# The importance of improvisation in coaching

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# The importance of improvisation in coaching

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Coaching of employees, executives and organisations is becoming increasingly widespread. Improvisation may be essential to dynamic, interactional relationships such as those found in coaching. This paper introduces improvisation to the coaching literature, measures its importance to coaches and highlights improvisation usage within 12 coaching activities. Data from 113 coaches across two studies indicate that most coaches believe improvisation is essential and use it to a great extent. The combined results indicate improvisation is commonly utilised by a majority of coaches in a variety of coaching activities. Consequently, this paper offers a first step towards understanding how and why coaches use improvisation in organisational coaching.

**Keywords:** coaching; improvisation; leadership; creativity; innovation

## Introduction

The occurrence of coaching has recently increased dramatically in all areas of society (Hardingham, 2004), and coaches are becoming a vital part of many employee and organisational development systems. Coaching is thought to be one of the most significant emerging approaches to executive and managerial development (Gray, 2006). Highly emphasised in some organisations, coaching is one of the principal tools organisations use to increase performance and productivity, as well as help retain and develop their employees (Sketch, Johnson, & Casella, 2001).

Primarily seen as a developer of people, Latham, Almost, Mann, and Moore (2005) believe that only with the help of a coach can a performance management system produce highly trained and motivated employees. It appears also that coaching is a developmental strategy which can positively impact the organisation, group and individual. For example, Joo (2005) suggests that coaching exists as the main part of an entire organisational development strategy. In current coaching practice, a focus is placed on the coach–coachee relationship, and how this special connection can help people exceed previous levels of performance (Eggers & Clark, 2000). Whether coaching employees, executives, groups or organisations, coaching interactions involve this type of dynamic relationship between coach and coachee.

When improvisation (spontaneous creativity and innovation) is necessary, the ability to perform and lead improvisational acts becomes an important skill for coaches. Lemons (2005) stresses that improvisation involves creation through performance interactions with and for other individuals – a scenario which closely

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resembles that of a coaching interaction. Consequently, improvisation becomes important to any relationship where a dynamic exchange of thoughts, ideas and solutions occur, especially coaching relationships.

At the organisational level, how coaches' effective performance is important as Kamoche and Cunha (2001) believe economic uncertainty and rapid global change make organisational improvisation essential. In addition, Cunha, Rego, and Kamoche (2009) feel that improvisation may be the key to service organisation recovery after failure. As a result, improvisation appears to be an important component of organisational survival and recovery – issues dealt with in many coaching interactions.

Despite the attention given to improvisation in related fields, literature involving improvisation and coaching is lacking. A thorough literature review yielded no research linking these two topics. Improvisation may be an essential factor in coaching interactions. Considering that, this research project intends to investigate the following questions:

(1) To what extent do coaches improvise during their coaching interactions?
(2) How important is improvisation to the coaching process?
(3) If improvisation is important, in what coaching situations or activities do coaches utilise improvisation to the greatest extent?

The research was conducted through two online survey studies consisting of active organisational coaches. Study 1 investigated the relevance of improvisation to practicing coaches and encouraged written responses to illustrate examples of how coaches used improvisation. Study 2 looked deeper into specific coaching practices and how frequently coaches use improvisation for those practices.

By collecting data about improvisation from current coaches, this paper contributes to the coaching literature in two important ways. First, after surveying many practicing coaches about improvisation's importance and common usage, improvisation is introduced to coaching literature and theory as a highly relevant concept. Second, by providing evidence from current coaches, this research provides an empirically based starting point for future research on coach improvisational behaviour.

## Study 1

### Method

To establish the relevance of improvisation, Study 1 asked 34 practicing organisational coaches about the importance of improvisation and the extent of its usage in their coaching. Using an online survey, coaches were asked two Likert-type items asking them to indicate the extent that they improvise during coaching and to rate how important they feel that improvisation is to their coaching success. In addition to demographic items, one open-ended question asked coaches to give an example of improvisation in their coaching. For a list of the items, see Appendix 1.

Organisational coach contact information for Study 1 was located by searching online for organisational coaching keywords (i.e. coach, coaching, executive coach/ coaching, business coach/coaching, employee coach/coaching, organisational coach/

coaching, corporate coach/coaching, supervisory coach/coaching, manager coach and manager-as-coach). The coaches had to have an organisational descriptor as a focus of their coaching in a website or public online profile. Though multiple coaching organisations and certifications are included in a sample of this sort, a diverse sample is necessary to be representative of the current state of organisational coaching. Coaches were sent several emails with links to the voluntary survey. The survey was fronted with the research summary and consent information. To complete the survey, consent had to be given. The functionality of a web-based survey allowed simple data to be automatically tabulated and open-ended responses to be viewed and analysed electronically. Coaches had the option to request final research results in an aggregate form. Self-administered electronic surveys with reasonable response rates are becoming more prevalent (Dillman, 2000).

## Sample

In total, 278 organisational coaches from mainly the UK, Canada and the USA were invited to participate in the online survey, and 34 coaches (16 males, 18 females) completed the items on improvisation, yielding a response rate of 12.2%. The coaches had an average age of 54.08 years (SD $= 8.48$) with a range of 28–67 years. Coaches reported their working tenure in years as 5–10 (17.3%), 10–15 (32.7%), 15–20 (21.2%) or more than 20 (28.8%). In addition, coaches reported a typical session length in minutes as 15–30 (0%), 31–45 (15.1%), 46–60 (58.5%), 61–120 (24.5%) or more than 120 (1.9%).

## Results

Regarding improvisation, coaches most often responded that they *always* improvise during coaching. The frequency percentages for the 34 coaches' improvisation usage were never (0%), rarely (5.9%), sometimes (29.4%), often (29.4%) and always (35.3%). When asked about the importance of improvisation, coaches most often responded that it was *essential* to the coaching process. The percentages for the 34 coaches' rating of improvisation's importance were not important (2.9%), somewhat important (23.5%), very important (32.4%) and essential (41.2%).

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of how coaches view improvisation, the open-ended item yielded illustrative quotes from current organisational coaches. Though some coaches did not feel improvisation was necessary, 'I don't improvise that often. I stick to the coaching model. If I did, it might be to change lines of questioning or changing the subject' (OCS34), many other coaches gave examples of how they utilised improvisation during coaching. Table 1 outlines several illustrative coaches' quotes regarding usage of improvisation in their practices.

## Discussion

The majority of coaches reported using improvisation to a great extent, with 64.7% often or always utilising it during coaching. This finding suggests that of the coach sample, the minority of coaches operate with a completely pre-determined coaching programme and do not utilise much improvisation. Reinforcing those results, over 73% of coaches reported that improvisation was very important or essential. These

Table 1. Coach quotes on improvisation usage.

| Coach | Coach quote |
| --- | --- |
| OCS13 | Going with the flow is fundamental to good coaching. Having assumptions or imposing my own thinking is contrary to the fundamental principles of coaching. e.g. client wants to achieve a specific career goal and has no way of working out where to start – we improvise by brainstorming and then working with what we get. |
| OCS16 | Professional coaching is improv. We're working in the moment with our clients and bringing in whatever will work to move the client forward to her/his goals. I often hear a client metaphor, and we'll use it to explore an issue and create an action plan and even a reminder phrase or picture to support them. |
| OCS28 | When a client isn't responding to a question or looks uncomfortable, I will just change things up right then. |
| OCS32 | I will pull out a particular process, tool, experience that fits what the client brings to the conversation that session. |
| OCS31 | I adjust to the needs of those I coach. |
| OCS03 | I follow the client, it's their agenda, not mine...so I go with them. |
| OCS07 | Following my instinct and asking questions to find out what is not being acknowledged. |
| OCS15 | I listen to my client and respond. |
| OCS23 | I don't assume where the client wants to take a session, so always respond to the needs in the session; this means I always use whatever I may have in my 'toolkit' to support the client in making progress towards their goals. |
| OCS02 | Sharing stories, building a strategic plan during the session, immediately calling a key person with the coachee to resolve an issue, role modeling how to resolve a conflict, etc... |
| OCS26 | Relating a personal story. |
| OCS08 | Rephrasing, feedback, active listening, etc. |
| OCS10 | The homework assigned between coaching session is always somewhat improvised based on the target goal and the environmental circumstances of the coachee. |
| OCS29 | Changing the environment of coaching – to mix things up. |

findings indicate that for many practices, coaches use improvisation and believe it is of utmost importance to their coaching.

As Table 1 illustrates, coaches reported using improvisation in a number of ways. Perhaps the coach who stated, 'Professional coaching is improv' (OCS16), sums up the general findings well. A key point revealed in several of the coaches' written responses, coaches felt they must spontaneously adjust to needs of the coachee during coaching sessions to help them reach their goals. Coaches reported using improvisation during coaching sessions and conversations, though through a variety of activities, such as during brainstorming, questioning, role-modelling, storytelling, tool usage and feedback delivery. Coaches also reported improvising when creating action plans, planning future sessions, assigning homework or to change the physical context of coaching.

The quantitative and qualitative results both suggest that improvisation is highly relevant to current organisational coaches. With a greater understanding of the importance and the varied usage of improvisation in coaching, Study 2 goes deeper by investigating the frequency of use for a number of specific coaching activities.

**Study 2**

**Method**

Carried out six months after Study 1, Study 2 involved an online survey of 79 organisational coaches who were recruited in the same manner as those in Study 1. In addition to demographic items, coaches were again asked to rate how important they feel that improvisation is to their coaching success using a five-point, Likert-type response format. To gain a deeper understanding of how coaches use improvisation, they were asked about specific improvisation usage within 12 defined coaching activities (i.e. conversations, recruiting, scheduling, etc.) using five-point, Likert-type frequency response options (i.e. never to always). See Appendix 1 for the survey items.

The results of Study 1 informed the list of coaching activities in this study; the open-ended responses about improvisation were converted into 12 commonly reported coaching activities which utilise improvisation. See Table 2 for the full list of 12 coaching activities included in this measure and the results regarding improvisation frequency.

**Sample**

In sum, 493 organisational coaches from mainly the UK, Canada and the USA were invited to complete the online survey, and 79 coaches (62 females, 17 males) completed the items on improvisation, yielding a response rate of 16.0%. Coaches recruited for Study 2 did not participate in Study 1. The coaches had an average age of 55.73 (SD = 8.09) with a range of 31–70 years. Coaches reported their coaching career length (in years) of less than 1 (0%), 1–2 (0%), 2–5 (13.6%), 5–10 (14.8%), 10–15 (30.9%) or more than 15 (40.7%). In addition, coaches reported a typical session length in minutes as 15–30 (1.2%), 31–45 (11.1%), 46–60 (45.7%), 60–120 (39.5%) or more than 120 (2.5%).

**Results**

When asked about the importance of improvisation, coaches in this study most often responded that it was *very important* to the coaching process. The percentages for the 79 coaches' rating of improvisation's importance were not important (5.1%), somewhat important (21.5%), very important (39.2%) and essential (34.2%). Results for this item were compared, from Study 1 to Study 2, and no significant difference between responses for the importance of improvisation was found ($F_{(111,62.42)} = 0.297$, $p = 0.587$). Pooling the top two categories established some consistency, as in Study 1, 73.6% of coaches reported improvisation as very important or essential, while in Study 2, 73.4% reported improvisation as very important or essential.

Table 2 illustrates the coaches' responses to how frequently they use improvisation among the 12 listed coaching activities. The most frequent coaching practice for which coaches reported using improvisation was during coaching conversations, where 86% of the coaches reported using improvisation often or always. On the other end of the usage spectrum, 20.5% of coaches reported using improvisation often or always when dealing with coachee post-performance or recovery.

Table 2. Frequency of improvisation in coaching practices.

| Coaching activity | N | Mean | Standard deviation | Mode | Response frequency (%) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always |
| Conversations | 79 | 4.11 | 0.83 | Often | 2.5 | 1.3 | 10.1 | 54.4 | 31.6 |
| Sessions or practices | 79 | 3.77 | 1.01 | Often | 5.1 | 5.1 | 19.0 | 49.4 | 21.5 |
| Delivering feedback | 79 | 3.49 | 1.12 | Often | 7.6 | 10.1 | 24.1 | 41.8 | 16.5 |
| Team building | 78 | 3.32 | 1.29 | Often | 17.9 | 3.8 | 20.5 | 43.6 | 14.1 |
| Simulations/ rehearsals | 77 | 3.29 | 1.22 | Often | 15.6 | 6.5 | 19.5 | 49.4 | 9.1 |
| Recruitment of coachees | 79 | 2.86 | 1.10 | Sometimes | 16.5 | 15.2 | 36.7 | 29.1 | 2.5 |
| Scheduling sessions | 79 | 2.85 | 1.11 | Sometimes | 13.9 | 24.1 | 29.1 | 29.1 | 3.8 |
| Assessment of coachees | 79 | 2.84 | 1.08 | Sometimes | 13.9 | 20.3 | 39.2 | 21.5 | 5.1 |
| Selection of coachees | 79 | 2.58 | 1.14 | Sometimes | 22.8 | 22.8 | 30.4 | 21.5 | 2.5 |
| During performance | 78 | 2.41 | 1.42 | Never | 43.6 | 10.3 | 12.8 | 28.2 | 5.1 |
| Handling injuries | 79 | 2.32 | 1.39 | Never | 45.6 | 10.1 | 17.7 | 20.3 | 6.3 |
| Post-performance/ recovery | 78 | 1.95 | 1.31 | Never | 59.0 | 11.5 | 9.0 | 16.7 | 3.8 |

## Discussion

The coaches' ratings of improvisation usage in Study 2 seem to mirror the initial qualitative comments given in Study 1, where many coaches discussed improvising during coaching conversations or sessions. The results from Study 2 confirm those comments and suggest improvisation is an essential piece of coaching interactions.

The ordered list in Table 2 may provide a starting point to where coach improvisation may be most fruitful. Displayed in descending order in regard to item mean, clear differences can be seen in regard to reported coach usage of improvisation. Only five coaching practices received a mode of 'often' (conversations, sessions or practices, delivering feedback, team building, simulations or rehearsals), indicating these coaching practices are the most common source of coach improvisation.

Four coaching activities received a mode of 'sometimes' (recruitment of coachees, scheduling sessions, assessment of coachees and selection of coachees). These activities may require less improvisation as they may occur less often in a coaching relationship, especially the selection and recruitment of coachees. Moreover, these activities are reported to be more structured as they may not provide great opportunities in which to improvise.

Representing less common coach improvisational behaviour, three coaching activities (during performance, handling injuries and during post-performance or recovery) had a mode of 'never' indicating that the majority of coaches most

commonly use standardised, pre-determined coaching practices during these activities. Or alternatively, coaches may not handle coachee injuries or deal with recovery issues at all, thus reducing the possible use of improvisation. The list in Table 2 thus provides guidance to coaches and coaching researchers in regard to which coaching activities are most likely to contain coach improvisational behaviour.

## Limitations

Though the data presented in this research provide important and interesting results, there are several limitations associated with its collection. Primarily, using only coach self-report data, mono-source bias is a concern. Ideally, more methods of data collection and data from other sources will be included in future research. However, it should be noted that the coaches in the study came from many different organisations and coaching philosophies, helping to stratify the sample and provide diverse responses.

In addition, how the coach contact information was collected is a limitation. Using this method, only coaches with online, publically available email addresses could be contacted. As a result, coaches who did not have their information online were not contacted.

The administrative limitations of online surveys may create fakability or validity concerns. Given the uncertain nature of online information and that organisational coaching is an unregulated field, the actual identity or coaching certification of the participant coaches could not be verified. Moreover, many coach email addresses found online no longer existed. Some coaches had automatic filters which may have prevented receipt of the survey invitation. As a result, some coaches did not receive the survey or respond due to third-party issues affecting email and online surveys. Of the coaches who did respond, the online survey methods prevented full information from being gathered. Nevertheless, with a total of 113 coaches providing responses on improvisation, the collection method did yield valuable data.

Addressing a limitation to encouraging improvisational behaviour in general, Lings, Durden, and Souchon (2010) represent a minority group of researchers who feel improvisation is undesirable to organisations and should be dissuaded due to the greater variance of employee reactions. Considering this potential limitation of unpredictability, coaches leading improvisation should then be prepared to handle a greater range of unexpected responses from coachees. Accordingly, organisations wishing to encourage coachee improvisation should build a climate of risk-taking where new ideas and solutions are welcomed – another task coaches may be able to support through coaching interactions.

## Future research

The empirical findings presented in this paper may serve as the basis for future research on improvisation in coaching. Focusing on the coaching activities reported to be the most often improvisational, future work may identify a few key areas in which coach improvisation is key. Studies 1 and 2 provide preliminary self-report data from coaches, but only through further investigation can we understand how coaches use improvisation within their coaching process and throughout the entire coach–coachee relationship. In future, studies may want to also collect data on

coachee improvisational behaviour, as well as more detailed analysis of coaching interactions and how the coach and coachee mutually influence improvisation.

Going further, the personality of the coach or coachee may impact the use of improvisation. For example, a difference in coaches' implicit person theory (IPT) has been demonstrated as important to coaching outcomes described by Heslin, Vandewalle, and Latham (2006). Moreover, if coachees differ in a Big 5 personality dimension such as Openness to Experience that may impact the effectiveness of coach improvisation in the coaching process. These variables should receive more attention in future research.

The types of coach (executive, supervisory, team, etc.) as well as the industry sector in which the coach operates are potential avenues for future research. Differences in coaching format or industry sector may substantially alter how important improvisation is to the coaching process. For example, an executive coach of a financial industry CEO may require different levels and approaches to improvisation than a coach of a high-tech industry research and development team. In future work, these variables will be measured and included in the analysis, and the implications for improvisation in coaching will be evaluated.

In addition to self-report surveys used in this research, in-depth interviews, non-participant observations or video-review may provide effective methods for coaching researchers to collect more comprehensive improvisational data from the coaching process. Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) give a thorough review of executive coaching research, which provides many good examples of how more comprehensive data on coaching has been obtained using a variety of methods.

In organisations, researchers have used metaphor to help understand improvisational behaviour. One popular improvisational metaphor in organisations is based on jazz improvisation (Weick, 1998; Zack, 2000). Using the knowledge created through the history of jazz-based improvisation may help construct lessons or relationships applicable to coaches dealing with improvisation and improvisational leadership – for both individuals and teams. Combining the jazz improvisation metaphor with coach behaviour is one promising extension of this research project.

### Conclusion

Improvisation may be an important missing piece from coaching interactions. With scarce previous empirical investigation of improvisation within coaching, this paper offers meaningful contributions to coaching theory and practice. Of the 113 coaches surveyed, over 73% reported improvisation to be very important or essential, suggesting that for coaches, improvisation is a vital part of their ongoing success. The list of coaching activities in Table 2 provides guidance to coaches in regard to where their improvisation may be most important. For example, coaches reported that they often improvise during coaching conversations or coaching sessions using a variety of techniques.

This paper offers a first step towards understanding the relationship between coaching and improvisation. As organisations are thought to perform improvisation regularly, understanding this relationship may prove especially fruitful for coaches seeking constant innovation and for those who wish to lead improvisational acts. Leading client organisations to improvise for survival or recovery may be a valuable coaching skill. The implications are far reaching; a quick coach decision made at a

critical moment may result in much larger consequences. In organisations, it is often the spontaneous decisions or innovative ideas that can make all the difference – even more so in highly productive organisations. This places an importance on coach improvisation as well as conducting research to further extend our knowledge about this concept.

## Notes on contributor



Dr. Michael J.B. Read is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, British Columbia, Canada. His main research interests include coaching in organisations, improvisation, group design and diversity, and informal networks. Michael possesses a PhD in Organizational Behaviour and Human Resources from the University of British Columbia and his research has also been published in the *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching*.

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**Appendix 1**

*Study 1 items*

(1) To what extent do you improvise during your coaching? (1 = Always, 2 = Often, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Rarely, 5 = Never).

(2) How important do you feel coach improvisation is to coaching success? (1 = Not Important, 2 = Somewhat Important, 3 = Very Important, 4 = Essential).

(3) If utilised, could you please describe one example of improvisation in your coaching?


*Study 2 items*

(1) Improvisation is defined as a spontaneous and creative attempt at finding a new way of doing things. To what extent do you feel you improvise during the following coaching processes? (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always).

-Recruitment of coachees
-Selection of coachees
-Scheduling coaching sessions
-Coaching conversations
-Coaching sessions/practice
-Assessment of coachees
-To accommodate ill/injured coachees
-Team building
-Simulations/rehearsals
-Performance/competition
-Post-performance/recovery
-Delivering feedback

(2) How important do you feel coach improvisation is to coaching success? (1 = Not Important, 2 = Somewhat Important, 3 = Very Important, 4 = Essential).