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# The role of group coaching in developing leadership effectiveness in a business school leadership development programme

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**Purpose:** The aim of this study was to explore the role of group coaching in developing leadership effectiveness within the context of a business school leadership development programme, which included both classroom facilitation and group coaching.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The study adopted a sequential, mixed-methods approach, combining a pre-programme and post-programme, 360-degree, multisource feedback instrument and in-depth interviews with South African women managers to assess changes in their leadership effectiveness.

**Findings/results:** The results indicate that participants' leadership effectiveness had changed significantly as a result of the programme. More specifically, the group coaching dimension appeared to play a role in developing personal competence, evidenced in participants' enhanced sense of direction, self-awareness, self-confidence and relationship with their authentic self. It also appeared to facilitate the development of social competence, evidenced in participants' enhanced understanding of, and relations with, others, as well as their ability to empower others. This was made possible by affording participants a psychologically safe place in which learning and growth could take place and by providing them with external inputs and feedback.

**Practical implications:** The positive role played by group coaching in developing leadership effectiveness in a business school leadership development programme suggests that the learning approach could be replicated in other academic environments and in corporate settings.

**Originality/value:** The framework that was developed suggests that group coaching can contribute to the building of personal and social competence in a leadership development programme. This framework may assist other practitioners to motivate for the inclusion of group coaching in their leadership development programmes.

**Keywords:** group coaching; business school leadership development programme; leadership effectiveness; human capital; social capital.

## Introduction

Business school training programmes are a popular vehicle for improving employees' skills, performance and motivation and for bringing about transformational change (Korotov, 2016; Stefaniak, 2017). Leadership development programmes, for example, aim to enhance managers' leadership skills and effectiveness in the workplace. However, studies have shown that training programmes are not supplemented by other learning modalities, such as mentoring or coaching, and as a result, training's average return on investment is just 24% (Fleissig, 2014; Percival, Cozzarin, & Formaneck, 2013). This suggests that there is scope for improvement. In this regard, the research community has begun to focus on the important role of coaching in management development and leadership development processes (Reid, Cook, Viedge, & Scheepers, 2020).

Whilst there is growing interest in executive coaching in organisations and other learning contexts, this modality is criticised for focusing on individual outcomes and for being too costly (Britton, 2015; Brown & Grant, 2010). Consequently, some scholars advocate group coaching as a more cost-effective and sustainable approach to the development of leadership capacity (Flückiger, Aas, Nicolaidou, Johnson, & Lovett, 2017; Fusco, O'Riordan, & Palmer, 2016a). This type of intervention not only prompts efficiency through economies of scale but

also allows participants to learn from one another through facilitated feedback and exchange (Aas & Flückiger, 2016). This is consistent with evolving and current theories on leadership development (Hernandez, Eberly, Avolio & Johnson, 2011). However, there is limited literature on group coaching as an aid to leadership development (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Flückiger et al., 2017; Fusco et al., 2016a).

The rationale for combining teaching and coaching for management and leadership development purposes is explored in the literature (Reid et al., 2020), but the manner in which coaching is used to enhance executive development programmes requires more thorough research (Hooijberg & Lane, 2009; Korotov, 2016; Stefaniak, 2017). For example, whilst several studies have examined specific activities and interventions associated with the development of effective leaders (Day & Barney, 2012; Ibarra, Snook & Ramo, 2010), group coaching and its potential to boost leadership effectiveness as part of leadership development programmes has attracted little research attention.

This study investigated changes in managers' leadership effectiveness after they had participated in a business school leadership development programme, with just over half the programme devoted to group coaching. More specifically, the study explored the role of the programme's group coaching and classroom facilitation activities in the leadership development process. The study adopted a sequential, mixed-methods approach (Subedi, 2016), which combined a pre-programme and post-programme, 360-degree, multisource feedback measure and in-depth interviews with a sample of South African women managers.

This study makes an important contribution both to the literature and to the practice of group coaching in organisational learning environments. In this regard, the study will add to theoretical debates on how to enhance leadership effectiveness through human and social capital development. In addition, it will serve as a useful guide to educational institutions, particularly business schools, on why and how to incorporate group coaching in their leadership development programmes.

## Developing leadership effectiveness

Leadership effectiveness is concerned with the extent to which members of designated groups willingly strive to achieve group goals (Amagoh, 2009; Day & Barney, 2012). Given the importance of strong leadership to organisations, it is not surprising that diverse leadership theories have emerged, all attempting to demonstrate how leadership effectiveness can be measured (Dabke, 2016). Some focus on building individual leaders' skills and behaviours, whilst others place the emphasis on interpersonal and relational aspects of leadership (Dabke, 2016).

Several studies point to the need to distinguish between developing leadership effectiveness through the application of human capital and social capital, respectively (Day, 2000; Galli & Müller-Stewens, 2012; Hollenbeck & Jamieson, 2015; Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2017). Human capital embodies intrapersonal competencies, including self-awareness, self-motivation and self-regulation. Social capital, in turn, embodies relational attributes, including social awareness (evidenced in empathy for other people) and social skills (evidenced in a collaborative nature, an open mindset, an ability to build internal and external networks and conflict management skills) (Galli & Müller-Stewens, 2012; Hollenbeck & Jamieson, 2015; Noe et al., 2017).

The given distinction is important because social capital, which has been undervalued in the leadership development context in the past, is at the core of the contemporary view of leadership as a collective, contextual, relationship-based and group-driven phenomenon. Also required for effective leadership are intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, which are complementary, interactive and mutually reinforcing (Galli & Müller-Stewens, 2012; Hollenbeck & Jamieson, 2015; Noe et al., 2017).

Leadership development processes take different forms, from classroom-facilitated training and experiential learning to mentoring and executive coaching (Day, 2000; Solansky, 2010). The 360-degree feedback measure is now commonly used to provide a baseline before the start of development (including executive coaching) programmes (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014; Hooijberg & Lane, 2009; Lovett & Robertson, 2017). In this regard, the 'head, heart and hands' 360-degree feedback model (Nicholls, 1994) can be used to assess leadership behaviours (Lovett & Robertson, 2017). According to Nicholls (1994), the head themes set the direction, the heart themes deal with leaders' emotional intelligence and the hands themes relate to the achievement of goals. The 360-degree feedback instrument based on the model was used in this study to measure leadership effectiveness before and after the leadership development programme, which included a group coaching component.

As leadership entails influencing others to achieve group goals, it must be applied in an interpersonal and organisational context to be effective (Day et al., 2014). Hence, a key success factor in leadership development initiatives is ensuring that participants critically reflect on what they have learnt and pass on that learning to others, whilst also integrating the acquired learning into their unique work context.

This study did not take place in an organisational setting but rather in a business school learning environment. Nevertheless, an inherent assumption was that the acquired learning and enhanced leadership effectiveness could be applied in an organisational context. Therefore, the purpose of the study was twofold: to explore changes in leadership effectiveness following the running of a leadership development programme, which included a large group

coaching element, and to specifically determine the role that group coaching plays in developing leadership effectiveness.

## Group coaching

Unlike executive coaching, group coaching is a comparatively recent phenomenon in leadership development (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Brown & Grant, 2010; Flückiger et al., 2017). It has also attracted a fair amount of controversy. Group coaching builds on three activities: executive coaching, facilitation of learning and group process dynamics (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Britton, 2015; Brown & Grant, 2010). Group coaching is defined as 'a single group setting … which is primarily focused on the development of the individual within the group, whilst leveraging input from a range of varying peer perspectives and experiences' (Brown & Grant, 2010, p. 32).

The fundamentals of group coaching are as follows: firstly, coaching principles and skills are core to the group process, and secondly, individual learning goes to the core of group coaching, even though it is prompted by group interaction and feedback and is dependent on group members' active participation (Britton, 2015; Brown & Grant, 2010). Group members are 'peer coaches' who assist one another's personal growth by sharing their collective wisdom and displaying empathy and trust (Aas & Flückiger, 2016). Group coaching also provides a space in which parameters are set, roles are defined, the interactive process is clarified and interpersonal dynamics play out (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015). Extant literature has highlighted how a group is often more adept than an individual coach in promoting multifaceted social learning (Aas & Flückiger 2016). The group's ability to act as a mirror and give feedback enables group members to learn from one another (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Britton, 2015; Hawkins, 2011).

Research has shown that 60% of group coaching centres on the coaching of teams (known as team coaching), where members of the group share a common goal, whilst 40% is directed at groups who come together to learn (known as learning-group coaching) (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Britton, 2015; Hawkins, 2011). In learning-group coaching, which was the focus of this study, members come together as relative strangers to engage in self-directed learning in a cross-pollinating learning atmosphere (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Britton, 2015). Group coaching sessions focus on integrating and internalising learning materials, applying learning techniques and capitalising on the collective wisdom and social capital of the group (Flückiger et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the group coaching process is affected by various factors that influence the tools and techniques that a group coach uses, including the group's purpose, composition, size, diversity, permanence and length of engagement (Britton, 2015). The selection of tools will also depend on whether the coaching is being conducted for a group of individuals with a common learning goal or a group who enjoy some sort of symbiotic relationship. In the case of the former, it is recommended that themes be used as a common anchor for participants (Britton, 2015; Kets de Vries, 2014), as was done in this study. The sessions and themes allow for tentative insights to emerge, ideas and views to be clarified and knowledge to be affirmed by peers (Reid et al., 2020).

Extant literature on group coaching highlights that one of its benefits is an ability to scale up the coaching conversation to a group of between 4 and 10, whilst still providing an intimate conversation space for deep dialogue, sharing and joint discovery (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Britton, 2015). Group coaching has been found to contribute to learning about leadership and development by providing opportunities for multiple feedback loops, ongoing monitoring and support and collaborative peer-to-peer learning (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015; Flückiger et al., 2017).

## Benefits of group coaching for leadership development

The literature highlights many benefits of group coaching in the leadership development space. From a human capital perspective, group coaching contributes to improved *personal competence*, which includes self-awareness and self-identity or identity formation, whilst also providing a social learning environment (Aas & Vavik, 2015; De Lasson, Just, Stegeager, & Malling, 2016) and greater clarity on self-concept and self-efficacy (Fusco et al., 2016a). In these studies, clarity on self-concept was impacted by group coaching's ability to create an environment in which leaders could work at a 'deeper level of self', thereby increasing their self-knowledge and becoming more 'authentic' and 'congruent' with self.

Fusco, O'Riordan and Palmer (2015a, 2015b, 2016b) found that because group coaching induces a sense of psychological safety and cohesion, it positively affects the authentic leadership characteristics of consciousness, competence, confidence and congruency. In addition, they found that group coaching positively impacts leaders' authenticity in terms of values, meaning, purpose and attitude.

From a social capital perspective, group coaching contributes to *social competence* (through sharing) and cultural competence (through understanding others' contexts) (Aas & Vavik, 2015; De Lasson et al., 2016). These competencies allow leaders to broaden their worldview, which in turn improves, influences and impacts others' performance. Whilst it can be inferred that group coaching could lead to leadership effectiveness, most studies to date have not been conducted in the context of executive development programmes. This study therefore extends the literature by exploring how group coaching brings about changes in leadership effectiveness in the context of a business school leadership development programme.

# Methodology

To address the research question, this study used a sequential, exploratory, mixed-methods approach incorporating both

qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Subedi, 2016). Phase 1, constituting the quantitative study, involved the administration of a 360-degree, multisource feedback instrument before and after the implementation of a 6-month leadership development programme. This phase set out to establish whether leadership effectiveness had improved as a result of the programme. Phase 2, constituting the qualitative study, aimed to deepen the analysis by examining the specific role of group coaching in developing leadership effectiveness, using in-depth interviews.

## Phase 1 – Quantitative study

A convenient, non-probability sample of upper-middle to senior women managers, who had participated in a leadership development programme at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), were invited to take part in the study. Of the 62 women invited to participate, 51 gave their consent and joined the study. The sample was checked to ensure that, from a sectoral perspective, it was proportionately representative of the wider group from which it had been drawn.

The GIBS leadership development programme took the form of one session conducted once a month over a period of 6 months. Each session comprised a half-day plenary (classroom) session, followed by a half-day (structured) group coaching session. The classroom sessions were not traditional teaching sessions but were rather facilitated sessions that used case studies, guest speakers and dialogue processes, amongst other interventions. Thus, the group coaching component was substantial, covering roughly half the programme. It comprised six learning themes: (1) a life story session, enabling participants to reflect on memorable experiences on their journey through life, to get to know one another and to create a psychologically safe space for learning, (2) feedback on the 360-degree assessment, enabling participants to identify their strengths and weaknesses in the area of leadership, (3) a values session, enabling participants to explore their authentic selves, (4) a leadership impact session (with a video recording of the participants engaged in an activity), enabling participants to receive feedback from others on their leadership impact, (5) a personal development plan, which helped participants to develop long-term goals and actions for achieving them and (6) a leadership vision session, enabling participants to craft a future vision for themselves at the end of the leadership development programme. Various coaching processes and tools gleaned from the literature were used to facilitate integration and internalisation of learning (Griffiths, 2015).

At the beginning of the programme, the women managers were asked to identify individuals to complete the online 360-degree leadership effectiveness questionnaire, including their direct managers, peers and subordinates. The participants (who also completed the questionnaire) approached the same individuals to provide ratings 6 months after the completion of the programme.

The questionnaire used in this study for the pre-test and post-test assessments was a self-response, Likert scale-type questionnaire comprising 50 items that had been used on many occasions in GIBS learning programmes to assess leadership effectiveness. The items had originally been compiled in line with a 'head, heart and hands' model, which assesses leadership behaviours according to head themes (strategic vision, strategic pathways and organisational culture), heart themes (inspiration, beliefs, feelings, vision and purpose) and hands themes (capability and commitment) (Nicholls, 1994). The model was extended by GIBS to include 'impact' factors, that is, how the follower experiences or is impacted by the leader. The revised questionnaire was aligned to the earlier one but incorporated 12 additional items relating to impact.

The constructs measured in the questionnaire are summarised in Table 1. For all the items (62 in total), respondents were asked to select the relevant option from the seven-point scale, ranging from 'seldom effective' to 'always a strength'.

## Phase 2 – Qualitative study

At the end of the leadership development programme, 12% (six) of the 51 participants in the quantitative study were invited to be interviewed, with the assurance that their responses would remain confidential. A simple random sampling technique using random tables was used to select the participants (Short, Ketchen, & Palmer, 2002). These participants were further checked to ensure that they proportionately represented the various industry sectors from which they were drawn.

**TABLE 1:** Thornhill 360-degree assessment measures.

| 360-degree components | Description | Key components |
|---|---|---|
| Head – Creating direction | Comprises 10 behaviours signalling that the leader understands the business, sets the direction, solves problems and makes decisions. | Big picture, vision, business understanding, solutions focus, innovation and decision-making |
| Heart 1 – Enabling self | Represents the interpersonal and personal aspects of leadership and emotional intelligence, respectively. | Self-awareness, openness and growth, energy, self-control, action, authenticity and confidence |
| Heart 2 – Enabling others | | Listening, respect, valuing and celebration of others; support for and confidence in others; active in building, coaching and supporting the decisions of others |
| Heart 3 – Enabling groups and the organisation | Relates to the effective use of influence and ensuring that people can work together constructively. | Self-confidence and influence; ability to act for the team in thought and practice, to manage conflict and power dynamics, to network and to inspire loyalty |
| Hands – Execution | Relates to holding people and processes to account and ensuring that they are properly developed. | High standards, clear objectives, consequences for poor performance, use of resources, training implementation |
| Leadership impact | Indicates what people feel when they are with an individual manager. | Aspects influenced by the heart of the leader |

*Source*: Thornhill, (2019). 360 Feedback Multi-Rater System. *Head, Heart and Hands Model.* https://thornhill.co.za/wordpress/head-heart-and-hands-model

A semi-structured, in-depth interview technique was used to conduct face-to-face interviews with participants (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). The purpose of the in-depth interviews was twofold: firstly, to strengthen the data obtained from the quantitative part of the study and secondly, to assess the perceived role of group coaching in developing leadership effectiveness in the context of a business school leadership development programme (Subedi, 2016). To this end, the in-depth interview guide covered questions that related both to the effect of the classroom plenary sessions and the effect of the group coaching component on leadership effectiveness. The interviews were recorded unobtrusively, supported by field notes and observations. The interview data were then transcribed, anonymised and stored securely. (The interview guide appears in Annexure A.)

### Data analysis

A professional statistical consulting service was used to assist with the quantitative analysis. The average responses to the pre-programme questionnaire were analysed, using Cronbach's alpha values, to determine the reliability of the different constructs (head, heart, hands and leadership impact) in the questionnaire.

A total of 16 participants were able to complete the post-questionnaire administration themselves, whilst about 18 participants obtained sufficient respondent input to include 'others' (namely, subordinates, team members and peers) as a participant response category. However, only three managers who had successfully completed the pre-questionnaire administration were able to complete the post-questionnaire administration. Therefore, this category of respondent was excluded from the final analysis.

The mean and standard deviations were computed for the 'self' and 'other' 360-degree ratings for both the pre-programme and post-programme questionnaire administrations. Two paired *t*-test analyses were compared to determine if there was a difference between the means of the pre-group and post-group summated scores pertaining to perceptions of self and other respondents, respectively. Consequently, the analysis generated two average mean change scores: one showing a change in self-rating across the two administrations and one showing a change in other respondents' ratings across the two administrations. The scores of respondents who identified themselves as the participants' managers were also compared across the two administrations, but the results were later excluded.

In the qualitative segment of this study, an interpretative approach was used to conduct inductive content analysis, with several iterations to generate first-level codes and categories (Saldaña, 2013). Subsequently, a deductive thematic analysis was conducted to reveal recurring patterns of meaning (or themes) (Saldaña, 2013).

### Ethical considerations

The Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Non-Medical) at the University of Witwatersrand have approved this research proposal and granted permission for the research to commence (9510357K. 2011).

## Results

This section first presents the pre-test and post-test assessment results pertaining to each of the dimensions of leadership effectiveness amongst the sample participants. Following a discussion of the results for the different dimensions, relevant findings from the interviews are presented, which provide deeper insights into changes in leadership effectiveness. These findings relate to the programme as a whole, hence the combination of group coaching and classroom facilitation in leadership development. Finally, the section presents the qualitative findings, which reveal the specific role of group coaching in the building of leadership effectiveness. The analysis of the findings prompted the construction of a framework denoting the consolidated impact of group coaching on leadership effectiveness.

### Quantitative results on leadership effectiveness, supported by qualitative findings

A paired *t*-test was conducted on each pre-programme and post-programme pair of means, as indicated in Table 2. The *p*-values were calculated, with significant differences indicated at the $p < 0.05$ level.

The overall quantitative results show that there were no significant differences between pre-programme and post-programme scores in the participants' responses to the questionnaire. The paired *t*-test results for the 'managers' group were not included in the analysis because the number of managers who completed both administrations for a participant was too low for the results to be deemed statistically accurate. The results reveal significant changes after the programme in all leadership constructs in the respondent category 'others' (participants' subordinates and peers).

### Creating direction (head)

This leadership effectiveness category comprises components such as big-picture thinking, vision, business understanding, solutions-driven focus, innovation and decision-making with https://thornhill.co.za/wordpress/surveys/. The *p*-value for self under this category was 0.7319, which is above the significance level of $p < 0.05$. This means that the participants in the programme did not see themselves as having improved in the elements making up this category of leadership. However, the assessment by others (peers, subordinates) was significant ($p = 0.0140$), meaning that the participants' peers and subordinates felt that their (the participants') ability to craft a vision and set a direction had substantially improved.

The qualitative data from the interviews showed that group coaching had helped participants to stay on track in pursuit of the direction, goal and game plan that they had set. This was done by 'setting objectives', 'doing checks and balances' or performing evaluations in the light of these objectives in the interests of continuous improvement.

**TABLE 2:** Mean (standard deviation) values for constructs and *p*-values for each pre- and post-paired *t*-test indicating significance.

| Group (*N*) | Construct | Pre-test | | Post-test | | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | |
| Self (16) | Head – Creating direction | 4.52 | 0.87 | 4.44 | 0.97 | 0.7319 |
| | Heart 1 – Enable self | 4.82 | 0.74 | 4.85 | 1.09 | 0.9776 |
| | Heart 2 – Enable others | 4.89 | 0.70 | 4.54 | 1.07 | 0.1110 |
| | Heart 3 – Enable groups | 4.39 | 0.86 | 4.40 | 0.95 | 0.9650 |
| | Hands – Execution | 4.71 | 0.70 | 4.45 | 0.78 | 0.3911 |
| | Leadership impact | 4.67 | 0.79 | 4.60 | 1.05 | 0.5231 |
| Managers (3) | Head – Creating direction | 4.21 | 0.83 | 5.66 | 0.73 | - |
| | Heart 1 – Enable self | 4.60 | 0.64 | 5.25 | 0.97 | - |
| | Heart 2 – Enable others | 4.46 | 0.63 | 5.58 | 0.76 | - |
| | Heart 3 – Enable groups | 4.17 | 0.73 | 5.34 | 0.94 | - |
| | Hands – Execution | 4.43 | 0.74 | 5.55 | 0.83 | - |
| | Leadership impact | 4.51 | 0.68 | 5.86 | 0.66 | - |
| Others (18) | Head – Creating direction | 4.90 | 0.68 | 5.29 | 0.65 | 0.0140* |
| | Heart 1 – Enable self | 4.97 | 0.68 | 5.50 | 0.49 | 0.0025* |
| | Heart 2 – Enable others | 4.96 | 0.64 | 5.41 | 0.57 | 0.0091* |
| | Heart 3 – Enable groups | 4.77 | 0.67 | 5.18 | 0.59 | 0.0060* |
| | Hands – Execution | 4.93 | 0.65 | 5.26 | 0.66 | 0.0115* |
| | Leadership impact | 5.08 | 0.72 | 5.62 | 0.64 | 0.0152* |

*Source*: Data from Reid A, Masters Thesis- 2012
Note: *, Significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

## Enabling self (heart 1)

This leadership effectiveness category comprises components such as self-awareness, openness and growth, energy, self-control, action, authenticity and self-confidence (Thornhill, 2019). Whilst this category's self-assessment *p*-value was above the significance level ($p = 0.9776$), the assessment by others was the most significant ($p = 0.0025$). This was corroborated by the qualitative data, which revealed that the participants had improved in terms of authentic self and self-confidence.

The participants reported similarities in the areas of increased awareness of self and knowing authentic self. Increased awareness was associated with 'learning more', 'delving into self' or 'learning about whole self', 'unlocking self' and 'opening my eyes'. Reference was made to values (a specific aspect of self-knowledge), including 'what is meaningful' and 'what is important' to self. Five of the six respondents articulated new insights relating to 'knowing authentic self'. This resonated with participants' responses relating to understanding and learning about themselves. Such knowledge was viewed as a state of mind or an internal attribute, as opposed to a hard skill.

Four respondents commented that they had increased self-confidence, which manifested in different ways, including a feeling of certainty or courage and an awareness of their own power. Participants also spoke about a 'shift' from self-doubt, a lack of confidence and fear of being wrong to growing (or renewed) confidence. The reported positive shifts included having the courage to speak out, voice their opinions more often, act in line with their beliefs and strengths and concentrate on pursuing their passions.

## Enabling others (heart 2)

This leadership effectiveness category comprises components such as listening, respect, valuing and celebrating others, confidence in others and actively building, coaching and supporting others' decisions (Thornhill, 2019). The self-assessment *p*-value was above the significance level at 0.1110, whilst the other *p*-value was significant at 0.0091. Moreover, the qualitative interview data confirmed an improvement in participants' ability to understand and engage with others.

## Enabling groups and the organisation (heart 3)

This leadership effectiveness category comprises components such as self-confidence and influence, ability to deal with conflict and power dynamics, networking and inspiring loyalty (Thornhill, 2019). The *p*-value for self ($p = 0.9650$) showed no significant changes in leadership effectiveness, although the others' assessment was significant ($p = 0.0060$). All six interviewees reinforced the theme of influencing others, including encouraging them to set goals and mentor and empower subordinates.

## Execution (hands)

This leadership effectiveness category comprises components such as high standards, clear objectives, consequences for poor performance, an ability to find and apply resources and training and development systems for employees (Thornhill, 2019).The self-assessment *p*-value showed no significant changes in these components ($p = 0.3911$), whilst the others' assessment indicated significant changes ($p = 0.0115$). There was no meaningful feedback from the participants on how this leadership effectiveness category was impacted by the programme's group coaching and classroom facilitation activities.

## Leadership impact

Leadership impact, a composite of all the other leadership effectiveness categories, indicates what people feel when

they are with a manager, which is what a leader strives for (Thornhill, 2019). For this category, the self-assessment *p*-value showed no significant changes ($p = 0.5231$), whilst the others' assessment showed significant changes in leadership effectiveness ($p = 0.0152$) both before and after the programme. There was no noteworthy feedback from the participants regarding how this component of leadership effectiveness was impacted by the programme's group coaching and classroom facilitation activities.

## The role of group coaching in developing leadership effectiveness

The findings from the interviews indicate that the group coaching component of the leadership development programme contributed in four main ways: the creation of a safe environment for learning, sharing and support, learning from external input and awareness of self.

### Creation of a safe environment

A strong theme emerging from the data was safety. All six respondents commented in detail on the importance of a safe environment for the purposes of sharing and providing support. Safety was described as a space characterised by non-judgement and validation, where it was possible to identify with others. Furthermore, individuals' similarity put them in a unique position to offer advice and support on common issues and concerns. The different meanings ascribed to safety coalesced to create an image of an environment characterised by confidentiality, intimacy and widespread support, where people were not judgemental and had no hidden agendas. This environment allowed participants to reveal who they were, express themselves freely, share their beliefs and views and put their personality and leadership skills on display. Whilst only three participants made specific reference to a 'non-judgemental' atmosphere, others alluded to it when they spoke of having 'space to be myself' and 'just allowing my personality to be'.

Other key aspects relating to safety in sharing were affirmation and validation, in the sense of being valued. Affirmation (flowing from external acknowledgements and encouragement) and confidence (flowing from heightened self-esteem or self-worth) were cultivated in the group coaching sessions through participants' actions, opinions and insights being valued. Some participants reported that in their work environment, they were hesitant to share because they lacked support and did not know whom to trust.

### Sharing and support

All six respondents provided frequent and rich commentary on the importance of a safe environment for sharing and winning support. Participants also indicated that they benefited from giving inputs and collaborating with others. Five of the respondents remarked that receiving external input from others (largely peers) and seeing themselves on video had assisted their learning.

### Learning from external input

Learning from others was mainly achieved through the feedback provided by peers, including 'what peers think and feel', 'insight into how you're perceived' and 'learning about my role in the group'. Another dimension of receiving feedback was 'seeing or observing yourself', including 'seeing how you interact' and 'seeing your demeanour, body language, gestures and use of voice' and 'leadership style'.

### Awareness of self

The process of learning from others led to an increased awareness of self. Comments on the effects of this input included 'causing one to reflect on', 'keeping at the back of one's mind', 'acknowledging' something and being more actively 'challenged' and intent on 'setting objectives'.

# Discussion

The findings reveal that the combination of group coaching and classroom facilitation significantly enhanced leadership effectiveness across the head, heart and hands categories. Figure 1 shows that group coaching facilitated the creation of a psychologically safe environment which stimulated learning amongst the participants. This resulted in two streams of leadership development and effectiveness. The first stream focused on self or personal competence (De Lasson et al., 2016), which is associated with greater self-awareness, self-confidence and authenticity, a heightened sense of direction and an ability to work towards and achieve goals. The second stream focused on social competence, which is associated with understanding, relating to (De Lasson et al., 2016), influencing and empowering others.

From these findings, five themes were extracted: (1) group coaching induces psychological safety which stimulates learning and growth; (2) group coaching facilitates learning through external input and feedback; (3) group coaching stimulates self-awareness and authenticity and improves self-confidence; (4) group coaching provides a sense of direction or a game plan; and (5) group coaching improves leaders' ability to influence others positively.

## Group coaching induces psychological safety, which stimulates learning and growth

Safety is commonly referred to in the literature as a necessary condition for learning as it is easier to learn when one feels safe and valued. If organisations provide neither challenges nor support, leaders are unlikely to solicit feedback or other external input that would induce learning. Psychological safety means 'to feel safe at work in order to grow, learn, contribute and perform effectively in a rapidly changing world' (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 23). The literature argues that a psychologically safe environment provides employees, teams or group members with the confidence to voice ideas, willingly seek feedback from others, provide honest feedback, collaborate, take risks and experiment (Frazier, Fainshmidt, Klinger, Pezeshkan, & Vracheva, 2017; Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017).

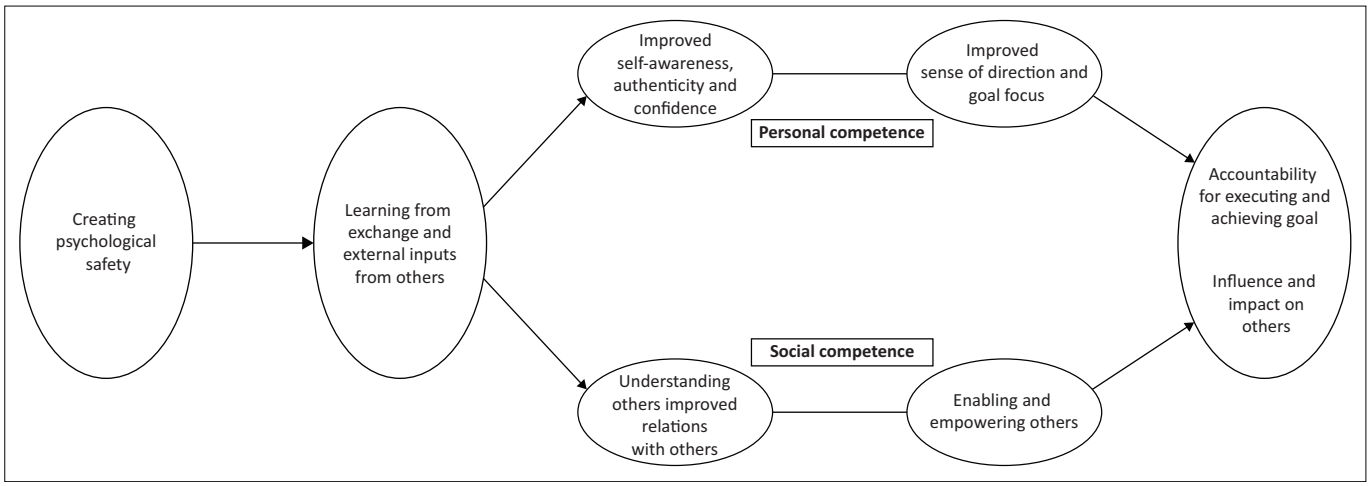


**FIGURE 1:** Framework for the role of group coaching in developing leadership effectiveness.

Thus, there is potential for members of groups to act as emotional anchors for one another's learning, creating a safe and stimulating atmosphere that is infused with acceptance and support, which also motivates members to embrace learning and change (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017). The findings from this study confirm that group coaching fosters psychological safety and cohesion, which enables participants to 'self-reflect', 'self-explore', 'learn', 'relearn' and 'realign themselves' and to engage in 'authentic self-development' (Fusco et al., 2015a, 2016b).

## Group coaching facilitates learning through external input and feedback

Learning about oneself from external input (feedback from peers and others and video recordings) was a particularly strong theme, judging from participants' comments. It provided an opportunity to learn from 'collective knowledge', 'what peers think and feel about you' and receiving 'honest, face-to-face feedback' and 'objective views from others'.

These findings are in line with the literature, which views group coaching as a stimulant to enhanced learning as a result of inputs from role models and multiple learning partners and personal reflection (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Britton, 2015; Flückiger et al., 2017; Reid et al., 2020). Group coaching provides alternative solutions to challenges, whilst also suggesting various forms of change and improvement. Moreover, participants' exposure to a range of views about their own behaviour helped them to see where and how they could improve (De Lasson et al., 2016). This lends support not only to the notion of learning through collective knowledge and peer input, but also to the importance of knowing how one is perceived and how this impacts others. The findings also reinforce the argument that exposure to different perspectives urges reflection and the desire to change (Reid et al., 2020).

## Group coaching stimulates self-awareness and authenticity and improves self-confidence

The findings highlighted participants' journey towards self-awareness, evidenced in knowing, learning, delving into, 'unlocking', engaging in self-reflection and deciding what was meaningful or important. The findings resonate with those segments of the literature that associate leadership with self-orientation, authenticity and self-knowledge. The literature also asserts that group coaching is concerned with individual learning and strengthening personal insights (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015; Britton, 2015; Flückiger et al., 2017). In other words, it promotes individuality, self-development and self-transformation, albeit in relation to others (Ibarra et al., 2010).

In addition, the findings pertaining to 'knowing authentic self' and being genuine and true to oneself confirm recent studies that group coaching contributes to the development of authentic leadership (Fusco et al., 2015a, 2016b). A key element of knowing oneself is the ability to discern what is particularly meaningful and valuable. Authentic leaders need to have a clear understanding of their own value system, which they should use as the basis of their leadership (Aas & Vavik, 2015; Fusco et al., 2015a, 2015b). Therefore, group coaching not only creates opportunities for acquiring insights about the self; it also uncovers their inherent meaning, value and purpose (Fusco et al., 2015b, 2016a). The findings also indicate that group coaching contributed to improved self-confidence and a shift from harbouring 'self-doubt' and 'fear' to being 'courageous' and able to express one's 'own voice'.

## Group coaching provides a sense of direction or a game plan

Group coaching affected participants' ability to develop a sense of direction. This is consistent with the literature which indicates that group coaching, like individual coaching, can help to formulate a 'game plan' or an overall objective relating to new insights and intended change (Britton, 2015; Kets de Vries, 2014). Group settings can lead to the framing of a purpose larger than that of individuals, which encourages them to feel that they are contributing to a larger endeavour. Connecting leaders to their purpose is critical for strong and enlightened leadership (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015; Britton, 2015).

### Group coaching improves leaders' ability to influence others positively

Whilst no noteworthy feedback was forthcoming from the participants on how this component of leadership effectiveness was impacted by group coaching, it could be extrapolated, based on extant literature, that a better understanding of and improved relations with others and an empowering mindset as well as enhanced self-awareness, authenticity and self-confidence could pave the way for influencing others positively (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015; Flückiger et al., 2017). This is validated by the quantitative data, which showed significant changes in leadership effectiveness before and after the leadership development programme by others at a *p*-value of 0.0152.

### Implications for leadership development programmes within a business school context

The case for group coaching as a mode of leadership development has been gaining momentum in recent years. In particular, group coaching appears to have contributed immensely to the development of leadership skills as they relate to personal and social competence (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Aas & Vavik, 2015; De Lasson et al., 2016; Fusco et al., 2016a), which was also evident in this study. The implications for business schools (and indeed corporate entities) are that group coaching can and should be explored as a vehicle for learning in the context of leadership development.

The framework developed as an outcome of this study could be used by designers of management and leadership development programmes to supplement other educational interventions used in their programmes. Moreover, a 360-degree assessment tool such as the head, heart and hands model could constitute a useful foundation for the group coaching process.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to assess the role of group coaching in developing leadership effectiveness. More specifically, it investigated changes in leadership effectiveness after a group of participants had attended a business school leadership development programme, which comprised classroom facilitation and group coaching sessions.

The findings reveal that leadership effectiveness had changed markedly as a result of the 6-month programme, particularly with respect to enabling self and others. Moreover, group coaching combined with classroom facilitation resulted in improved personal competence (evidenced in knowing one's authentic self, self-confidence and an improved sense of direction) and social competence (evidenced in understanding and enjoying improved relations with others and empowering and influencing others positively). Importantly, too, the programme's group coaching component was found to create a safe environment for learning through input and support received from others. This stimulated awareness of self and what truly matters, which contributed to heightened leadership effectiveness amongst the participants.

### Limitations of the study

The study's main limitations were the sample and sample size. Moreover, the selection of a programme with just women middle managers meant that the study could not be generalised to the other gender. Thus, it remains an explorative study. Nevertheless, it contributes to the expanding literature on group coaching and leadership development and to the evolving theoretical discourse on developing leaders through the building of human and social capital. It is recommended that further studies of a similar nature be conducted, covering both genders and using larger samples to further test the framework developed in this study on the role of group coaching in leadership development.

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### Competing interests

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

### Authors' contributions

A.R. conceptualised, collected data, conducted the initial literature review and wrote the first draft as part of a master's degree research report. G.M. converted the M.A. thesis into a journal article – this included an update of the literature review and reanalysing data for the purpose of the journal manuscript.

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### Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available on request.

### 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 institution of the authors.

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