

# Assessing the efficacy of a cognitive behavioural executive coaching programme

Vincenzo Libri & Travis Kemp

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**Objectives:** Cognitive behavioural techniques have been the mainstay of psychological treatment for many psychologists in clinical practice. However, there is little known in relation to the efficacy of cognitive behavioural techniques for performance enhancement within a non-clinical setting, such as those found in organisational environments. The present study examined the effects of a cognitive behavioural based executive coaching intervention for a finance sales executive.

**Design:** A within subject, ABAB single case design was utilised in this study.

**Methods:** The participant was a 30-year-old Australian male, employed as a full-time finance sales executive. Each phase of the single case design had a duration of three weeks. Follow-up measures were taken at six months (week 36) and at 18 months (week 88) after the conclusion of the intervention.

**Results:** It was shown that a cognitive behavioural executive coaching programme enhanced a 30-year-old Australian male finance executive's sales performance, core self-evaluation, and global self-ratings of performance following his participation in an executive coaching intervention.

**Conclusions:** The present study suggests that executive coaches should consider incorporating cognitive behavioural techniques into their coaching programmes. Further research into executive coaching models, approaches and outcomes, is needed, particularly by academics within the field of organisational psychology.

## The context of executive coaching

KILBURG (2000) DEFINES EXECUTIVE coaching as a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation, and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals. The consultant seeks to improve the client's professional performance and personal satisfaction, and consequently improve the effectiveness of the client's organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement.

Within the literature, this definition appears to represent a comprehensive view of what executive coaching is (Judge & Cowell, 1997; Kiel *et al.*, 1996; Olesen, 1996; Peterson, 1996; Richard, 1999; Saporito, 1996; Sperry, 1993, 1996; Witherspoon & White, 1996a, 1996b; Cavanagh *et al.*, 2005). It has also been reported that executive coaching is a profes-

sional relationship characterised by a highly confidential personal learning process that focuses not only on interpersonal issues, but also intrapersonal ones (Diedrich, 1996; O'Brien, 1997; Witherspoon & White, 1996a).

The coaching literature is deficient in empirical investigations, with much of the peer reviewed literature focussing on the conceptual and theoretical analysis of coaching. Indeed, much of the literature to date has focussed on the development of models, techniques and methodologies for coaching (Diedrich, 1996; Frisch, 2001; Giglio *et al.*, 1998; Hellervik *et al.*, 1992; Jay, 2003; Katz & Miller, 1996; Kemp, 2006; Levinson, 1996; Peterson, 1996; Richard, 2003; Saporito, 1996; Storey, 2003; Waclawski & Church, 1999;).

While many models have been presented within the literature, there has been little effort in the empirical validation of models or the scientific study of executive coaching

interventions and the evaluation of outcomes of such interventions (Kilburg, 1996). Whilst there is a lack of empirical research concerning executive coaching, there are studies within the psychological literature supporting the concept and positive outcomes of executive coaching (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001).

The executive coaching literature has several issues to address. Specifically, research must consider validating coaching models as well as coaching processes in order to best explain how such processes can account for positive behavioural change and performance outcomes. The coaching relationship is perceived as being central to the change process, yet the literature largely devoid of any deeper exploration of such matters (Hargrove, 1995; Kilburg, 2000; O'Neill, 2000).

It has also been asserted within the executive coaching literature that psychologists are perhaps the best qualified for offering executive coaching services (Kilburg, 1996, 2000). Therefore, psychologists would appear to hold some responsibility in conducting, supporting and participating in the research being conducted on the efficacy of executive coaching as an intervention (Brotman *et al.*, 1998; Diedrich & Kilburg, 2001; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001).

Psychology has many tools, techniques and strategies that lend themselves to enhancing both the coaching relationship and processes for eliciting positive outcomes, personally and professionally. Examples include cognitive and behavioural techniques as well as problem solving strategies and communication techniques.

### **The present study**

Whilst it has been acknowledged that there has been little research concerning the efficacy of specific psychological tools and executive coaching psychology (Brotman *et al.*, 1998), there is a substantial body of research concluding that coaching psychology has a positive impact on leadership skills (Conway, 2000; Kilburg, 1997; Saporito, 1996) and also

emotional competencies (Laske, 1999; Tobias, 1996). Although such conclusions indicate the positive effects of coaching, Olivero *et al.* (1997) note that there have been few studies examining the efficacy of executive coaching psychology and objective performance empirically.

A major technique reserved for psychologists is cognitive behavioural therapy, yet there is little research in regards to the application of cognitive behavioural techniques and executive coaching outcomes. Perhaps the most conclusive study of the positive effects of cognitive behavioural techniques and psychology is that of Grant (2002). With a sample of first year tertiary level accounting students, Grant (2002) compared the effects of a cognitive only approach (CT), with a behavioural only approach (BT), with a cognitive behavioural approach (CBT) on students' grade point average (GPA), self-regulation, self-concept, general mental health, private self-consciousness, self-reflection, and personal insight.

Overtly, the main goal of coaching psychology is to increase performance, thus in this case the goal was to increase students' GPA (Grant, 2002). However, one of the central constructs of goal attainment is self-regulation. Locke and Latham (1990) concluded that goal setting increases performance from 10 per cent to 30 per cent. Implicit in such performance increases is the individual's ability to self-regulate.

According to Garcia (1996) self-regulation refers to the process by which the individual controls and directs their actions in the pursuit of their goals. Therefore, goal-directed self-regulation is a series of processes where the individual sets a goal, devises a plan of action, initiates such action, monitors their performance, evaluates their performance by comparison to some standard, and based on such an evaluation adjusts the action plan for further enhancement and goal attainment.

Grant (2002) notes that the process of self-regulation provides basis for the individual's ability for efficient goal attainment.

Based on the social-learning theory of Bandura (1986), there are three key processes involved in instigating directed change and goal-directed self-regulation. The first is self-monitoring (of thoughts and behaviours); the second is self-evaluation (making comparisons of performance to some standard); and thirdly self-reaction (creating purposeful change in order for goal attainment).

Through empirical investigation, Grant (2002) concluded that the cognitive behavioural coaching approach was indeed the most powerful in enhancing performance and goal attainment, as well as enhancing self-regulation, self-concept, and general mental health. The cognitive behavioural coaching programme was also found to maintain and elevate performance increases at post and follow up measures. Neither the cognitive approach, behavioural approach, nor the cognitive behavioural approach had any effect on private self-consciousness, self-reflection, or insight. Similar studies such as that reported by Grant and Greene (2001) also conclude that the cognitive behavioural coaching psychology approach increased performance and decreased stress and depression.

The present study sought to replicate the study of Grant (2002) by applying cognitive behavioural coaching psychology principles within an organisational context. Indeed Grant (2002) himself recommended that the coaching study be replicated with an adult population in attaining 'real life' goals such as enhancing work performance.

The present study also sought to validate the above findings by applying coaching psychology to a finance executive. The executive in question acts as a lending broker, finding clients the best possible loan for the purchase of domestic and commercial real estate. The present study applied a cognitive behavioural executive coaching programme for the performance enhancement of the finance sales executive.

## **Research questions**

The present study sought to support the conclusions of Grant (2002), namely the efficacy of cognitive behavioural techniques within a coaching psychology paradigm.

Specifically, the following research questions were explored.

- Would the performance of a finance sales executive improve as a result of his participation in an executive coaching intervention that utilised cognitive behavioural methods?
- Would the core self-evaluation ratings of a finance sales executive improve as a result of his participation in an executive coaching intervention that utilised cognitive behavioural methods?
- Would the subjective global self-ratings of a finance sales executive improve as a result of his participation in an executive coaching intervention that utilised cognitive behavioural methods?

## **Method**

### ***Participant***

The participant of the present study was a 30-year-old Australian-born male. The participant was a full-time finance sales executive who voluntarily took part in the present study.

### ***Single case design***

The present study employed an A (baseline) – B (intervention) – A (intervention withdrawal) – B (intervention) single case design. Each phase of the single case design had duration of three weeks, thus the total length of the study was 12 weeks. Follow-up measures were taken at week 36, six months after the conclusion of the intervention, and at week 88 giving an 18-month follow-up period. These follow-up periods enabled the collection of valuable longitudinal data.

The single case design, or time-series approach, provides multiple data points that allow for a 'fine grain' analysis of the co-variation of the executive coaching intervention and the outcome variables over time (Grunzig, 1988; Moran & Fonagy, 1987).

This is advantageous as time-series data provides immediate feedback for the investigator and the participant. Consequently, the programme could be evaluated instantaneously and modified if and when required.

Interpretation of the significance of the coaching intervention, practically speaking, is also much easier than an experiment (Jones *et al.*, 1993). The A-B-A-B single case design attempts to control for extraneous variables and also attempts to show cause and effect when the programme is introduced, withdrawn and introduced once more in distinct time phases. In essence it allows a comparison between stages, in order to get a better 'view' of the effects of the executive coaching programme through control phases, rather than control groups.

Inferential statistics are not necessary, as practical significance can be determined through the observation of trend within the graphical data. Graphical data reveals changes in trend and slope from baseline to intervention, and between control phases, also highlighting latency of change. The single case design provides a practical way of evaluating a theory or hypothesis, in this case substantiating the conclusions of Grant's (2002) cognitive behavioural coaching programme with an academic sample, and applying the coaching programme for performance enhancement within an organisational context.

### Measures

#### *Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI)*

The BAI is a 21-item self-report inventory, with each item representing symptoms of anxiety. The BAI was used as a screening instrument for study inclusion. The participant is required to rate the degree that they have experienced a symptom of anxiety in the past week using the rating scale not at all (0), mildly (1), moderately (2) or severely (3). Examples of symptoms are nervous, terrified and feeling hot.

Higher scores are indicative of anxiety. According to Beck and Steer (1993) the BAI has an internal consistency of 0.94 and a test-

retest reliability of 0.75. In reference to validity, the BAI was found to significantly correlate with the Hamilton Anxiety Scale ( $r=0.51$ ) and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) ( $r=0.58$  for trait and  $r=0.47$  for state) (Beck & Steer, 1993).

#### *Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II)*

The BDI-II is a 21-item self-report inventory, with each item representing symptoms of depression. The BDI-II was used as a screening instrument for study inclusion. Each item has four statements which the participant is required to select from; circling the statement which best describes their experience of that particular depressive symptom in the past week.

An example is the item sadness and its associated four statements; 'I do not feel sad', 'I feel sad much of the time', 'I am sad all of the time', and 'I am so sad or unhappy that I can't stand it.' Each statement is rated from 0 to 3 and higher scores are indicative of depression. According to Beck, Steer and Brown (1996) the BDI-II has an internal consistency of 0.92 and a test-retest reliability of 0.93. In reference to validity, the BDI-II was found to significantly correlate with the Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression ( $r=0.71$ ) and the BDI-I ( $r=0.93$ ), (Beck *et al.*, 1996).

#### *Sales performance*

Sales performance, an outcome measure, was assessed through the average of four separate but related measures. Such measures were the amount of client leads generated per week, the number of client loan interviews per week, the number of loan applications submitted per week and the number of loans approved per week. All measures were recorded on a weekly basis.

#### *Core self-evaluation scale (CSES)*

The CSES, an outcome measure, is a 12-item scale measuring the higher order trait of core self-evaluation. Judge *et al.* (2003) found the CSES indicative of four well established personality traits of self-esteem ( $\alpha=0.80$  to 0.89), generalised self-efficacy

( $\alpha=0.80$  to  $0.89$ ), neuroticism ( $\alpha=0.87$  to  $0.89$ ), and locus of control ( $\alpha=0.57$  to  $0.70$ ).

Examples of items are 'When I try, I generally succeed' and 'Sometimes I feel depressed.' The participant rates each item using a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). The CSES has also been found to predict job satisfaction ( $r=0.82$  to  $0.83$ ), job performance ( $r=0.96$ ), and life satisfaction ( $r=0.81$  to  $0.85$ ), (Judge *et al.*, 2003).

#### *Subjective global self-rating of performance*

An outcome measure, the participant was asked to rate their own performance on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 indicated absolute worst performance, 5 indicated average performance, and 10 was indicative of absolute best performance. Qualitative data was also gathered during performance interviews with the participant, discussing the participant's subjective rating of their performance relative to their goals, values, and problem solving skills.

#### *Procedure*

In seeking to replicate the methodology used by Grant (2002), the participant was first screened for psychopathology, specifically measured for symptomology of anxiety and depression using the BAI and BDI-II respectively. The participant exhibited no such psychopathology and, therefore, met the inclusion criteria of the study.

The A (baseline) – B (intervention) – A (intervention withdrawal) – B (intervention) single case design began with three weeks of baseline measures. Every Sunday morning for the first three weeks of the study, the participant was measured on all outcome measures, namely sales performance, core self-evaluation and also provided a subjective global self-rating of performance.

The second phase of the study introduced the executive coaching intervention. The intervention was a cognitive behavioural executive coaching programme based on the cognitive behavioural coaching programme of Grant, (2002). The intervention took part

at the end of week 3 and was taught in one four-hour session on a Sunday morning.

Based on Locke (1996), and Latham and Locke (1991), the participant was taught to set specific, measurable, attractive, realistic, and time framed goals (SMART goals). The participant was also informed about the cyclical nature of moving through the stages of change, as described by the Transtheoretical model of change (TTM) of Prochaska, Norcross and DiClemente (1994). The Transtheoretical model of change describes six stages of change; pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance and relapse. It was emphasised to the participant that change would not occur linearly from one stage to the next, but rather cyclically, where relapse was a common and natural part of the process.

The participant was shown how to monitor thoughts and feelings using the downward arrow techniques (Burns, 1989) and the laddering technique (McKay & Fanning, 1991). These techniques are a series of self-questioning statements which lead the participant to an understanding of any dysfunctional schemata, self-defeating beliefs and feelings. The participant was taught to modify negative or self-defeating thoughts and feelings by using motivational self-talk, a process of cognitive restructuring (Manning & Payne, 1996; Neck & Manz, 1992; Nelson-Jones, 1997). The participant also kept a logbook of successful work performance, specifically the number of finance loans approved, finance loans submitted, generating finance sales leads and finance sales interviews with prospective clients.

Also, the participant identified a core set of values and monitored behaviour that was congruent with such values in order to enhance work performance as suggested by Swenson and Herche (1994). The final aspect of the executive coaching programme was instruction on problem solving. The participant was taught problem solving techniques, as poor problem solving has been shown to contribute towards anxiety and depression (Cassidy & Long, 1996) and has

also been shown to impair performance (Blankstein *et al.*, 1992; Priester & Clum, 1993).

The participant was interviewed weekly during the intervention phase and provided outcome data, namely sales performance, core self-evaluation and a subjective global self-rating of performance. The intervention phase lasted a total of three weeks. At the end of the sixth week, the intervention was withdrawn and the participant was asked to return to their original methods of work. The participant again provided weekly outcome measures of sales performance, core self-evaluation and a subjective global self-rating of performance during the intervention withdrawal phase.

The executive coaching intervention was re-introduced in the final three weeks of the study and the participant was again measured weekly on all outcome measures, namely sales performance, core self-evaluation and a subjective global self-rating of performance. The participant was also asked to provide data on outcome measures six-months after the conclusion of the study (week 36) to evaluate the long-term outcomes of the executive coaching intervention.

## Results

The A-B-A-B single case design shows weekly changes in the outcome variables of sales performance, core self-evaluation and subjective ratings of performance over time. The changes in outcome variables can be observed, beginning at baseline, through to the introduction of the intervention, intervention withdrawal and the reintroduction of the intervention through to the six-month follow-up measures. On all outcome measures, it was observed that initial baselines exhibited clinical stability to warrant the introduction of the treatment variable, namely the cognitive behavioural coaching programme.

It can be observed from Figure 1 that the finance sales executive exhibits an increase in sales performance from baseline (weeks

1A to 3A) through to the introduction of the executive coaching programme (weeks 4B to 6B). The trend of Figure 1 also shows a dip in performance in the first week of the intervention withdrawal phase (week 7A) and the first week of the reintroduction of the executive coaching intervention (week 10B), both dips, however, were immediately followed by recoveries in performance.

Overall, Figure 1 shows the utility of the executive coaching programme, highlighting an increase in performance from baseline through to the end of the 12-week study and continues to show performance maintenance at six-month follow-up (week 36F) and 18-month follow-up (week 88F) relative to baseline. Such a trend supports the efficacy and utility of the executive coaching programme in enhancing sales performance within the finance sales executive and the sustainability of this performance enhancement over time.

In regards to core self-evaluation, it can be observed from Figure 2 that the finance sales executive exhibits a sound core self-evaluation ranging from 51 to 58, where 60 is the highest core self-evaluation score possible, indicating maximum positive adjustment.

Figure 2 shows stable core self-evaluation ratings in baseline (weeks 1A to 3A), followed by some variability in core self-evaluation scores within the second phase of the study, the introduction of the executive coaching programme (weeks 4B to 6B). Within the intervention withdrawal phase (weeks 7A to 9A) core self-evaluation scores again stabilise, followed by a continuous increase of scores within the final phase of the study, the reintroduction of the executive coaching intervention (weeks 10B to 12B).

Overall, Figure 2 shows the utility of the executive coaching programme, highlighting an increase of core self-evaluation from baseline through to the end of the 12-week study and continues to show core self-evaluation maintenance at six-month follow-up (week 36F) relative to baseline. Longitudinal data (week 88F) indicates a

Figure 1: Weekly changes in the average sales performance (KPI) of the finance sales executive.

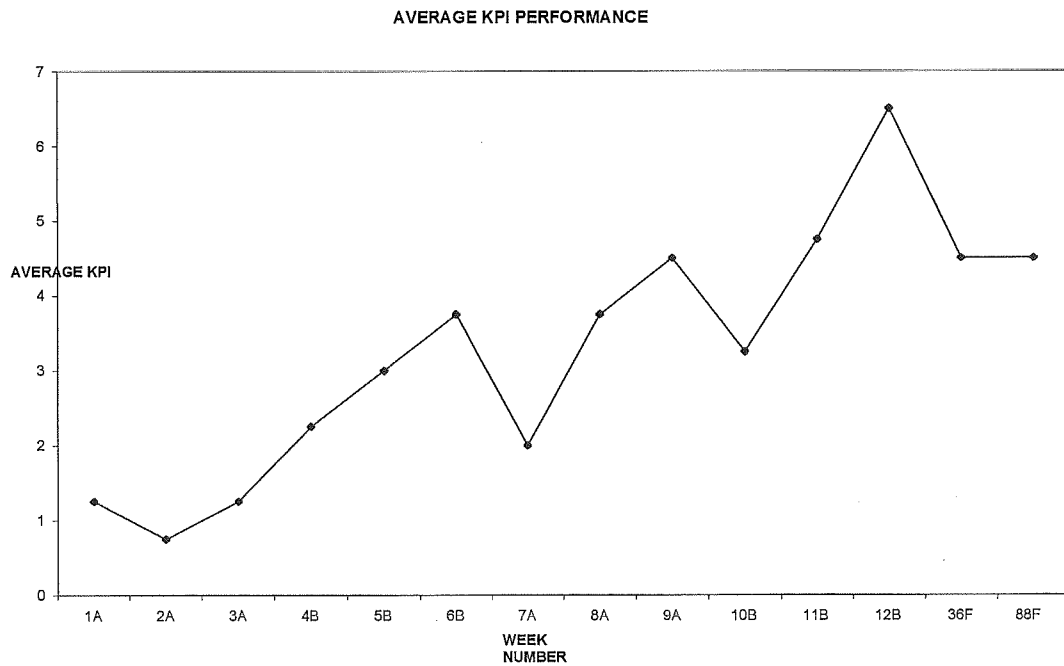
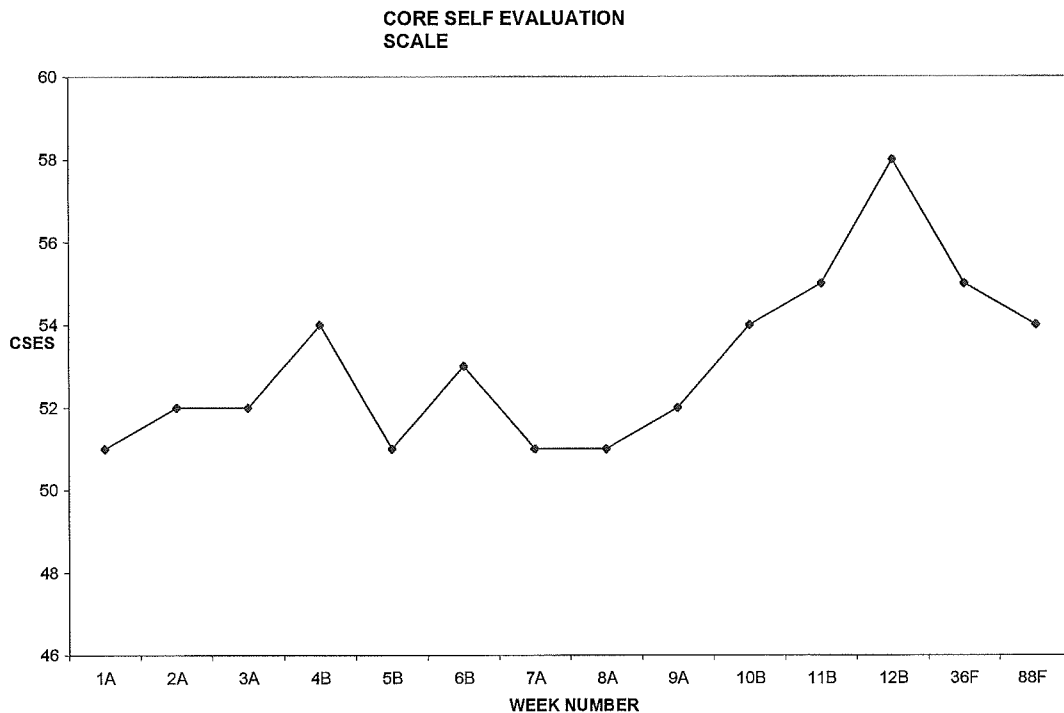


Figure 2: Weekly changes in the core self-evaluation (CSES) of the finance sales executive.



minor decrease in core self evaluation over time. Such a trend supports the efficacy and utility of the executive coaching programme in enhancing core self-evaluation within the finance sales executive.

The finance sales executive was asked to rate their own performance on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 indicates maximum performance and 1 indicates poorest performance and 5 is indicative of average performance.

Figure 3 shows the global self-rating of performance of the finance sales executive throughout the 12-week study and at 6-month follow-up. It can be observed that the general trend of Figure 3 shows an increase from baseline through to the conclusion of the 12-week study in the global self-rating of performance of the finance sales executive. It can also be observed that the increase in the global self-rating of performance of the finance sales-executive is maintained at the six-month follow-up measure (week 36F) and the 18-month follow-up measure (week 88F), relative to baseline.

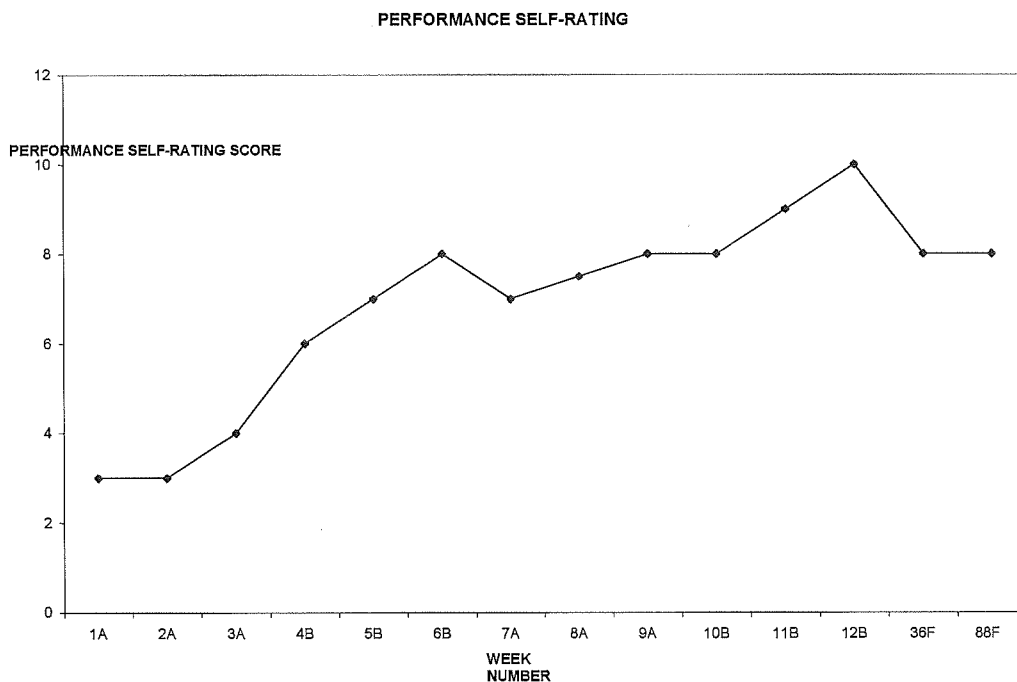
Overall, Figure 3 provides support for the utility of the executive coaching programme, highlighting an increase in the global self-rating of performance from baseline through to the end of the 12-week study and continues to show maintenance of the global self-rating of performance at both the six-month and 18-month follow-up measures relative to baseline. Such a trend lends specific support to the efficacy and utility of the executive coaching programme in enhancing global self-rating of performance within the finance sales executive.

### Discussion

Due to the nature of the single case design or time series approach, the results in this study included no statistical analyses. Instead, the interpretation of the efficacy of the cognitive behavioural executive coaching programme was completed through the observation of graphical trend data. By observing changes in data through graphical analysis, the effects of the executive coaching programme could be determined over time (Jones *et al.*, 1993).

Graphical trend analysis supported the efficacy of the executive coaching programme in enhancing sales performance, core self-evaluation and global self-ratings of performance. The graphs of each outcome variable showed consistent improvements over time, which were all maintained at follow-up relative to baseline measures. This trend was most evident in the performance outcomes of global self-ratings of performance and core self-evaluation ratings. In comparison, the graph of average finance sales performance, whilst overall showing general performance enhancement over time, also showed two significant dips in performance in weeks 7A (the first week of

Figure 3: Weekly changes in the self-rating of performance of the finance sales executive.





intervention withdrawal) and 10B (the first week of the reintroduction of the executive coaching intervention).

The participant accounted for such performance dips by explaining that in week 7A, it proved difficult to maintain performance when having to revert to old methods of work without setting weekly performance goals and having a specific goal plan. The dip in sales performance in week 10B was also due to adjustment, in particular returning to the executive coaching intervention, specifically setting weekly sales performance goals and adhering to a specific goal plan. It should be noted that although dips in sales performance occurred in weeks 7A and 10B, both weeks elicited sales performance measures that were higher than baseline measures.

It is observed that performance did not return to baseline levels at either intervention withdrawal or at follow up measures. Therefore, it appears that a positive cumulative effect over time of the coaching intervention occurred and hence these results appear to support and replicate the findings of Grant (2002) upon which the present study is based. Grant (2002) found through empirical investigation, that a coaching programme based on cognitive-behavioural techniques was most powerful in enhancing performance and goal attainment, as well as enhancing self-regulation, self-concept, and general mental health. Grant (2002) also concluded that the cognitive-behavioural coaching programme maintained and elevated academic performance at post and follow up measures. Similar studies such as that reported by Grant and Greene (2001) also conclude that the cognitive-behavioural coaching psychology approach increased performance and decreased stress and depression.

Current literature suggests that executive coaching must be shown to have positive outcomes that are measurable and observable (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Kilburg, 1996, 2000). It has also been purported (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson,

2001; Kilburg, 1996, 2000) that such outcomes should be focussed on overall organisational performance and development through the behavioural change of the executive. The present study was able to highlight this by showing performance enhancement of the individual executive, thus having a positive effect overall on the organisation. Simply put; the greater number of finance sales, the better the bottom line, both for the individual finance executive and for the organisation as a whole.

This is perhaps the single most important factor in executive coaching. Executive coaches are required to provide positive outcomes for their clients, and within the organisational context the organisation should benefit overall from the productivity and performance enhancement of the executive being coached (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001).

The present study goes some way in addressing the lack of empirical evidence for executive coaching outcomes and assessing particular psychological techniques for the enhancement of executive coaching and overall performance enhancement. The present study found the cognitive behavioural techniques provide an effective framework for executive coaching and found support for executive coaching as an intervention for job performance enhancement, personal development and organisational benefit. Furthermore, the added strength offered by the often overlooked longitudinal data gathered at 18-months post-intervention provides for compelling support for the efficacy of such an intervention.

### **Study limitations**

Whilst the present study found positive outcomes as a consequence of executive coaching, it is unable to conclude cause-and-effect. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that the executive coaching intervention was solely responsible for sales performance enhancement, core self-evaluation improvements or enhanced global self-ratings of performance. The reason for this is due to

the nature of the methodology of the study.

Whilst the present study did not utilise a pre and post intervention, treatment and control group, quasi-experimental design, its single case design does provide for a high degree of internal validity. The single case design or time series approach also provides a practical way of evaluating a theory or hypothesis, in this case substantiating Grant's (2002) cognitive-behavioural coaching programme and its practical applications to an organisational context. However, it is noted that reliability is compromised, due to the lack of inter-observer reliability in particular. Unfortunately this is mainly due to the study taking place in an applied environment and therefore the generalisability of results is limited.

A further limitation of the present study is the time allocated to baseline, treatment and withdrawal stages (three weeks per stage). However, due to the limited time practitioners have available to interact with their clients together with the commercial expectations of such coaching interventions, it is difficult to justify long periods of inactivity for the purposes of establishing baseline stability.

Engagement of cognitive behavioural coaching is subject to the commercial nature of an organisation, influenced by the practical constraints of time, budget and organisational objectives, and, therefore, provides no opportunity to conduct a true experiment. In order to assist clients and ascertain whether an executive coaching programme is efficacious, an organisational psychologist may employ a single case design using a multiple baseline A-B-A-B approach, satisfying both agendas.

### Conclusion

The present study found that a cognitive behavioural executive coaching intervention was shown to be efficacious in enhancing the sales performance, core self-evaluation and global self-rating of performance of a finance sales executive. Executive coaches who seek to enhance the performance and

well-being of their clients should consider incorporating cognitive behavioural techniques into their coaching programmes.

It is suggested that further research be conducted investigating and validating executive coaching models, approaches and outcomes, as well as validating the efficacy and utility of specific psychological techniques for the basis of executive coaching. It is also suggested that further research concerning executive coaching be conducted by academics within the field of organisational psychology. Such research should provide empirical evidence for executive coaching and psychological techniques for organisational performance enhancement, via sound experimental designs such as the use of experimental and control groups.

### Authors

#### Vincenzo Libri

School of Psychology,  
University of South Australia.

#### Travis Kemp

Adjunct Lecturer, School of Psychology,  
University of Sydney.  
Adjunct Research Fellow, Graduate School  
of Business, University of South Australia.

### Correspondence

#### Vicenzo Libri

P.O. Box 708  
Kent Town,  
South Australia 5071.  
E-mail: [Vlibri@picknowl.com.au](mailto:Vlibri@picknowl.com.au)

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