



## IOC RESEARCH DOSE

Institute of Coaching  
McLean Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Affiliate



### Developing an Eye for Coaching Science

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#### Research Dose Dedicated to our Beloved Tony Grant

Tony Grant, our beloved scientific advisor, friend, the first coaching psychologist and a giant in coaching research, passed on February 3.

Tony was Professor of Coaching Psychology at University of Sydney. Tony led many randomized controlled coaching outcomes studies, and was an abundant author of scientific articles ([Check out Grant's many IOC resource contributions here](#)). Tony was the first recipient of the Institute of Coaching's Vision of Excellence Award.

IOC is working on a worthy tribute.

In the meantime, we dedicate this dose to Tony, an exploration of one of his recent papers. Tony and his close colleague Sean O'Connor wrote the 2019

paper — *A Brief Primer for Those New to Coaching Research and Evidence-Based Practice*, published in *The Coaching Psychologist*.

In appreciating this dose, Tony's work lives on through all of us, as we develop an eye for coaching science.

## How to talk about the evidence for coaching

*Imagine it: You're talking about a coaching project with a skeptical client who prizes facts based upon objective data, i.e. robust evidence. What do you say then about the evidence for coaching?*

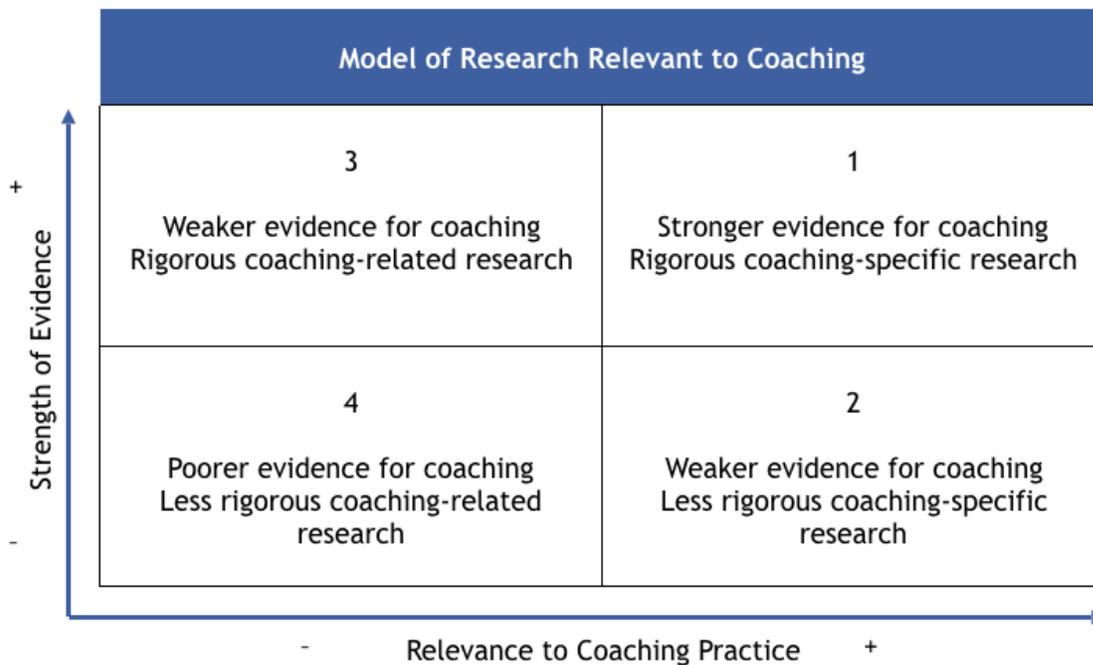
Tony's wise advice: "As informed practitioners, we need to be critical consumers of research....so that we can identify the research that will shed genuine insight into coaching practice..."

## How to know what's important in coaching science

First and foremost, Tony and Sean urge us to engage in evidence-based coaching, which they define as "coaching that involves the intelligent and conscientious use of relevant and best current knowledge, integrated with professional practitioner expertise in making decisions about how to deliver coaching to clients."

It's a lofty goal, and one they admit is challenging for those new to scientific literature. At the same time, it is essential to the integrity of the coaching profession.

Tony and Sean present a **quadrant** of research relevance to coaching practice. As science relevant to coaching comes from many fields –e.g. behavioral science, management literature, adult learning and development, systems theory, neuroscience, and positive psychology – the framework helps categorize research related to coaching.



One axis moves from coaching-specific to coaching-relevant, and the other axis moves from strong evidence to weak. The four quadrants in order of relevance:

**Quadrant 1: Rigorous coaching-specific research with stronger evidence for coaching** holds coaching as the primary focus. Studies have been properly designed and peer-reviewed. They use the correct methodology for the research question being addressed. It's also important that the results have been replicated in a range of appropriate populations.

**Quadrant 2: Less rigorous coaching-specific research with weaker evidence for coaching** might include opinion articles, unsubstantiated reports, weaker research designs, and limited numbers of researchers and/or sources.

**Quadrant 3: Rigorous coaching-related research with weaker evidence for coaching** isn't specifically focused on coaching, but "produces information that could be used in coaching practice or might indirectly inform coaching practice." Examples here include studies from fields such as behavioral psychology or neuroscience.

**Quadrant 4: Less rigorous coaching-related research with weakest evidence for coaching**, which, as in Quadrant 2, the research is less well-designed or not replicated.

## Key Themes in Research

Tony and Sean then explore the current state of play in coaching research, landing on four themes:

1. Coaching outcome studies
2. Coach-coachee relationship studies
3. Characteristics of effective coaches
4. Research about how coaching works (the psycho-mechanics)

### Coaching Outcomes Studies

There is *“quite a considerable body of research indicating that coaching can be an effective approach for facilitating change on a number of variables.”* Those variables include goal attainment, personal resilience, subjective well-being, self-insight, and transformational leadership behaviors.

Outcome studies range from single-person qualitative case studies to large-scale outcome studies, including sophisticated meta-analyses and systematic reviews of coaching research. The authors note that goal-focused, solution-focused, and cognitive-behavioral coaching methodologies have been the most validated for coaching in the workplace.

To date there have been five meta-analyses, the highest standard of outcomes coaching research which analyses a set of research studies and calculates an average effect of coaching interventions. All of these meta-analyses indicate that coaching is an effective change methodology.

### Coach-Coachee Relationship Studies and Characteristics of Effective Coaches

In coaching it turns out that the focus on a client’s desired outcomes and goals is key to positive outcomes in contrast with the importance of “concentrating on the deep rapport and unconditional positive regard” in psychotherapy.

Personality types and matching of coach and client haven’t been shown to impact outcomes.

The authors cite that coaches who have received training grounded in behavioral science and psychology are more effective in facilitating coachee self-awareness and job performance than coaches without that background.

### Psycho-Mechanics of Coaching

Tony and Sean cite that there’s a considerable amount of research that lands in Quadrant Three: rigorous coaching-related research. While this research is less

robust than coaching outcomes studies, these studies can counter long-held coaching beliefs and methods. That is a good thing; the result may mean more flexibility and creativity in coaching practice.

For example, if one applies Locke's research on goal setting, it doesn't matter whether a coachee or coach sets a goal (same impact on outcome), as long as the coachee understands why the goal is being set and agrees with that reason.

Interestingly, self-reflection doesn't necessarily result in self-insight and by itself may not increase well-being. Coaches, then, may be better to *"help their coachees develop good self-insight, rather than steering the coaching conversation towards introspective self-reflection."*

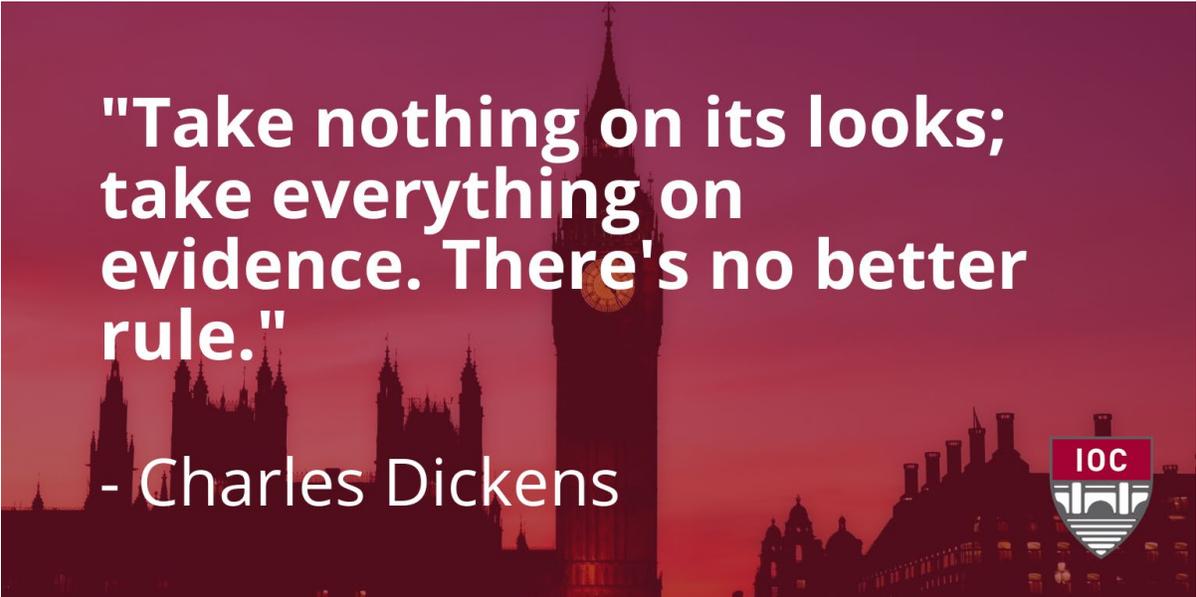
Another lesson: while research might be interesting, that doesn't necessarily make it useful. It's good to be wary of being sidetracked by research that is not of tangible use (including some neuroscience literature) in developing our coaching skills and practice.

Finally, Tony and Sean advise coaches: *"By engaging in constructive and informed self-reflection about our coaching practices; by explicitly benchmarking our own personal coaching approach with the existing and emerging research; by seeking to integrate current best empirical research with our own personal experience and professional expertise, we become more mature, balanced and purposeful professionals and more rounded, more fulfilled human beings. In a very real sense, we need to personally embody an evidence-based approach."*

## **Takeaways for coaches**

1. **Understand the Evidence:** Invest in understanding coaching research, not only to become a better coach, but to credibly explain the impact coaching can have.
2. **Not All Research is Created Equal:** Given the wide variability of research in coaching, for the greatest impact, focus on research that is rigorous and relevant.
3. **Question Common Assumptions:** Explore findings that disprove commonly held assumptions in coaching.
4. **Expand Your Learning:** Seek, understand and integrate the learning from the strong coaching evidence base and research relevant to coaching.

IOC makes it easy for you honor Tony Grant and *develop your eye for coaching evidence and talk about it confidently* with clients. Login today to explore our **IOC research doses**.



"Take nothing on its looks;  
take everything on  
evidence. There's no better  
rule."

- Charles Dickens



### **Featured Article**

Grant, Anthony & O'Connor, Sean. (2019). A brief primer for those new to coaching research and evidence-based practice. 15. 3-10.

Available online: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333162365\\_A\\_brief\\_primer\\_for\\_those\\_new\\_to\\_coaching\\_research\\_and\\_evidence-based\\_practice](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333162365_A_brief_primer_for_those_new_to_coaching_research_and_evidence-based_practice)