the HR professionals' view that people are reluctant to accept telecoaching. However, the telecoaches' statement has to be qualified because HR practitioners screen potential telecoachees to confirm their suitability for being coached via telephone. Nevertheless, the development of trust is of the utmost significance to remove telecoachees' possible uncertainties and skepticism. Particularly in the beginning of a new telecoaching cycle the formation of interpersonal trust between the coach-coachee dyad may be difficult to establish; the lack of non-verbal behavior, as a trust building amplifier, may cause an obstacle in the development of rapport. Telecoaches must be able to actively listen with commitment and empathy to decode the interlocutors' emotional conditions by interpreting their voice, speaking tempo, breaks or breathing. In addition, the telecoaches' affinity for technology is important to manage breaks and overlaps in telephone conversations with appropriate communication techniques. In the same vein, two of three HR professionals

commented on the need for telecoaches to screen more intensively the telecoachees' verbalizations and to make greater effort to build trust in the coaching dyad. Based on these research findings, telecoaches may be more challenged during telecoaching than in face-to-face coaching. Against this background, the advantages of specific training in telecoaching seem obvious. Surprisingly, none of the interviewed telecoaches completed a training program in telecoaching; on the contrary, they did not consider telephone-based training necessary for telecoaches.

Topic Choice and Visualization: although coaching via telephone is an individual-centered intervention and covers almost every coaching issue, telephone-based coaching is subject to some restrictions. According to one interviewed telecoach, telecoaching may be used to address about 80% of all management coaching topics. Telecoaching is less effective than face-to-face coaching in improving coachees' individual presentation skills and body language (non-verbal communication). One HR professional interviewed commented on the ineffectiveness of coaching via telephone in strategic problem solving and complex coaching situations where face-to-face coaching is an asset.

Visualization is common practice and helpful to visually structure reasoning or reduce complexity. All telecoachees interviewed stressed the advantages of exploiting whiteboards and flip charts. Interestingly, none of the telecoaches had any experience with the application of online visualization software in telecoaching and claimed not to miss any visualization activity during the coaching sessions. Although consulting software (e.g., OmniGraffle and CONSIDERO Modeler) is commercially available, none of the telecoaches interviewed use these software packages. Two telecoaches noted that they were restricted in applying systemic structural constellations in telephone-based coaching, which may demonstrate telecoaches' lack of interest and knowledge of online software. 3D software tools for systemic structural constellations (e.g., LPScocoon) were developed to bridge the gap for using system simulations online. The use of online visualization software would enhance telephone-based management coaching.

7. Future of Telephone-Based Management Coaching

Human Resource is in need of alternatives to face-to-face coaching due to globalization, changing dynamics in companies and managers' time limitations. Telecoaching is a budget-friendly and flexible coaching alternative providing rapid support. However, telecoaching may be amended by new user-friendly technology (perhaps in combination with portable devices) enabling affordable image transmission in high quality (e.g., HD video conferencing applications). The tendency of people to seek the feeling of being close in communication is not really addressed by current telephone technology. New technological developments will provide virtual face-to-face situations in coaching. Telephone conversations are more uncertain than face-to-face conversations. This uncertainty is perhaps the real reason why people are resistant to being coached via telephone; although the same uncertainty may promote real learning.

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