Managerial coaching has emerged as a powerful developmental intervention over the past several years as human resource development practices continue to devolve to supervisors and managers. Yet, despite the growing interest and apparent benefits of managerial coaching, it remains an area on which little has been written from an empirical or theoretical perspective. The purpose of this paper is to examine the conceptual and limited empirical research literature on managerial coaching to develop a tentative model that may guide future research and practice.

Keywords: coaching, managerial coaching, management development, leadership development

Introduction and Problem Statement

In recent years the scholarly literature has suggested that frontline supervisors and managers are becoming increasingly held responsible for performing many human resource practices such as developing their employees and facilitating their learning (de Jong, Leenders & Thijssen, 1999; Gilley, 2000; Hanks & Kleiner, 1995; Larsen, 1997; McGovern, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, Stiles & Truss, 1997; Mindell, 1995; Thornhill & Saunders, 1998; Schuler, 1990; Yarnall, 1998). To facilitate employee learning and development, supervisors and managers are expected to assume roles as coaches (Bartlett & Goshal, 1997; Evered & Selman, 1989; Marsh, 1992; McGill & Slocum, 1998; Orth, Wilkinson & Benfari, 1987). Consequently, the concept of coaching has emerged as a new paradigm or metaphor for management. Evered and Selman have acknowledged that coaching is the heart of management and that creating a culture for coaching is a core managerial activity. Others have also suggested that coaching is an important role for supervisors, managers, and managerial leaders which should be performed as a part of daily
management practice (Antonioni, 2000; Bianco-Mathis, Nabors, & Roman, 2002; Burdett, 1998; Flaherty, 1999; Hunt and Weintraub, 2002; Kraines, 2001; Piasecka, 2000; Ragsdale, 2000; Slater and Narver, 1994, 1995). Coaching has gained considerable popularity as evidenced by the escalating number of practitioner-oriented books and articles on the topic (Armentrout, 1995; King & Eaton, 1999; McGovern, et. al., 1997; Redshaw, 2000).

Yet, despite the growing interest in coaching and the apparent benefits associated with coaching for both individual employees and for their organizations, coaching in general, and managerial coaching in particular, remains an area on which little has been written from an empirical or theoretical perspective (Grant, 2003; Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Grant & Zackon, 2004; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Kilburg, 1996; McLean & Kuo, 2000; Minter & Thomas, 2000; Popper & Lipshitz, 1992). As Peterson and Little (2005) have acknowledged, “We have seen an explosion of interest in the professional practice of coaching and a concomitant increase in books and resources aimed at executive coaches…Yet, there has been a relative paucity of resources aimed specifically at helping managers to coach people better” (p. 179). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the limited empirical research on managerial and supervisory coaching with the aim of developing a tentative conceptual model that may stimulate future research on several aspects of this type of coaching.

Method and Literature Review

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the conceptual and limited published empirical research on managerial coaching in the workplace. To fulfill the intentions of this paper, the researchers used several research databases, including ABI Inform and EBSCOhost to identify conceptual and empirical research on supervisory and managerial coaching. The researchers used the following keywords to guide searches on the databases: coaching, managerial coaching, supervisory coaching, and leadership coaching. The researchers reviewed relevant journal articles, unpublished dissertations and books as a part of this process.

The Emergence of Coaching. The concept of coaching is not a new phenomenon and has been widely discussed in various fields such as sport behavior and psychology, youth and adult education, counseling, clinical psychology, family therapy, industrial and organizational psychology, and within management (McLean, Yang, Kuo, Tolbert & Larkin, 2005). Coaching emerged in the management literature in the 1950’s as an approach to develop employees through a master-apprentice type of relationship (Evered & Selman, 1989). In the 1970’s several articles appeared that attempted to translate athletic and sports coaching into managerial contexts and much of the literature about coaching in the context of management has been drawn from sports coaching (Evered & Selman, 1989; McLean & Kuo, 2000; McNutt & Wright, 1995). Although a general base of literature on coaching exists from a sports and athletics perspective, some scholars suggest that using the sports analogy of coaching may be insufficient for business settings (Evered & Selman, 1989; McLean & Kuo, 2000).

Distinguishing Coaching from Counseling and Mentoring. The term coaching is often used interchangeably with counseling and mentoring, but many scholars differentiate between these activities (Burdett, 1998; Evered & Selman, 1989; Hargrove, 1995; King & Eaton, 1999; Kirk, Howard, Ketting & Little, 1999; Mink, Owen & Mink, 1993; Minter & Thomas, 2000; Orth, Benfari & Wilkinson, 1987; Popper & Lipshitz, 1992). Counseling generally addresses the employee’s emotional state, the causes of personal crises and problems, and involves short term
interventions designed to remedy problems that interfere with the employee’s job performance (Burgett, 1998; King & Eaton, 1999; Mink, Owen & Mink, 1993), while mentoring typically describes a longer-term process that is developmental, career focused, and covers all life structures (Burgett, 1998; Hansman, 2002; Mink, Owen & Mink, 1993).

**Conceptualizations of Coaching and Managerial Coaching.** In contrast to counseling and mentoring, coaching has been variously defined as a process for improving problem work performance (Fournies, 1987); as a day to day, hands on process of helping employees recognize opportunities to improve their performance and capabilities (Orth, Wilkinson & Benfari, 1987; Popper & Lipshitz, 1992); as a process of empowering employees to exceed prior levels of performance (Burgett, 1998; Evered & Selman, 1989; Hargrove, 1995); as a process of giving guidance, encouragement, and support to the learner (Redshaw, 2000); and, as a “process by which one individual, the coach, creates enabling relationships with others that make it easier for them to learn” (Mink, Own, & Mink, 1993). Coaching has traditionally been perceived as a remedy for poor performance and as an approach that links individual effectiveness with organizational performance (HR Focus, 2001). However, other scholars have incorporated the importance of providing relevant learning opportunities so that improved performance becomes a by-product of learning (Mink, Owen & Mink, 1993; Redshaw, 2000). In more recent literature, coaching has been conceptualized as facilitation of learning (Beattie, 2002) and research has suggested that these terms are synonymous (Ellinger, 1997; Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999). While coaching can be provided by external consultants (executive coaches) and coaching professionals (professional business coaches, career coaches, and life coaches, for example), this paper specifically refers to managerial coaching. This form of coaching is conceptualized as a supervisor or manager serving as a coach, or facilitator of learning, in which he or she enacts specific behaviors that enable his/her employee (coachee) to learn and develop (Beattie, 2002; Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999; Talarico, 2002).

**Research Literature on Managerial Coaching**

Kilburg (1996) has acknowledged that most of the formal research on coaching in management has come from graduate dissertations and prescriptive articles and books. In more recent years, there have been some studies that have examined the beliefs of managerial coaches, coaching behaviors, coaching skills, and the outcomes of coaching. The following sections overview the current state of empirical research on managerial coaching.

**Beliefs of Managerial Coaches.** Within the sports and athletics coaching literature, the concept of coaching efficacy has been considered to be a powerful variable in coaching effectiveness (Feltz, Chase, Moritz, & Sullivan, 1999). Coaching efficacy in this context refers to “the extent to which coaches believe they have the capacity to affect the learning and performance of their athletes” (Feltz, Chase, Moritz & Sullivan, 1999, p. 765). Feltz et al.’s concept of coaching efficacy is comprised of four dimensions: game strategy (“the confidence coaches have in their ability to coach during competition...” p. 766); motivation efficacy (“the confidence coaches have in their ability to affect the psychological skills and states of their athletes” p. 766); technique efficacy (“the belief coaches have in their instructional and diagnostic skills” p. 766); and, character building efficacy (“the confidence that coaches have in their ability to influence personal development and positive attitude toward sport in their athletes” (p. 766)) (Feltz, et al., 1999). Feltz et al. also contend that these coaching efficacy
dimensions are influenced by the coaches’ past experience, coaching preparation, and performance. They further suggest that such influences are sources of efficacy information. Their research studies have indicated that coaching efficacy is important in coaching effectiveness and athletic performance and subsequent studies have offered support for these concepts and extended the sources of coaching efficacy (Chase, Feltz, Hayashi, & Hepler, 2005).

Within the context of work organizations, limited research has explored the beliefs associated with managerial coaches. The findings from Ellinger and Bostrom’s (2002) study has provided some preliminary insights with regard to managerial coaching beliefs. In their qualitative study of managerial coaches, five clusters of beliefs emerged that were categorized into three categories: Category 1 contained “beliefs about roles” and “beliefs about capabilities”; category 2 contained “beliefs about the learning process” and “beliefs about learning”; and, category 3 contained “beliefs about learners.” In placing these belief categories in a belief map, managerial coaches within this study held several beliefs: those associated with their identity as coaches, their self-efficacy, their beliefs about the outcomes associated with learners, the learning process, and the learners themselves. While these beliefs have not been operationalized for testing, they do suggest that beliefs influence coaching behaviors of managers.

**Antecedents, Triggers or Catalysts for Managerial Coaching.** While coaching has traditionally been associated with improving problem work performance (Fournies, 1987), Mumford (1993) has acknowledged that any managerial activity contains the potential for learning. Mumford has identified several catalysts for managers’ learning which include: a new assignment, a new challenge, a new project, a shock or crisis, problem solving within a group, different standards of performance, or an unsuccessful piece of work. These catalysts for managerial learning are similar to those identified by Dechant (1989) and Cseh (1998) as catalysts for informal managerial learning. Findings exploring the catalysts or triggers specifically associated with coaching interventions similarly have offered support for Mumford, Dechant, and Cseh’s findings. While gaps and deficiencies of existing employees’ skills was reported to be the predominant catalyst for coaching, Ellinger’s (2003) qualitative study also identified political and developmental issues that served as triggers for coaching interventions. Examples included high consequence issues catalyzing the need for managerial coaching along with assignments, projects, and employee transitions that stimulated the need for coaching in which managers actively looked for ways to develop their employees’ skills and capabilities.

**Managerial Coaching Skills and Behaviors.** The requisite skills associated with managerial coaching often described in the conceptual literature include listening skills, analytical skills, interviewing skills, effective questioning techniques, observation, and typical coaching behaviors often include giving and receiving performance feedback, communicating and setting clear expectations, and creating a supportive environment conducive to coaching (Graham, Wedman & Garvin-Kester, 1993, 1994; King & Eaton, 1999; Marsh, 1992; Mobley, 1999; Orth, Wilkinson & Benfari, 1987; Phillips, 1994, 1995; Zemke, 1996).

In terms of coaching skills, recent research by McLean, Yang, Kuo, Tolbert and Larkin (2005) has yielded a self-assessment of coaching skills based upon a four-dimension coaching model. This model, suggests that the “manager as coach” reflects four aspects of managerial behavior: the manager as coach should communicate openly with others, needs to take a team approach instead of an individual approach with tasks, tends to value people over tasks, and should accept the ambiguous nature of the working environment. Their findings suggest that managerial coaching is a multidimensional construct that supports their four-dimension coaching
model. In responding to this work, Peterson and Little (2005) have questioned whether the team approach is a primary component of effective coaching since coaching is often considered a one-on-one managerial intervention. Further they have noted that other factors associated with coaching skills that have appeared in the literature should be considered such as: developing a partnership, effective listening skills and providing feedback as well as capabilities for facilitating development.

With regard to empirical research on managerial coaching behavior, some empirical research has been conducted within the sales management context examining the specific behaviors that employees associate with managers who possess effective coaching skills. For example, incorporating Schelling’s eight behaviors associated with successful sales managers, Graham et. al. (1994) interviewed account representatives and obtained their ratings of their respective manager’s coaching skills prior to the implementation of a manager coaching skills training program. The findings supported the existing literature on coaching concerning the importance of providing feedback, setting clear expectations, and creating a climate for coaching that involves a positive trusting relationship. Ellinger’s (1997) and Ellinger and Bostrom’s (1999) research identified a taxonomy of thirteen managerial coaching behaviors that were clustered into facilitating and empowering clusters. The empowering cluster consisted of the following behaviors: question framing to encourage employees to think through issues; being a resource – removing obstacles; transferring ownership to employees; holding back – not provide the answers. The facilitating cluster consisted of the following behaviors: providing feedback to employees; soliciting feedback from employees; working it out together – talking it through; creating and promoting a learning environment; setting and communicating expectations; stepping into other to shift perspectives; broadening employees’ perspectives – getting them to see things differently; using analogies, scenarios, and examples; and, engaging others to facilitate learning. Beattie’s (2002) research on managerial coaching in the context of a social service organization revealed twenty-two discrete effective facilitative behaviors that were then classified and allocated into one of nine identified behavioral categories. Beattie’s behavioral categories consisted of: thinking – reflective or prospective thinking; informing – sharing knowledge; empowering – delegation, trust; assessing – feedback and recognition, identifying developmental needs; advising – instruction, coaching, guidance, counseling; being professional – role model, standard setting, planning and preparation; caring – support, encouragement, approachable, reassurance, commitment/involvement, empathy; developing others; and, challenging employees to stretch themselves. Considerable similarity between the managerial coaching behaviors of Ellinger, Ellinger and Bostrom and the Beattie studies have been found in subsequent analyses. Furthermore, recent comparative analyses of the results of these respective studies against the behavioral construct of Hamlin’s ‘Generic Model of Managerial and Leadership Effectiveness’ (Hamlin, 2004), which Hamlin (2005) has also compared against the managerial leader behaviors comprising the Zenger Miller ‘Grass Roots Leadership Model’ (Bergmann, Hurson, & Russ-Eft, 1999; Russ-Eft, Berry, Hurson, & Brennan, 1996) and have revealed high degrees of sameness, similarity, congruence of meaning and generalizability across all of the studies (Hamlin, Ellinger, & Beattie, 2006).

Additional studies examining facilitative learning behaviors (Powell & Doran, 2003) and managerial coaching behaviors (Shaw & Knights, 2005) and Amy (2005) have offered support for the behavioral findings that have previously emerged in the Ellinger and Beattie studies. In addition to these studies, a recent focus group based study by Longenecker and Neubert (2005) examined the practices junior managers considered to be critical for senior managers to employ.
when implementing coaching as a performance improvement strategy. Their findings consisted of ten practices that these junior managers wanted in a coach: clarify what results/performance outcomes are desired; provide honest, ongoing balanced performance feedback; impact feedback based upon an accurate assessment of performance; know the junior manager’s strengths and weaknesses; offer expert advice on performance improvement; develop a working relationship based on mutual benefit and trust; understand the context, pressure, and demands of a junior manager’s job; support the junior manager in solving work problems; help the junior manager prioritize and stay focused; and, create accountability for performance improvement. These practices, derived from 225 managers in 45 focus groups hold promise for more deeply considering coaching skills and potentially effective behaviors and are remarkably similar to those behaviors identified by previous managerial coaching research.

**Coachees’ Perceptions and Reactions to Managerial Coaching.** To assess subordinates’ perceptions of managerial coaching behavior, Mills (1986) used twenty-five items relating to coaching practices adapted from The Checklist of Individual Coaching Practices (Mahler & Wrightnour, 1973). Subordinates’ perceptions of their managers’ coaching behaviors included five factors: development of the individual, work environment, attributes of the coach, task assignment, and information sharing. Analysis of factor means suggested that managers were perceived by their subordinates as sometimes or seldom using certain coaching practices. Findings supported earlier research by Mahler and Wrightnour that “few managers hold formal coaching interviews with their subordinates” (Mills, 1986, p. 115). More recent survey-based research by Ellinger, Ellinger and Keller (2003) to assess the prevalence of supervisory coaching behaviors from the perspectives of both supervisors and their respective subordinates also revealed similar findings. The mean scores for employees suggested that they perceived their supervisors to be providing low to moderate coaching behavior, whereas the supervisors perceived that they were providing relatively high levels of coaching behavior to their employees. In Morgeson’s (2005) empirical study on external leadership of self-managing teams, findings suggested that leaders’ preparation and supportive coaching were positively related to subordinates’ perceptions of leader effectiveness.

**Contextual Factors Influencing Managerial Coaching.** Scholars have acknowledged that creating a culture of coaching is important to promote managerial coaching behaviors (Evered & Selman, 1989). However, empirical research exploring such contextual influences has been limited with regard to managerial coaching. Beattie’s (2006) study provides insight into some of these issues based upon her research in the social service sector. She acknowledged that environmental factors such as political, economic, societal, and technological trends influenced the management framework and learning needs within the two organizations she studied. In terms of the organizational influences, she identified history, mission and strategy, structure, and culture as impacting the context for managerial coaching. Specifically, in these organizations, the aspirations to become learning organizations contributed to line managers’ roles as coaches and developers. In terms of human resource development strategy, the provision of training for managers to assume developmental roles by supporting their learning needs was also a critical influence.

**Outcomes of Managerial Coaching for Coachees, Coaches, and the Organization.** As a performance improvement strategy, it is often assumed that coaching positively impacts individual and team performance. For example, research has suggested that specific coaching behaviors have been directly correlated with net increases in sales (Graham, Wedman & Garvin-Kester, 1994). Other research has suggested that improvements in systems, cost savings,
and knowledge sharing may be directly attributed to coaching interventions when managers serve as coaches for individuals or teams of employees (Ellinger, 2003). Yet, beyond these studies, research that examines the linkages between managerial coaching behavior and individual, team, and organizational performance improvement is relatively scarce and Yukl (1994) has acknowledged that “empirical research on the effects of coaching…by managers is still very limited” (p. 125). Thus, while scholars suggest that the benefits of coaching are enormous and associated with producing long-lasting learning, contributing to high levels of motivation, and improving and enhancing employee performance, working relationships, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, (HR Focus, 2001; Redshaw, 2000), overall, limited empirical research has been conducted that has examined the impact of managers’ coaching behaviors on performance outcomes (Ellinger, 2003; Yukl, 1994). Findings based upon managers’ perceptions of the outcomes of their coaching has indicated that learners benefit from coaching interventions by developing skills and knowledge, and managers themselves also benefit from serving as coaches through strengthening relationships with their employees, learning about their employees and themselves in the process (Ellinger, 2003). More recent research by Shaw and Knights (2005) suggests that introducing a coaching style as a preferred leadership style within a small to medium sized enterprise resulted in enhanced knowledge and potential growth, along with improved communications and interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, the coaching initiative increased awareness of different leadership styles and general self-awareness and impact on others.

**Development of a Tentative Model of Managerial Coaching**

Based upon the review of limited empirical research on managerial coaching, the integration of the aforementioned key findings has enabled us to develop a tentative model of managerial coaching. While this model requires testing and further elaboration, it represents a foundation upon which to build a more comprehensive understanding of managerial coaching and the factors that may influence it and be influenced by such a developmental intervention.
Implications for Practice and Research

Conceptual, practitioner-oriented literature, and limited empirical research have acknowledged that managerial coaching provides benefits associated with both organizational effectiveness and individuals’ performance improvement and learning. However, as some scholars suggest, in practice, supervisors’ and managers’ involvement in employee development may be more rhetoric than reality (Hall & Torrington, 1998; Longenecker & Neubert, 2005; McGovern et al., 1997; Mills, 1986; Thornhill & Saunders, 1998; Yarnall, 1998). While supervisors and managers may appear to recognize the importance of the coaching role, scholars have suggested that short-term demands on line managers, time pressures, lack of rewards or recognition for assuming development roles, confusion about their roles, lack of an organizational climate...
conducive to coaching, and lack of skills and competencies may be barriers that impeded supervisors and managers from serving as managerial coaches (Beattie, 2006; Ellinger, Ellinger & Keller, 2003; Goleman, 2000; Honey, 1995; Hunt & Weintraub, 2002, Hyman & Cunningham, 1998; McLean, Yang, Kuo, Tolbert, & Larkin, 2005; Peterson & Little, 2005; Talarico, 2002). Hence, from a pragmatic perspective, this paper examines the process of effective managerial coaching and the factors and variables that have been linked to effective managerial coaching and proposes a tentative model.

In summary, despite the growing popularity of managerial and supervisory coaching as an important approach for facilitating employees’ learning and development, the base of empirical research still remains relatively underdeveloped. We believe that the development of this tentative conceptual model for managerial coaching that includes managerial beliefs about coaching, coaches’ self-efficacy, catalysts for coaching, coaching skills, coaching behaviors, coachees’ perceptions, and outcomes associated with managerial coaching may serve as a reference point that stimulates future research in this area. Moreover, the environmental factors and organizational contextual factors that may influence managerial coaching have also been identified in this tentative model as issues that need to be further explicated in future research on managerial coaching.

References


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