SA Journal of Human Resource Management
ISSN: (Online) 2071-078X, (Print) 1683-7584

A guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting in executive coaching

Authors:
Zelda Burger[1,2]
Salome van Coller-Peter[2]

Affiliations:
[1]Montage Leadership Development, Durban, South Africa

[2]University of Stellenbosch Business School, Stellenbosch University, Cape Town, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Zelda Burger,
zelda@montageleadership.co.za

Dates:
Received: 13 Aug. 2018
Accepted: 25 Feb. 2019
Published: 19 Sept. 2019

How to cite this article:
Burger, Z., & Van Coller-Peter, S. (2019). A guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting in executive coaching. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur, 17*(0), a1114. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v17i0.1114

Copyright:
© 2019. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:
Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Orientation: Multi-stakeholder contracting provides a platform for the coaching stakeholders: the individual being coached (client), the organisation (sponsor and line manager) and the coach for achieving aligned outcomes within executive coaching. Contracting is not optimally implemented by stakeholders in all three phases of executive coaching (commencement, execution and conclusion).

Research purpose: The research's purpose was to develop a guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting in each of the three phases of coaching.

Motivation for the study: Stakeholders ensure outcomes achievement for the individual and the organisation in executive coaching. Limited research exists relating to the contractual elements and practices implemented by stakeholders during the three phases of coaching.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative, inductive, exploratory approach using purposive sampling was used to identify 12 participants, consisting of three: executive coaches, clients, line managers and sponsors from three corporate organisations. Participants were interviewed using a customised interview guide categorised into the three coaching phases.

Main findings: Findings showed that contracting was included at the commencement coaching phase. The study indicated the advantages of contracting in all three coaching phases with all stakeholders emphasising phase-specific accountabilities.

Practical/managerial implications: A guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting for each of the three phases of coaching could assist stakeholders; in particular human resource practitioners when contracting for executive coaching.

Contribution/value-add: Outcomes alignment at the commencement phase, agreement on progress and results feedback during the execution and conclusion phases are enabled by implementing the guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting offered by this research.

Keywords: executive coaching; multi-stakeholder contracting; three-way session; three-and four-cornered meeting.

Introduction

Problem statement

Key focus

Contracting challenges in the three phases of executive coaching impact outcomes alignment among stakeholders and the support from the line manager (Ogilvy & Ellam-Dyson, 2012) and sponsor (Lee & Frisch, 2015). This, in turn, affects the learning experience of the client, which could yield unsatisfactory coaching outcomes for both individual and organisation (Kombarakaran, Baker, Yang, & Fernandes, 2008). Multi-stakeholder contracting is effective for aligning outcomes and agreeing progress feedback and results reporting. However, limited research exists pertaining to the contractual elements and practices implemented by coaching stakeholders in the three phases of executive coaching. This research presents a guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting for implementation by coaching stakeholders at commencement, execution and conclusion phases of executive coaching.

Background

According to the International Coach Federation (ICF) 2016 Global Coaching Study, the coaching industry continues to demonstrate growth as a response to workplace demands (De Haan, 2008; De Meuse, Dai & Lee, 2009; Joo, 2005; Maritz, 2013; Turner & Hawkins, 2016). Hence, the coaching

industry needs to be serving both the individual and the organisation in ways that demonstrate clear value (Schlosser, Steinbrenner, Kumata, & Hunt, 2007).

The coach is faced with the challenge of achieving the goals set by the coaching client and the organisation represented by the line manager and sponsor (Khan, 2014; Stout-Rostron, 2014). This challenge, namely, the 'duality of client' role of the coach (Kahn, 2014), correlates with the systemic perspective of coaching (Drinnan & Hutson, 2007; Koortzen & Oosthuizen, 2010; O'Neill, 2000), where the coaching is delivered within the team and organisational systems (Stout-Rostron, 2012). This is supported by Kilburg (2000), who describes executive coaching as a helping relationship, assisting the client to achieve mutually identified goals, to improve professional performance and personal satisfaction and to improve the effectiveness of the organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement.

Multi-stakeholder contracting is presented in the literature and in this study as a solution to the 'duality of client' challenge of the coach. Multi-stakeholder contracting is defined as a contracting engagement involving the coach who provides the service, the client who receives the coaching and the organisation that pays for the coaching (Clutterbuck, 2015; Sherman & Freas, 2004; Stout-Rostron, 2014; Turner & Hawkins, 2016). Multi-stakeholder contracting is effective when all contractual elements receive the uncoerced agreement of the client, coach and organisation (Fielder & Starr, 2008; Sherman & Freas, 2004). Despite the benefits of multi-stakeholder contracting in executive coaching, limited research has been produced the last few years (Fillery-Travis, 2015; Stern & Stout-Rostron, 2013).

Research objectives

The question this study asks is: 'What contracting elements and practices should be included in a guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting covering the three phases of executive coaching: commencement, execution and conclusion?' To answer this question, the following research objectives were formalised: to identify what the initial contracting processes between executive coaches, clients, line managers and sponsors comprise; to determine what the contracting in the coach-client-line manager relationship regarding involvement and support consist of; to identify what the contracting for progress feedback between the four stakeholders comprise; and lastly to determine what contracting for results reporting and closeout between the four stakeholders comprise.

Contribution to the field of executive coaching

The worldwide demand for high-quality coaching (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Stern & Stout-Rostron, 2013) has encouraged multi-stakeholder contracting in organisational settings worldwide (Turner & Hawkins, 2016), yet research in this area is limited. In fact, the entire process of contracting is probably the most neglected area of coaching practice (Stout-Rostron, 2014). The limited research in multi-stakeholder contracting is amplified by the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches' (WABC) white paper on contracting, stipulating that the increased use of coaching in corporate contexts has created an urgent need for accountability and clearer contracts (Fillery-Travis, 2015). A review of 263 journal articles on coaching research, conducted between 2008 and 2012, found that contracting had less than 20 studies recorded and was therefore identified as one of the focus areas in need of research (Stern & Stout-Rostron, 2013).

Literature review

The theoretical underpinnings of this research consist of contracting as an executive coaching practice focused on contractual guidelines from coaching organisations and literature, emphasising three-cornered (client-coach-line manager) and four-cornered (client–coach–line manager-sponsor) contracting practices. This section reviews current research, views and practices, and discusses the significance of the contracting challenges for coaching stakeholders and the limited research in multi-stakeholder contracting.

Contractual guidelines from coaching organisations and literature

The importance of contracting is emphasised by coaching organisations such as the International Coach Federation (ICF), the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (WABC), Association of Coaching (AC) and Coaches and Mentors South Africa (COMENSA, 2016). These organisations provide member guidelines in their core competencies, code of ethics and professional standards for developing a coaching agreement, contracting confidentiality and other contractual elements. The WABC commissioned multi-stakeholder contracting research in 2014, which reviewed contractual elements identified by professional coaching organisations (ICF, EMCC, WABC, 2016) and communities of practice as the most critical. Contractual elements identified as most critical were accountability, confidentiality, and organisational and individual goal attainment (Turner & Hawkins, 2016).

A systemic approach when contracting would benefit goal attainment for stakeholders because clients require approaches that recognise the multiple systems of which they are part of (Fillery-Travis, 2015; O'Neil, 2000; Sherman & Freas, 2004). Key systemic factors to consider when setting up the coaching contract are (1) business results to be achieved; (2) leadership behaviours to be exhibited and (3) team communication and staff dynamics required to achieve the desired result (O'Neil, 2007 cited by Fillery-Travis, 2015).

It is evident that contracts should acknowledge the complex, systemic and qualitative aspects of coaching. As long as the coach, client and organisation have an understanding that stakeholder rights will be maintained regardless of differences in stakeholder interests, the contract will remain essential to the coaching relationship (Drinnan & Hutson, 2007; Fielder & Starr, 2008).

In summary, significant theory and different contracting approaches exist in executive coaching, which illustrate the complexity in achieving individual and organisational aligned outcomes. Stakeholder involvement ensures alignment of outcomes, which brings synergy, creates wealth, sustains the future of the organisation and provides meaning and purpose for all involved (Van Coller-Peter, 2015). The two most prominent systemic contracting practices in executive coaching are three- and four-cornered contracting involving all four coaching stakeholders in all three phases of executive coaching.

Three- and four-cornered contracting

Reaching explicit three-cornered (client-coach-line manager) and four-cornered (client-coach-line manager-sponsor) contracting agreements pertaining to goals, measures and accountabilities brings the stakeholders into alignment (Fakalata & Wiete, 2012; Sherman & Freas, 2004), which is key to the success of the coaching intervention (Lee & Frisch, 2015, p. 9). Contracting conversations should therefore be explicit, candid debates addressing boundaries of confidentiality and defined accountabilities for each stakeholder (Hay, 2011; Pomerantz & Eiting, 2004).

Three-cornered contracting

Firstly, a three-cornered contracting agreement is reliant on the client–coach relationship, which is determined by their connection, their collaboration and their mutual commitment to the process (Ting & Hart, 2004, cited by Baron & Morin, 2009). The first contracting conversation is the 'chemistry session', which is a coach-client exchange determining the feasibility of a potential working relationship. Following a positive 'chemistry session', a coaching agreement is developed, addressing the key points of the coaching engagement (Stout-Rostron, 2012), such as goals of the coaching (Lee & Frisch, 2015), estimated resources required, time and confidentiality commitment, and assessment methods to be used (Thach, 2002). In addition, the goal setting methodology, the client's willingness and effort towards achieving the goals and systemic feedback from the client's environment should also be included in the contract.

Secondly, a three-cornered contracting agreement is dependent on line manager involvement in the three-way coaching sessions with the coach and client, which enhances the line manager's understanding of the coaching process and its impact (Schlosser, Steinbrenner, Kumata, & Hunt 2006; Sherman & Freas, 2004). Client line manager feedback conversations provide targeted conversation regarding outcomes and a conducive context for clarifying expectations (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). The perspective of the line manager needs to be heard and brought into the process of outcome measurement (Schlosser et al., 2007). Coaching programme administrators, such as human resources, need to elicit and sustain line manager participation in coaching programmes because their involvement suggests a better return on investment (Kombarakaran et al., 2008).

Four-cornered contracting

A four-cornered contracting agreement between the coach, client, line manager and sponsor *is* an effective start to the contracting process because it clarifies roles and accountabilities, sets confidentiality boundaries, explains goal setting, agrees on goal areas, determines the format and frequency of progress feedback and results reporting, and agrees on client support (Ogilvy & Ellam-Dyson, 2012). The four-cornered contracting agreement aligns the outcome requirement of the organisation and the outcome delivery by the coaching intervention (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009). Successful contracting is therefore customising to the coaching stakeholders' requirements (Bennett, 2008; Fillery-Travis, 2015).

Building contractual structures around the coaching programme that clarify expectations, accountability and feedback mechanisms is essential for the achievement of coaching outcomes and illustrates the organisation's investment in the professional growth of the individual (Fakalata & Wiete, 2012; Walsh, 2016). Coaching is a time-intensive and expensive engagement and organisations should insist on regular and formal progress reviews starting in the first third of the coaching engagement (Kauffman & Coutu, 2009; Lee & Frisch, 2015). Insufficient contracting between the coach, client, line manager and sponsor can create misaligned outcomes and expectations, which may compromise the success of the coaching intervention.

The challenge is to continuously refine a methodology to measure coaching impact and assess value that meets the needs of all the stakeholders (Schlosser et al., 2006). Organisations should be committed to coaching clients to grow, and senior management needs to be invested in the engagement (Fakalata & Wiete, 2012; Kauffman & Coutu, 2009). An open organisational culture and support from within the organisation are considered to be critical for the success of executive coaching (Walker-Fraser, 2011). Readiness for change is an important consideration, regardless of whether it applies to the client or the organisation, as it concerns resisting change or being motivated to be pulled in different directions within the organisational system (Drinnan & Hutson, 2007).

It is evident from the literature that multi-stakeholder contracting could assist with achieving an aligned outcome for the individual and organisational in executive coaching; however, limited research has been conducted on the implementation of contracting practices by stakeholders in each of the three phases of executive coaching.

Research design

Research approach

The qualitative, inductive and exploratory study captured the essence of the actions of the participants within their contexts (Babbie & Mouton, 2014; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Bryman & Bell, 2007) and was appropriate for examining complex research such as multi-stakeholder contracting.

Research method

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used on the basis of knowledge of the population (multiple coaching stakeholders) and the research aim and objectives (Babbie & Mouton, 2014). The research aim was to develop a guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting within the three phases of executive coaching: commencement, execution and conclusion.

The sample consisted of three executive coaches, three clients, three line managers and three sponsors from three different corporate organisations. Three executive coaches, co-attendees of the researcher's coaching supervision group, were approached by the researcher and invited as study participants. Following their consent, the three coaches each selected and approached one client, line manager and sponsor as potential study participants from one corporate client organisation they had delivered coaching to. Twelve participants consented and were interviewed within their organisational clusters, respectively, to take cognisance of the multi-stakeholder dynamics and organisational context.

Participant selection criteria were as follows:

- *Executive coaches* who were professionally qualified, worked in corporate contexts and used multi-stakeholder contracting elements and practices in their stakeholder relationships during the three phases of the coaching intervention.
- *Coaching clients* who had completed a coaching intervention of more than eight sessions with an executive coach and who had experienced and participated in contracting interactions with a coach, line manager and/or sponsor during the three phases of the coaching intervention.
- *Line managers and sponsors* who had experienced and participated in contracting interactions with a coach and coaching client during the three phases of the coaching intervention.

Data collection methods

Primary data were generated by conducting 1-hour individual interviews with 12 participants. Ten face-to-face and two Skype interviews were conducted over a 3-week period. Interviews as a data collection method were effective in eliciting participants' experiences relating to multi-stakeholder contracting in the three phases of executive coaching. A customised interview guide was used for the three participant group interviews, based on the research aim and objectives. The seven stages of Kvale (1996, cited by Babbie & Mouton, 2014) were followed for the interview process. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed with participant consent, followed by participant checking and transcription analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis, a form of qualitative analysis, was used to identify and analyse patterns in the qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The six-step thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse interview transcriptions, and to select reoccurring, prominent and/or relevant categories. This was followed by coding, category grouping and theme selection. The themes were compared to the research aim and objectives assisting with sense making of the findings and comparing reality with the theoretical perspectives presented in the literature review.

Findings

According to the three executive coaching phases (commencement, execution and conclusion), the findings from the analysis of the 12 interviews with coaches (A, B, C), clients (A, B, C), line managers (A, B, C) and sponsors (A, B, C) were grouped into themes. The themes created context for the most prominent contracting elements and practices identified in each of the three phases.

Commencement phase

The commencement phase contains three themes, as summarised in Table 1.

Organisational objective and initial contracting

Overall, the client and coach findings indicated that they found the buy-in and support from senior management encouraging and motivational. According to Client A, the pre-coaching programme provided context, a sense of certainty and trust in the coaching. Client B shared his organisation's culture of investing in his development, and Client C was inspired by the organisation's ability to improve leadership skills.

Sponsor findings indicated that the coaching had a specific organisational objective to be achieved, which supported coaching's systemic perspective:

> 'The leadership development programme is about stepping into your own leadership. Clients are delegates on the programme where they design their own leadership philosophy which they continually update through the coaching.' (Sponsor B, female, human resources executive)

In a similar manner, Sponsor A noted that their leadership development was aimed at transforming behaviour and client engagement philosophy and that leadership had to transform from a matriarchal to a collaborative, adaptive and coaching management style. Sponsor C's organisation was engaged in cultural, team and value integration interventions and coaching was one of the methodologies implemented.

TABLE 1: Commencement phase.

Themes	Key insights
1. Organisational objective and initial contracting	Senior management support, pre-coaching programme, organisational coaching objective, contracting between organisation and service provider or coach and coach and client
2. Coach selection and client–coach relationship	Coach's knowledge and understanding of business context, coach–client connection and psychological contract
3. Coaching goals and measures	Contract comprehensively at start, first coaching session, goal setting and direction, self-assessments or 360 feedback

Line managers B and C noted that the coaching was aimed at enabling the leaders towards increased effectiveness and formed part of a succession development programme:

> 'There was a need to empower our leaders, to make them feel more confident in their day-to-day operations and to lead in terms of the new strategy by applying a more rounded, holistic management style.' (Line manager A, male, sales executive)

> 'Initial contracting between the organisation and the service providers consisted of a process document presented to coaching participants.' (Coach A, female, executive coach)

> 'The initial contracting in terms of the intervention was between the coaching service provider and the sponsor. I contract with the service provider to do the coaching and was involved in some of the workshops prior to the coaching.' (Coach C, female, executive coach)

Contracting between coaches A, B and C and their clients started with a comprehensive contract at commencement, mentioning the three-way line manager sessions and systemic feedback mechanisms:

> 'There is a two-page document which you go through with your client at the beginning, which says this is the coach's and client's role. Setting out the responsibilities between what they do and what is expected of them.' (Coach A, female executive coach)

Coach B was directly contracted to the organisation and noted that the coach needed to lead the contracting process because of contracting being a core coaching principle and competency.

Coach selection and coach-client relationship

Despite the difficult task of coach selection, all three organisations in the study succeeded in using matching and chemistry sessions effectively. Clients A, B and C indicated the importance of the coach–client connection and Coach B emphasised the psychological and spiritual connection essential for client–coach rapport building.

The two important factors in coach selection were the coaching methodology and knowledge of the coach (clients A, B and C). Understanding the business context and credentialing was highlighted by Sponsor B (female, human resources executive): 'We only select coaches who are ICF accredited onto our panel. We also choose integral coaches nationally to link to our philosophy of leadership'. In the case of Sponsor C, the coaches were sourced by the service provider, with whom the organisation had an established relationship.

Coaching objectives and measures

Coaching objectives were mostly derived from self- and 360-assessments at the start of the coaching (clients A, B and C). 'The client sends me his developmentally supportive insights based on the Enneagram profile and conversation' (Coach C, female, executive coach). 'I shared my development plan and the 360 with my coach in the first session. He guided me towards my development plan' (Client B, male, human resources manager).

The first coaching session provided goal setting and direction for clients A, B and C: 'We spent the first meeting going through the Enneagram. One of my goals emerged along the way' (Client A, female, sales manager).

The question relating to goal measures drew a variety of responses. Coach C's opinion was that measures should be based on systemic feedback relating to the client's actions. Measures for Client C consisted of a self-awareness and self-regulatory approach, whereas Client A used a scaling method for determining the goal progress. Client B's description of goal measures was: 'We set objectives which we can measure such as the culture survey which gave us the best information for implementing a number of interventions to achieve results'. (male, human resources manager)

Execution phase

The execution phase contains three themes, as summarised in Table 2.

First three-way session

Findings indicated that three-way sessions assisted line managers and clients in reaching agreements on goals, measures and accountabilities before the coaching started. Sponsor B and Coach A noted that line managers received an email from the organisation explaining their role during the three-way sessions. Line Manager B shared that the coach explained the process including the three-way sessions providing the opportunity of adding to the coaching development plan. Client A concurs: 'My manager had an opportunity to view the objectives sheet to see if it aligned with his expectation and had input at the three-way session' (female, sales manager).

Goal alignment between the individual and line manager is described by Coach C:

> 'Sometimes the client has their own idea of where they should develop, depending on their own level of maturity and self-awareness. The line manager adds a valuable dimension in terms of confirming what the client has already identified as areas for development or perhaps adding another angle, especially in terms of how that person shows up in the work place and the team.' (female, executive coach)

Line managers (A, B and C) were non-descriptive and aligned with the coaching goals shared by the client during the first three-way session. 'The goals were set by the client with their coach. We were not involved in that until the first three-way session' (Line manager A, male, sales executive). 'He had two goals he enthusiastically told me about, which we agreed on. The 360 assessments in the beginning and performance

TABLE 2: Execution phase.

Themes	Key insights
1. First three-way session	Goal alignment, goal measures, systemic feedback
2. Progress check-ins with line manager	Targeted conversation regarding goals, clarifying expectations, line manager's understanding of role, 360 feedback and line manager or coach observations
3. Progress feedback to sponsor	Sponsor requirements, feedback reports

management feedback confirmed the goals discussed' (Line Manager C, male, production executive).

Line manager feedback during the three-way session was experienced by Client A as performance management focused, which in her opinion should have been a reflection on her individual growth during the coaching. The view of Sponsor C was that the coach needed to enlighten the line manager in providing practical support during the coaching. One example is Coach A who encouraged authentic and transparent interactions during the three-way sessions: 'I try and put 10 minutes upfront to speak to the line manager before the three-way sessions, to get the line manager to articulate their expectations of the client' (Female, executive coach).

On the contrary, Coach C was pleased with Line Manager C's skilled delivery of the feedback in a 'non-threatening way'. Line managers A and B suggested the adding of a third three-way session in the middle of the coaching journey to provide further support to the client.

Upfront systemic feedback for goal setting was noted by Sponsor C as critical for preventing goal evolution during the coaching:

> 'Once objectives are agreed between client, coach and line manager, they should get coaching objectives from the sponsor. Collaborate the goal – you want commitment from the client, but at least the insight is there and the client can reflect on it.' (female, human resources executive)

Progress check-ins with line manager

The client and line manager findings showed that check-in conversations created goal alignment and expectation clarification:

> 'We now have radical clarity between us where she can ask for assistance and not feel that she is any less respected.' (Line manager A, male, sales executive)

Check-in conversations positively influenced the clients' perceptions by creating a sense of line manager support for the clients' career development (Clients B and C). As stated by line manager:

> 'The client would have discussions with me on issues where he needed support and I found that very refreshing, because I saw that as my primary role as his boss.' (Line manager B, male, human resources executive)

Progress check-ins also resulted in an enhanced relationship based on improved communication:

> 'The engagements enabled us to check-in that we were doing the things we said we would do. It became natural to integrate the coaching into the discussions and generally the conversations took on a whole different theme.' (Line manager A, male, sales executive)

The line managers (A, B and C) indicated a high level of understanding of their support role which translated into involvement and valuing the coaching process. Line Manager C reinforced the client's efforts by providing observational feedback, and the constructive input regarding potential growth areas was appreciated: 'Line manager gave his feedback to see if he saw any difference in me, it was factual. He picked up my behavioural changes and going back to default mode in meetings and would give me feedback' (Client C, male, production manager).

Progress feedback to sponsor

Sponsors A and B received monthly updates from coaches indicating whether sessions had been forfeited by clients for the situation to be remedied:

> 'The contract with the client includes confidentiality, but the feedback to the project manager (service provider) covers process and attendance information which is provided by the coach in a monthly tracker via email. The service provider has initially contracted with the sponsor and communicates with them.' (Coach C, female, executive coach)

Although Sponsor B mentioned goal progress tracking as one of their development areas, they still required high level feedback: 'Coaches give me a monthly touchdown feedback report – just high overview. So, I have got a picture at the end of the 13 sessions' (female, human resources executive). On the contrary, Sponsor C required the clients to complete a quarterly self- and 360-assessment accompanied by a report shared with the coach, line manager and sponsor.

Two different perspectives pertaining to sponsor feedback were shared by clients A and C: 'I do not think it is unusual for the company to want to get feedback from a group perspective in terms of the progress being made in the field with their managers' (Client A, female, sales manager). The importance of the sponsor partnering with the client and the line manager in terms of support, empathy and interest in their well-being including the coaching was emphasised by Client C, who was uncomfortable with the line manager sharing coaching information with the sponsor.

Another method used by Sponsor B to gauge progress was to engage clients attending the leadership programme. 'I think line managers are agreeing to something they do not always understand, so I will have a touchdown session halfway through. This has been a gap that we are addressing' (female, human resources executive).

Conclusion phase

The conclusion phase contains three themes, as summarised in Table 3.

TABLE 3: Conclusion phase.

Themes	Key insights
1. Second three-way session	Senior management's commitment, feedback on progress and outcomes achievement
2. Sustainability	Closeout reports, systemic feedback
3. ROI and value from coaching	ROE more valuable measure for coaching success

ROI, return on investment; ROE, return on engagement.

Second three-way session

Line Manager B describes the last three-way session as a reflection on what had transpired during the coaching – the completion of the formal coaching. This session is an effective feedback mechanism for the client pertaining to coaching progress and outcomes achieved:

> 'I have seen a change in his behaviour, gave feedback to him; areas that he needs to continue focusing on.' (Line manager B, male, human resources executive)

Findings noted that the session was useful for trust building: 'The client's realisation or acceptance that we regard her as a valuable member of our team and we back her and respect her abilities and capabilities' (Line manager A, male sales executive). Sponsor B mentioned that the second three-way session is the culmination of learning: 'At the close-out they need to share their leadership philosophy' (female, human resources executive).

Sustainability

Coaches A, B and C produced closeout reports in collaboration with their clients in accordance with mutually agreed requirements. The coaches stated that they revisited the initially agreed coaching goals throughout the coaching which were included in the closeout reports.

> 'The client and I do the end report together, it could include a comment in the client's own words and a short piece from me on what we have discovered and covered. The report is then sent to human resources or the line manager.' (Coach B, male executive coach)

Sponsor B was adding guidelines for goal reporting on measures and progress for embedding the client's learning into the business and sustaining the learning. Line Manager B suggested that the client journals the objectives, learnings, insights and behavioural change during the coaching journey to minimise regression and sustain the learning. Ongoing feedback from line managers was noted as a mechanism for sustaining the learning: 'I appreciate that the client might lapse, because it is all about practice. I give immediate feedback informally as well as in the formal one-on-one' (Line Manager C, male, production executive).

Return on engagement and value from coaching

Sponsors (A, B and C) and coaches (A, B and C) viewed return on engagement (ROE) as a more useful measure of coaching success than return on investment (ROI). Sponsor A said that clients' behavioural change in alignment with the organisational objectives added the most value to the organisation and the client:

> 'When you have somebody with very high power and influence that makes that kind of shift, the impact is far and wide. It is all based on behavioural change and shifts. 360-feedback became unimportant when we saw the behavioural changes in the most powerful and influential colleagues of ours.' (Sponsor A, female, human resources executive)

This is echoed by Line Manager A's view that coaching is about the individual developing at their rate, feeling confident and being able to disseminate their learnings into their own teams:

> 'Sometimes the coaching helps people in their personal lives; it helps them see their purpose more clearly. You would pick up the change in your engagement survey results, in your team performance, team goal performance and in the system.' (Sponsor C, female, human resources executive)

The success of coaching, according to Sponsor C, is defined by the client and the line manager, and when there are good results they become agents of change. 'It was important for me to gauge and to ensure that the process ultimately delivered on the envisaged end result' (Line Manager C, male, production executive).

Sponsors B and C used 360 feedback assessment in gauging behavioural change during coaching. Client B and Sponsor B used a 360-feedback at the commencement and closeout phases. Client A suggested that pre- and post-coaching assessments should include not only the line managers, but also individuals from the client's work environment. Line Manager C was in agreement with the coach conducting systemic interviews and the client eliciting feedback from the system; however, Line Manager B was cautious of the impact on the coach–client trust relationship if the coach had to obtain feedback directly from the system.

Ethical considerations

The selection of the participants and sample size were the researcher's choice by including coaching stakeholders who had experience in multi-stakeholder contracting in corporate contexts.

Given the research aim and objectives, the researcher had to contract mindfully with each of the stakeholders. Because contracting was the focus of the research, it had to be incorporated and modelled throughout the interactions with the participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were contracted with participants before, during and after interviews. Further contractual elements included an informed consent form discussing the ethical research principles and an organisational permission form signed by the sponsors. The truthfulness, openness and honesty of the results were critical to the quality of the research and these elements were kept prominent during interactions with participants.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate the contracting elements and practices for inclusion in a guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting for each of the three phases of executive coaching: commencement, execution and conclusion. Study findings indicated key contractual elements and practices implemented by coaching stakeholders, which were consolidated into a guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting for each of the three executive coaching phases.

Commencement phase

The most prominent finding of this research was that contracting for objective setting at the onset of the coaching relationship remains a complex process, taking the systemic perspective of the client, line manager and sponsor into consideration (Bennett, 2008; Drinnan & Hutson, 2007; Koortzen & Oosthuizen, 2010; O'Neill, 2000). According to the findings, systemic feedback in the form of 360-feedback and line manager and coach observations formed part of the clients' learning and progress tracking and was included in the initial contracting conversations (Clutterbuck, 2015; Gregory, Levy, & Jeffers, 2008; Lee & Frisch, 2015; Thach, 2002).

Coaches A and C had written contracts with the coaching service provider they were contracted to, whereas Coach B had a written contract with the organisation represented by the sponsor. Coaches A and C had written contracts with clients, whereas Coach B verbally discussed the contract with clients.

Sponsor B had contracting conversations with line managers and clients before the coaching started. The three-cornered agreement between the coach, client and line manager was according to the findings represented by an objectives or outcomes document used during the two three-way sessions to align the three stakeholders on goal setting, progress and results reporting. Clients A, B and C indicated that the line managers were non-descriptive of the goals proposed (Cowan, 2013). The findings showed that the sponsor was not included in the contractual agreement between the client, coach and line manager at commencement of the coaching. Involving the sponsor would have implied a four-cornered agreement at the start of the coaching for clarifying objectives, process and accountabilities.

In summary, findings indicated that two written contracts were used by coaching stakeholders: (1) contract between the coach and the client, and (2) contract between the coach and the service provider or organisation, and that the contracts between the client, coach and line manager consisted of an objectives or outcomes document agreed during the three-way sessions. The findings therefore align with the literature that the majority of coaches have one contract with the organisation and a three-cornered agreement with the client and line manager and/or sponsor (Hay, 2011, p. 5; Walsh, 2016, p. 30).

Execution phase

This research indicated the significance of multi-stakeholder contracting in aligning goals, enhancing synergy and providing meaning and purpose for all involved (Van Coller-Peter, 2015). The findings indicated that three-way sessions assisted line managers and clients to reach explicit agreements on goals, measures and accountabilities, which brought the stakeholders into closer alignment before the coaching began (Fakalata & Wiete, 2012; Sherman & Freas, 2004). According to the findings, the formal feedback given to the client during the two three-way sessions was captured in the objectives or outcomes document.

The client and line manager findings on progress check-ins showed that these conversations provided a mechanism for targeted conversations about goals and expectations (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). The check-ins between Client B and Line Manager B were informal, a continuation of their ongoing work relationship, focused on operational issues and personal development. The check-ins between Client C and Line Manager C were structured one-on-ones discussing coaching milestones and feedback. The check-ins between Client A and Line Manager A were operational and not specifically centred around coaching, yet behavioural changes were recognised and acknowledged.

Involvement and support from line managers A, B and C were demonstrated by giving observational informal and informal feedback on the client's progress. Coach A mentioned the importance of the line manager articulating his expectations transparently during three-way sessions. Client A included feedback from peers, colleagues and team members in addition to his line manager's feedback before and at the end of the coaching to gauge behavioural change. Sponsor C had the view that systemic feedback should be elicited from the sponsor to confirm behavioural shifts based on the agreed objectives.

Sponsor findings indicated that coaching was perceived as a time-intensive and expensive engagement necessitating regular and formal progress reviews starting during the first third of the coaching engagement (Kauffman & Coutu, 2009; Lee & Frisch, 2015). Findings indicated that the coaches' feedback to sponsors covered process and excluded confidential content, as specified by the coaches' code of ethics (Stout-Rostron, 2012).

Conclusion phase

Findings agreed that the three-way sessions and specifically the last one were a powerful method for the client to obtain feedback on coaching progress and outcomes achieved (Hay, 2011; Lee & Frisch, 2015; Sherman & Freas, 2004;). The sponsor and line manager findings showed a strong commitment to the client's coaching which contributed to a supportive organisational culture for coaching (Walker-Fraser, 2011). Line manager feedback during the second three-way session was received as valuable (clients B and C). However, Client A suggested that the line manager should focus feedback on the individual's growth journey, demonstrating the line manager's commitment towards the client's coaching (Kauffman & Coutu, 2009).

Findings indicated that the three-cornered agreement between the coach, client and line manager was represented by the objectives or outcomes document used during both three-way sessions: one for objective alignment and the other for closeout reporting. Sponsor C indicated the need to be included in the closeout session, which demonstrated senior management's investment in the client's progress (Fakalata & Wiete, 2012). The coach findings indicated that coaches produced closeout sponsor reports in collaboration with

their clients in accordance with mutually agreed requirements (Bennett, 2008; Fillery-Travis, 2015).

Coach B mentioned that goal evolvement (David, Clutterbuck, & Megginson, 2013) should be contracted at the commencement of the coaching and that stakeholders should be kept engaged throughout evolvement. This highlights the importance for the coach to align the expectations of the organisation with the outcomes delivered by the coaching (Kauffman & Coutu, 2009). Coach A and Client A emphasised the 'unintended consequences' of the client's behavioural change on the system. Contracts should include an understanding of the systemic implications of coaching for the organisation created by the client's self-development, learning and behavioural changes to meet the coaching objectives (Fielder & Starr, 2008).

The findings and discussions of the three phases were consolidated into a guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting. Box 1 contains the guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting for each of the three executive coaching phases.

In summary, multi-stakeholder contracting needs to become more systemically integrated. Coaches, in particular, should make a cognitive shift towards systemic thinking, where the client is regarded as the individual being coached as well as the organisation. Literature and this research indicate that the multiple coaching relationships may require stakeholders to structure contracts in customised ways to accommodate the dynamic nature of coaching relationships.

The benefits of multi-stakeholder contracting guidelines

The benefits of contractual guidelines for each of the four stakeholders could be described as follows:

Benefits for clients: The client receives coaching underpinned by a contracting process providing clarity on goal setting, progress feedback and results reporting, in alignment with mutually agreed individual and organisational objectives. The client needs to partner with the coach in reaching out to the line manager and the sponsor, from setting goals to obtaining systemic feedback on achievement of goals.

Benefits for executive coaches: Effective contracting with stakeholders will encourage collective responsibility for the client receiving the coaching and the organisation investing in the coaching. Coaches need to take a leadership role during contracting by adopting a systemic approach, involving the line manager and the sponsor throughout the contracting process and encouraging the client to seek line manager and sponsor feedback on goal setting and progress. Setting goals, defining expectations and agreeing on progress feedback and results reporting are critical for coaching success and should be pursued as three- and four-cornered contracting with line managers and sponsors.

Benefits for line managers: A guiding framework for contracting will provide a clear guide for progress feedback and results reporting and will clarify the line manager's supporting role during the coaching journey. Line managers need to partner with clients and coaches from objective setting to progress feedback and closeout. Line managers have to clarify the support needed by the client in practical behavioural terms. Observing the client's behaviour in relation to the coaching objectives is critical as well as giving positive and constructive ongoing feedback. Line managers need to provide transparent feedback during three-way sessions, articulating their expectations and distinguishing between performance and coaching feedback.

Benefits for sponsors: The contracting guidelines will provide the sponsors, who are the investors on behalf of the

BOX 1: A guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting in executive coaching.

Commencement phase

- Sponsor engages the line manager in the coaching process, clarifies the support needed for the client, meets with the client and the line manager and sets up workshops to educate and prepare the line manager for his or her supportive role during the client's coaching.
- A written contract between the coach and the organisation or service provider is agreed.
- A written contract between the coach and the client is agreed.
- The client sources systemic feedback from the line manager, peers, colleagues and team members to set objectives.
- A four-cornered contract between client, coach, line manager and sponsor to explore and align objectives is agreed.
- Coaching objectives are set by client and coach based on self- and 360-assessment feedback.
- Client and coach compile an objectives or outcomes document serving as a three-cornered contract between client, coach and line manager for discussion during the first three-way session.

Execution phase

- Progress check-ins and one-on-one meetings between the client and the line manager discussing coaching integrated with operational issues or separately as personal development.
- Line manager observes the client's behaviour in the workplace related to coaching objectives, provides informal or formal feedback immediately, during one-on-one meetings or check-in meetings.
- Client's role in three-way session: describe the rationale for the objectives selected and provide systemic feedback as confirmation.
- Line manager's role in three-way session: give client feedback on objective alignment and articulate expectations transparently.
- Coach provides the sponsor or service provider with monthly email tracker.
- Client sources systemic feedback to inform progress on objectives achieved.
- Client and coach, with line manager involvement, compile a quarterly report providing progress on achievement of objectives.

Conclusion phase

- Objectives or outcomes document discussed during the closeout three-way session between client, coach and line manager.
- Client's role in closeout three-way session: describe the coaching experience and provide systemic feedback confirming behavioural change in terms of achieving the objectives.
- Line manager's role in closeout three-way session: give feedback to the client on behavioural change and suggest further development for achieving objectives.
- Client and coach compile the closeout sponsor report, with feedback from the line manager.
- Four-cornered closeout session between client, coach, line manager and sponsor reflect on the coaching experience, discuss systemic feedback and achievement of the client's and organisation's objectives.
- Last three sessions between the client and coach to discuss sustainability plan.
- Final closeout session between client and coach.

organisation, with structured progress feedback and results reporting to assess the success of the executive coaching. The sponsor needs to clarify the organisation's objectives and articulate the coaching expectations from an organisational perspective. At the start of the coaching, the sponsor needs to confirm the line manager's support for the client's coaching. Finally, sponsors need to offer systemic feedback to the client from the formulation of the objectives to closeout.

Limitations of the research

Although the participant selection included a wide range of perspectives which included coaches, clients, line managers and sponsors with multi-stakeholder experiences, diversity could have been increased by including a larger number of participants. The selection of the participants and the size of the sample were limited by the researcher's choice of using only coaching stakeholders who had experience in multi-stakeholder contracting in corporate contexts. A gender-balanced representation in each of the participant groups would have been preferable. The overall gender balance was 50% male and 50% female, which did create a gender balance for the overall study.

Conclusion

The literature and this study indicate the importance of contracting in executive coaching in achieving aligned client and organisation objectives. The four stakeholders are challenged by aligning on outcomes and progress feedback and results reporting to ensure the protection of their interests throughout the coaching. The literature makes it clear that research on contracting is limited. This research provides a guiding framework for multi-stakeholder contracting, for implementation by coaches, clients, line managers and sponsors in the three phases of executive coaching. By contracting in this way, executive coaching will be enabled to achieve an aligned outcome for the individual and the organisation.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges God for his wisdom and her family for their support.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Z.B. conducted the research and compiled the article as part of her Master's project. S.v.C.-P. supervised her research and reviewed the article.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

Association of Coaching (AC). (2016). *Member guidelines and professional standards*. Retrieved from https://www.associationforcoaching.com/

Babbie, E., & Mouton, J. (2014). *The practice of social research* (South African edn). Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Baron, L., & Morin, L. (2009). The coach-coachee relationship in executive coaching: A field study. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, *20*(1), 85–104. https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.20009

Bennett, J.L. (2008). Contracting for success. *The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, 6(4), 7–14.

Bloomberg, L.D., & Volpe, M. (2012). *Completing your qualitative dissertation*. London: Sage.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(92), 77–101.

Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2007). *Business research methods*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Coaches and Mentors South Africa (COMENSA). (2016). *Member guidelines and professional standards.* Retrieved from https://www.comensa.org.za/.

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning. *The Psychologist*, *26*(92), 120–123.

Clutterbuck, D.S. (2015). *Managing the three-way contract in executive coaching and mentoring*. Retrieved from https://www.davidclutterbuckpartnership.com/managing-the-three-way-contract-in-executive-coaching-and-mentoring/.

Coutu, C., & Kauffman, C. (2009). What can coaches do for you? *Harvard Business Review Research Report*, *87*(1), 91–97.

Cowan, K. (2013). What are the experiences of external executive coaches working with coachees' assigned goals? *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, *7*(June), 14–25.

David, S., Clutterbuck, D., & Megginson, D. (2013). *Beyond goals – Effective strategies for coaching and mentoring*. Farnham: Gower.

De Haan, E. (2008). I doubt therefore I coach: Critical moments in coaching in practice. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, *60*(1), 91–105. https://doi.org/10.1037/1065-9293.60.1.91

De Meuse, K.P., Dai, G., & Lee, R.J. (2009). Evaluating the effectiveness of executive coaching: Beyond ROI? *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, *2*(2), 117–134. https://doi.org/10.1080/17521880902882413

Drinnan, S., & Hutson, H. (2007). Who is the client really? Going beyond a multidimensional approach to organisational effectiveness. *The International Journal of Coaching in Organisations*, *5*(2), 38–45.

European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC). (2016). Member guidelines and professional standards. Retrieved from https://www.emccouncil.org/.

Fakalata, K., & Wiete, A.K. (2012). *Scaling executive coaching across the enterprise*: *The key to developing tomorrow's talent*, December 7–30. New York: Human Capital Institute.

Feldman, D.C., & Lankau, M.J. (2005). Executive coaching: A review and agenda for future research. *Journal of Management*, *31*(6), 829–847. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206305279599

Fielder, J.H., & Starr, L.M. (2008). What's the big deal about coaching contracts? *The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, *6*(4), 15–27.

Fillery-Travis, A. (2015). *Contracting within the business coaching relationship – A guide and a cautionary tale!* Worldwide Association of Business Coaches White Papers – Best Fit Business Coaching Series. Retrieved from http://www.wabccoaches.com.

Gregory, J.B., Levy, P.E., & Jeffers, M. (2008). Development of a model of the feedback process within executive coaching. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, *60*(1), 42–56. https://doi.org/10.1037/1065-9293.60.1.42

Hay, J. (2011). Setting up the coaching contract. *IDTA Newsletter*, *6*(2), 5–6.

ICF. (2016a). Global Coaching Survey. Retrieved from www.coachfederation.com.

ICF. (2016b). Member guidelines and professional standards. Retrieved from www.coachfederation.org.

Joo, B. (2005). Executive coaching: A conceptual framework from an integrative review of practice and research. University of Minnesota. *Human Resource Development Review*, *4*(4), 462–488. https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484305280866

Kauffman, C., & Coutu, C. (2009). The realities of executive coaching. *Harvard Business Review. Research Report*, *87*(1), 6–7.

Khan, M.C. (2014). *Coaching on the axis – Working with complexity in business and executive coaching*. Johannesburg: Knowledge Resources.

Kilburg, R.R. (2000). *Executive coaching: Developing managerial wisdom in a world of chaos*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association (APA).

Kombarakaran, F.A., Baker, M.N., Yang, J.A., & Fernandes, P.B. (2008). Executive coaching it works! *Consulting Psychology Journal*, *60*(1), 78–90. https://doi.org/10.1037/1065-9293.60.1.78

Koortzen, P., & Oosthuizen, P.M. (2010). A competence model for executive coaching. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, *36*(1), 1–11.

Lee, R.J., & Frisch, M.H. (2015). Legacy reflections coach: Ten lessons about becoming an executive. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, *67*(1), 3–16. https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000033

Maritz, J. (2013). Taming the wild west of business coaching training: An emerging conceptual framework. Retrieved from http://www.actacommercii.co.za/index.php/acta/article/view/174.

Ogilvy, H., & Ellam-Dyson, V. (2012). Line management involvement in coaching: Help or hindrance? A content analysis study. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, *7*(1), 39–53.

O'Neill, M.B. (2000). *Executive coaching with backbone and heart – A systems approach to engaging leaders with their challenges*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Pomerantz, S.I., & Eiting, J. (2004). Drawing lines in the sand: Ethics in coaching, contracting, and confidentiality. *International Journal of Coaching in Organisations*, *2*(3), 1–8.

Schlosser, B., Steinbrenner, M.A., Kumata, E., & Hunt, J. (2006). The coaching impact study: Measuring the value of executive coaching. *The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations, 4(3),* 8–26.

Schlosser, B., Steinbrenner, M.A., Kumata, E., & Hunt, J. (2007). The coaching impact study: Measuring the value of executive coaching. *The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, *5*(1), 140–161.

Sherman, S., & Freas, A. (2004). The wild west of executive coaching. *Harvard Business Review*, *82*(11), 82–90.

Stern, L., & Stout-Rostron, S. (2013). What progress has been made in coaching research in relation to 16 International Coaching Research Forum (ICRF) focus areas from 2008 to 2012? *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, *6*(1), 72–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2012.757013

Stout-Rostron, S. (2012). *Business coaching wisdom and practice: Unlocking the secrets of business coaching*. Johannesburg: Knowledge Resources.

Stout-Rostron, S. (2014). *Leadership coaching for results. Cutting-edge practices for coach and client*. Johannesburg: Knowledge Resources.

Thach, E.C. (2002). The impact of executive coaching and 360 feedback on leadership effectiveness. *Leadership & Organisation Development Journal*, *23*(4), 205–214. https://doi.org/10.1108/01437730210429070

The World Association of Coaches (WABC). (2016). *Member guidelines and professional standards*. Retrieved from www.wabc.com.

Turner, E., & Hawkins, P. (2016). Multi-stakeholder contracting in executive/business coaching: An analysis of practice and recommendations for gaining maximum value. *Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, *14*(2), 48–65.

Van Coller-Peter, S. (2015). *Coaching leadership teams – Getting organisational culture aligned*. Johannesburg: Knowledge Resources.

Walker-Fraser, A. (2011). An HR perspective on executive coaching for organisational learning. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, *9*(2), 67–79.

Walsh, B. (2016). Why coaching contracts are essential. *HR Future*, *1*(1), 30.