



THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE EXECUTIVE COACHING IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract:

This study explores the impact of one-on-one online executive coaching on developing active listening skills and leadership effectiveness. Given the increasing complexity of leadership roles in the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) business environment, engaging in effective communication and active listening has become a fundamental skill for executives. The research is based on a four-month coaching intervention with a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in the energy infrastructure sector, utilizing structured exercises and assessments to track progress.

A two-category framework was developed to evaluate the impact of non-verbal communication and verbal communication traits on leadership effectiveness. The results indicate significant improvements across all dimensions of active listening, with particularly strong development in the category of verbal communication.

Moreover, the study underscores the effectiveness of online coaching, facilitated through Microsoft Teams, in delivering comparable, if not superior, results to traditional in-person coaching. The findings align with existing research demonstrating that virtual coaching enhances accessibility, flexibility, and scalability without compromising impact.

Overall, this study confirms that online executive coaching is an essential component of leadership development strategies, fostering stronger team engagement, problem-solving capabilities, and organizational effectiveness.

Keywords:

Executive Coaching, Online Coaching, Active Listening, Leadership Development, Microsoft Teams.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals continuously advance in their professional careers through role transitions, promotions, or shifts across different sectors. Each new position necessitates the acquisition of a diverse set of competencies that must be effectively developed [1]. Moreover, while formal education provides the foundational qualifications required for employment, it does not comprehensively equip individuals with the specialized skills essential for various professional roles. The concept of lifelong learning [2] has become increasingly relevant in contemporary professional environments, reflecting the necessity for continuous knowledge acquisition and personal development to meet the evolving demands of the modern workforce.

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Education plays a crucial role in shaping both individuals and society, facilitating the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes through a complex web of interactions that fosters personal growth and active participation in the community [3]. In recent years, one area of professional education that has gained considerable attention is coaching [4]. Coaching can be described as a systematic process designed to assist individuals in achieving their goals, improving skills, and unlocking their potential through reflective dialogue and structured guidance [5]. This method serves as a valuable addition to traditional education, providing personalized opportunities for both personal and professional development, tailored to individual needs and aspirations [6]. It is most commonly applied in organizational contexts, with two main goals: (a) improving job performance and (b) offering career development support [7].

Coaching has become increasingly widespread and is now accessible not only to senior executives but also to a broader range of employees within organizations. In many cases, individuals may benefit from discussions with colleagues, friends, or mentors, as these interactions can provide new perspectives, facilitate problem-solving, and boost confidence in taking proactive steps toward personal or professional goals. Such engagements can be regarded as informal coaching sessions, characterized by their straightforward nature, which involves active listening, asking insightful questions, and refraining from offering prescriptive advice on resolving specific challenges.

Despite appearing straightforward, effective coaching is a structured discipline requiring formal training. While providing advice is a natural human tendency, professional coaching demands rigorous education and certification from reputable institutions. With the exponential growth of the coaching profession [4], the quality of training and accreditation has become crucial. Leading international organizations, such as the International Coach Federation (ICF), the Professional Coaches and Mentors Association (PCMA), and the Worldwide Association for Business Coaches (WABC), set the standard for coaching excellence, offering certification programs designed to ensure competency and ethical practice [8].

1.1. THE EVOLUTION OF EXECUTIVE AND ONLINE COACHING

Among the earliest and most established coaching models is executive coaching, which primarily targets senior leaders tasked with high-stakes decision-making. Executive coaching has gained widespread acceptance in corporate environments due to its potential to increase productivity by over 40% and generate a median return on investment (ROI) of 788% [9]. Traditionally, coaching sessions were conducted onsite and face-to-face, emphasizing direct interpersonal engagement. However, technological advancements and the growing need for flexibility have led to the increasing adoption of online coaching, a modality that offers equivalent, if not greater, effectiveness compared to in-person methods [10].

Empirical studies suggest that online coaching delivers outcomes comparable to traditional face-to-face coaching. A meta-analysis conducted by Theeboom et al. [11] demonstrated that virtual coaching interventions significantly enhance goal attainment, self-efficacy, and workplace performance, with no statistically significant difference between online and in-person formats. Additionally, Lindner et al. [10] found that online coaching fosters behavioral change and cognitive restructuring in ways that align with or even exceed the efficacy of traditional coaching models.

1.2. MICROSOFT TEAMS AS A PLATFORM FOR ONLINE COACHING

The integration of digital platforms into coaching practices has expanded accessibility, improved scheduling flexibility, and enabled seamless documentation of progress. Microsoft Teams is one of the most widely utilized platforms for virtual communication, offering a comprehensive suite of features tailored for professional development. The platform facilitates high-quality video conferencing, real-time chat, document sharing, and collaborative tools, creating an immersive coaching environment [12].

Key advantages of Microsoft Teams for online coaching include:

- session recording and note-sharing that enables the coachee to revisit discussions and track progress;
- breakout rooms, which allow for individualized coaching within group settings;
- Integration with productivity tools that support goal-setting through OneNote, Planner, and task management features;



- Cross-device accessibility that ensures uninterrupted participation from multiple locations.

In this case, the adoption of online coaching via the Microsoft Teams platform has transformed our leadership development intervention, making the coaching process more scalable, cost-effective, and easily affordable for both parties (i.e., coach and coachee).

1.3. LEADERSHIP, EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, AND ACTIVE LISTENING

Leadership is the ability to influence teams toward shared objectives, requiring a combination of visionary thinking, emotional intelligence, and decision-making skills. According to Northouse [13], leadership is defined as a process by which an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal, emphasizing the interplay between influence, goal setting, and team dynamics. Contemporary leadership paradigms emphasize emotional intelligence (EI) as a crucial determinant of leaders' effectiveness. Goleman [14] claims that leaders with high EI demonstrate superior stress management, decision-making, and team cohesion, underlining the necessity of active listening as an EI-enhancing competency.

Active listening enables leaders to interpret verbal and nonverbal cues, fostering empathy as one of the core dimensions of emotional intelligence. Research highlights that executives who undergo structured coaching programs incorporating active listening techniques report measurable improvements in team engagement, collaboration, and workplace morale [15]. Online coaching platforms further augment this development by facilitating interactive exercises, feedback loops, and asynchronous learning opportunities.

This paper aims to provide an in-depth analysis of active listening as a critical leadership skill, examined through the lens of coaching as a leading professional education method. Additionally, it will explore the role of digital coaching solutions in enhancing leadership effectiveness, particularly in the context of an increasingly virtual and globalized business environment.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of an organization that plays a significant role in the energy infrastructure sector. As a condition for publishing this paper, both the company and its CEO have been kept confidential. The company employs around 1,000 people and was established with the primary goal of meeting the needs of the energy industry, particularly in the areas of energy infrastructure development and maintenance.

The focal point of this study is the CEO (the coachee), a middle-aged man who has been with the company for 16 years and manages a team of 17 direct reports, predominantly consisting of directors. In 2023, the CEO initiated efforts to improve the development of his leadership team by conducting a 360-degree feedback survey through an external firm. The survey results, based on feedback from his direct reports, revealed concerns about his communication style, which was perceived as significantly inadequate. In response to this feedback, the CEO decided to work with a professional coach to facilitate the necessary improvements. Following an initial one-on-one session, it was determined that improving the CEO's active listening abilities would be the most effective way to enhance his communication and, consequently, his leadership.

During the initial coaching sessions, an assessment of the current situation was made, and goals for the future were established. Due to the coachee's frequent business trips, the sessions were conducted remotely every week, with occasional in-person meetings, over four months. The coach utilized the widely adopted GROW model, which includes four distinct stages that guide the coaching process [16, 17].

- *G (Goal)*. The main objective was to enhance the coachee's communication by focusing on the improvement of active listening skills.
- *R (Reality)*. To evaluate the current level of coachee competence and subsequent improvements resulting from the coaching process, 9 key criteria were established through a questionnaire designed to appraise active listening skills. The coachee was observed and evaluated in various regular situations while leading discussions with direct reports, using the rating format of the Mixed Standard Scale (MSS): below standard (score "1" in table), at standard (score "2"), and above standard (score "3") [18].



- *O (Option)*. A range of practical exercises was identified to strengthen the coachee's active listening skills, which were then incorporated into their everyday activities. Detailed descriptions of these exercises are provided later in the paper.
- *W (Will)*. The coachee's drive to progress was sustained through clear and actionable steps. It was essential for the coachee to consistently follow through with the exercises provided by the coach. Consequently, most coaching sessions were held online.

To evaluate the improvements in active listening skills throughout the process, the Harvard self-assessment questionnaire was used. This questionnaire consists of 13 questions that evaluate active listening skills. Although it is a self-assessment tool, the coach used it to evaluate the coachee's improvements at the beginning and end of the coaching process, based on a simple evaluation of whether certain behaviors are demonstrated always, sometimes, or rarely [19].

The nature of the criteria evaluation and sample size directed the methodology used for data analysis. The statistical software used in this research was SPSS version 29.0 [20]. A set of 9 evaluation criteria was further arranged into two distinct categories, namely non-verbal and verbal communication. Statistical hypothesis testing is an essential tool for inferential statistics that enables researchers to make informed decisions about population parameters based on sample statistics. One common hypothesis test used in this study for comparing two sample means is the Two-Sample Z-test, which proves more precise than the T-test, providing that standard deviations are known from previous research. Dyrbye et al. [21] reported standard deviation of pre-coaching was between 0.29 (29%) to 0.33 (33%), while post-coaching standard deviation was between 0.33 (33%) and 0.34 (34%). As a final result of analysis researcher is presented with the *p-value* that shows the significance of the observed differences between variables, based on the statistical evidence.

The initial exercises were designed with a progressive approach, starting with simpler tasks that gradually increased in complexity to reinforce prior learning and skill development. One such exercise involved a memory challenge, where a sequence of 15 words was spoken aloud to the coachee, who was then required to remember and repeat them after a specified time interval. This task was specifically aimed at strengthening active listening, improving concentration, and enhancing memory retention, all of which are crucial for sustained attention in professional interactions.

To further reinforce these cognitive abilities, the coachee was assigned a meditation-based focus exercise as part of independent practice between coaching sessions [22]. This technique required directing attention to a single object for a short duration, with the initial goal of maintaining focus for one minute. Upon successful completion, the duration was incrementally extended by one minute each day. This gradual increase aimed to cultivate sustained attention, enhance cognitive control, and support overall mental resilience, which are essential attributes for effective leadership and communication.

The next exercise incorporated the use of narratives with illogical patterns and an absence of clear connections [23]. The coachee was exposed to three to four such narratives and was required to retain as many details as possible to respond accurately to a series of complex follow-up questions. This exercise was designed to challenge conventional cognitive processing by encouraging engagement with non-linear and abstract thinking patterns. Research suggests that children tend to approach problem-solving with a greater degree of creativity and open-mindedness, whereas adults, shaped by societal norms and cognitive conditioning, often rely on structured and analytical reasoning, which can constrain innovative capacity [24]. By participating in imaginative and unconventional exercises, the coachee was able to re-engage cognitive processes associated with creative problem-solving, resembling the flexible thinking exhibited in childhood.

To develop the ability to paraphrase and avoid interruptions, specific exercises were implemented. Tangram puzzles require the coachee to manipulate geometric shapes to construct a final image representing recognizable objects, such as a house or aircraft. Throughout this exercise, the coach offered spoken guidance, guiding the coachee in putting together the designated figure while holding the reference image. In an unguided image creation exercise, the coachee received a sequence of step-by-step verbal instructions to draw various shapes but without access to the final visual reference. This approach necessitated active engagement in seeking clarifications, accurately paraphrasing directives, and demonstrating patience while awaiting additional guidance.

All activities carried out were intentionally crafted to improve the coachee's attentiveness and mental agility, emphasizing the value of integrating creative tasks into executive coaching as a way of promoting leadership growth.



3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the process of coaching continued, early results started to emerge. The initial exercise, a memory game, showed significant advancements in cognitive retention. Initially, when the coachee was presented with a set of 15 randomly selected words with no logical associations, he was able to recall only 6 to 7 terms. However, with continued practice, his performance significantly improved, ultimately reaching 12 to 13 accurately recalled words. These findings align with research indicating that structured memory training enhances working memory capacity and cognitive flexibility [25].

Daily meditation practices also played a significant role in achieving positive results. With each session, the meditation duration was progressively increased by 1 to 2 minutes, leading to enhanced concentration and sustained attention. Prior studies have shown that mindfulness-based meditation strengthens attentional control and improves cognitive performance, supporting the observed improvements in the coachee's ability to maintain focus during tasks [26].

This subsequently increased cognitive focus, which resulted in measurable progress in the illogical stories exercise. Initially, the coachee provided only 1 to 2 correct answers, but after several weeks of consistent practice, his accuracy increased to 6 to 7 correct responses. This progress can be attributed to the coachee's improved capacity to transcend traditional logical limitations, thereby activating the right hemisphere of the brain, which is linked to creativity and intuitive thinking. Research confirms that engaging in tasks that require unconventional problem-solving activates right-hemispheric brain functions, fostering greater cognitive flexibility and creative thinking [27].

These findings underscore the effectiveness of integrating memory training, meditation, and creative problem-solving exercises into executive coaching, facilitating both cognitive and leadership development.

After four months of continuous one-on-one online coaching, a comprehensive assessment was conducted to evaluate improvements in the coachee's workplace communication with direct reports, external clients, and partners. The results are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Coaching results for active listening skills

Category	Evaluation criteria	Before the coaching process	After the coaching process	Description of improvements
Non-verbal communication	Eye contact	2	3	Longer and more confident eye contact, avoiding gaze aversion that enhances connection and credibility in communication.
	Body language	2	3	Use open and relaxed gestures, avoid closed posture cues, thereby appearing more approachable and engaged.
	Non-verbal cues	1	2	Improved recognition of non-verbals from interlocutors and adjusts facial expressions and movements to convey understanding and empathy.
	Demonstrating interest	1	2	Actively nods, uses affirming expressions such as "I understand" and "Yes, I agree," and maintains an engaged facial expression.
Verbal communication	Seeking clarification	1	2	Asks additional questions when information is unclear and verifies understanding before responding or concluding.
	Relevant Questions	1	3	Asks clear, open-ended questions that encourage the interlocutor to participate, in contrast to the previous period when all of his questions were closed-ended.
	Paraphrasing	1	2	Actively uses paraphrasing in conversation, framing sentences with "If I understand you correctly..." and conveying understanding in her own words.
	Avoiding interruptions	1	2	Consciously refrains from interrupting the speaker, patiently listens before responding, demonstrating greater respect for others' perspectives.
	Summarizing	2	2	Summarize the key points of the discussion, taking notes in a notebook.



By inspecting Table 1, significant progress in the development of the coachee's active listening skills can be observed after the completion of the coaching process. Two categories defined in our study (non-verbal and verbal communication) are statistically significantly different in favor of after-coaching. Verbal communication traits show a stronger increase of 83.33% (with statistical significance of $p=0,006$) versus non-verbal communication traits of 66.67% (with statistical significance of 0,015). This can be explained by the fact that exercises conducted through coaching were mainly aimed at improving verbal communication skills.

Beyond communication improvements, the coaching process created a ripple effect throughout the organization, yielding key leadership enhancements, observed by the organization's owners and other team members.

- *Building trust and engagement.* Strengthened non-verbal communication helped foster a more transparent and open leadership style, increasing team morale.
- *Problem-solving facilitation.* The shift towards coaching-based inquiry enabled deeper discussions, encouraging proactive decision-making.
- *Delegation and accountability.* A more structured communication approach clarified expectations, empowering employees and reducing operational inefficiencies.
- *Leadership modeling.* By demonstrating active listening and structured communication, the coachee set a new behavioral standard, reinforcing a culture of collaboration.

The four-month online coaching intervention resulted in substantial improvements in the coachee's communication effectiveness, particularly in verbal engagement. These enhancements directly influenced leadership performance, fostering a more collaborative, transparent, and high-performing work environment. The findings underscore the critical role of structured online coaching in leadership development, providing a scalable and effective approach to improving executive communication skills.

4 CONCLUSION

This research highlights the essential impact of professional education techniques, especially executive coaching, on boosting leadership effectiveness. The deliberate cultivation of active listening skills leads to enhanced communication, stronger interpersonal relationships, and improved team dynamics—key elements of effective leadership [13], [14]. By incorporating coaching strategies into professional development, organizations can provide leaders with the skills needed to manage complex interpersonal dynamics and promote long-term team success.

In today's VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) business world, the capacity for effective communication through active listening is becoming more crucial—not just for individual leadership growth but also for driving overall team success. As the idea of continuous learning gains momentum, professional development methods like coaching have proven essential for shaping adaptive and impactful leaders in the fast-evolving workplace [10].

The evolution of digital communication tools has contributed to the growing acceptance and effectiveness of online coaching. Recent empirical studies indicate that virtual coaching yields comparable and, in some cases, even superior results to traditional in-person coaching, particularly in terms of accessibility, scheduling flexibility, and scalability [4], [11]. The integration of digital platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, has facilitated seamless interactions between coaches and coachees, ensuring continuity in leadership development regardless of geographical constraints [12].

This study confirms that executive coaching, both online and in-person, has become an indispensable component of leadership development strategies. As organizations continue to embrace digital transformation, online coaching is positioned to play an increasingly prominent role in shaping future leaders. The findings reinforce the idea that effective coaching is not determined by the medium through which it is delivered but by the quality of interaction, structured methodology, and the commitment of both coach and coachee.



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