Academic Paper

Coaching in the context of talent management: an ambivalent practice

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Abstract

Little is known about coaching in the context of talent management, especially the views of talented employees on its role for their career progression and leadership development. This single case study offers a contextualised analysis of the role of coaching in four talent management programmes in a global bank. Drawing on social exchange theory and psychological contract and based on 30 semi-structured interviews collected from talented employees, HR managers and coaches, this qualitative study reveals that talent coaching is perceived as a pivotal career event, yet an ambivalent practice difficult to operationalise.

Introduction

This study focuses on the role of coaching in talent management programmes in a multinational financial services organisation. Talent management (TM) and leadership development are both a perennial issue and a core priority for organisational development in a highly competitive, uncertain and knowledge-based economy (McNally, 2014; Deloitte, 2018). Since the global financial crisis of 2008, the banking sector has been facing on-going transformative change (Gomber et al., 2018). In addition, it has been reported that the industry faces low employee engagement, with about half of its young professionals actively looking for an exit from their current organisation (PWC, 2017). As a result, a future leadership crisis has been predicted in the banking sector, unless banks manage to deliver a more holistic career proposition that potential employees would see as meaningful, and to make the industry an employment of choice (Lemerle, Rudisuli, & Steiner, 2019). As few TM empirical studies have been undertaken in the banking and financial services industry (Sparrow, Farndale, & Scullion, 2013; Alferaih, 2018), this study seeks to examine TM practices in a global bank that has experienced significant restructuring, downsizing and change following the global financial crisis of 2008.

Despite a steady interest from HR practitioners and scholars in the past 10 years (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Sparrow, 2019), the effectiveness of TM activities is often questioned. A global survey of HR practitioners and managers revealed that only 5% of participants consider TM practices as effective (Andrianova, Maor, & Schaninger, 2018). Amongst the TM practices taking place in large organisations, coaching has continuously been identified as one of the most effective TM activities by HR professionals and practitioners (CIPD, 2015). Coaching is a developmental intervention widely used in large organisations for performance and leadership development purposes. It represented a sector worth $2.849 billion U.S. dollars in 2019, a 21% increase over the 2015 estimate (ICF, 2020). Surprisingly, whilst being identified as an effective TM practice, coaching outcomes have received little attention when delivered as part of a TM strategy (Blackman, Moscardo, & Gray, 2016). To address this neglect, this study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of coaching used as a TM practice in a global bank. Particularly, it seeks to examine the views of multiple stakeholders, namely the talented employees receiving coaching, HR managers, internal and external coaches involved in TM programmes.

This paper seeks to bridge two fields of study, namely TM and coaching. Based on the theoretical frameworks used in both fields, this study draws on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1986) and psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995), which provide a useful frame of reference to understand coaching in the context of TM, and particularly to examine the relationship dynamics between talented employees, coaches, and the organisation.

Literature review

Talent management

Talent management is a practitioner-led field which emerged in the early 2000s when the consulting firm McKinsey coined the expression "the war for talent" (Michaels, 2001). Although the nature, scope and boundaries of TM are still being debated (McDonnell, Collings, Mellahi, & Schuler, 2017), a consensus has recently started to emerge among scholars. The term talent refers to the human capital needed in organisations to create value and sustain competitive advantage (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Talent Management (TM) comprises the management and development of high-performing and high-potential employees who are expected to contribute disproportionally at pivotal positions for the success of the firm (Collings, Scullion, & Vaiman, 2015).

TM practices typically include leadership schemes with one-to-one support in the form of mentoring, coaching, training and international assignments. Amongst these activities, coaching and in-house training are identified as the most effective. However, most surveys and studies (CIPD, 2017; ICF, 2020) analyse data collected from HR professionals and decision makers in organisations, but not specifically from the participants being coached in these programmes. Consequently, it has been claimed that talent systems need to be better understood from the perspective of the talented employees, examining specifically their expectations and the impact that TM activities may have on their career progression within the company and their leadership development (Gallardo-Gallardo & Thunnissen, 2016; Cascio & Boudreau, 2016). Hence, this study explores the views of coaching of multiple stakeholders, with particular attention paid to talented employees taking part in TM programmes.

Coaching in organisations

In today's global economy, multinational companies recognise the need to develop their capacity to manage international and complex operations, and consequently acknowledge the imperative to develop their talent into future global leaders (Mendenhall, 2018). In this context, coaching is widely used in organisations for performance and leadership development purposes. Over the past two

decades, research on coaching for global leadership development has seen a steady and growing interest (Passmore, 2013; Canwell, Dongrie, Neveras, & Stockton, 2014). The increased funding related to coaching activities in large firms led to many debates on how to identify the benefits of coaching, calculate a potential return on investment, and establish correlations between the cost of coaching and the contribution to the firm's competitive advantage (De Meuse, Dai, & Lee, 2009; Grant, 2012).

Distinguishing coaching from other dyadic helping interventions in organisations, especially mentoring, remains a challenge. Traditionally, mentoring in the workplace refers to a long-term relationship between two individuals which involves guidance, support and advice for personal growth. A mentor is typically a more experienced and accomplished professional who takes a special personal interest in guiding and developing a junior or less experienced person in a relationship of mutual trust (Gibb, 1999; Clutterbuck & Lane, 2004). Although coaching and mentoring require similar skills such as listening, communication, feedback and empathy, workplace coaching focuses on the development of performance or behaviours which are critical for the individual to develop and progress on the career ladder within an organisation (Coutu & Kauffman, 2009). Yet, the definitions of coaching and mentoring are often blurred in practice, with "coaching" often used as an umbrella term for a range of helping interventions in the workplace such as training, counselling, consulting and mentoring (Garvey, Stokes, & Megginson, 2017). As a result, coaching and mentoring are often amalgamated in practice, and are often described as hybrid practices (Western, 2012), and the two terms are often used interchangeably in organisations and beyond. Furthermore, workplace coaching has become a "generic signifier" for good communication, people skills and empathetic management skills in the workplace (Western, 2012: 67). Consequently, the term is used expansively and encompasses a variety of meanings and practices. Recently, coaching and mentoring have been characterised as "two sides of the same coin" to highlight the role of context in determining which approaches, skills and behaviours are used in practice by practitioners (Stokes, Fatien-Diochon, & Otter, 2020: 1). The term executive coaching prevails in the literature; however, it does not account for the coaching embedded in TM programmes targeting less experienced professionals. Hence, for the purpose of this study, the term coaching is selected because it reflects the terminology used by the study participants engaged in the TM programmes operated by the case company. In this context, talent coaching refers to the one-to-one intervention embedded in TM programmes aiming at the leadership development and career promotion of talented employees operating at various seniority levels.

The workplace coaching literature widely emphasises the positive impacts of coaching at individual and organisational levels, which includes leadership development, performance enhancement and employee engagement (Bickerich, Michel, & Shea, 2017). Yet, there is little empirical research on the role of coaching as it is perceived by the participants involved in TM programmes (Clutterbuck, 2012; Clutterbuck, Poulsen, & Kochan, 2013). Therefore, this study examines the perception of the role coaching in the context of TM to understand the underlying processes of career progression and leadership development of talented employees within a global firm.

Theoretical framework

Over the last decade, TM has emerged as one of the fastest-growing field of study in business and management, yet with empirical studies lack a clear theoretical framework as well as rigour in their methodological approaches (Thunnissen & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2019). Similarly, empirical studies on coaching for leadership development have dramatically increased, yet they remain mainly practitioner-led and are characterised by a lack of independent academic research (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018). In addition, the theoretical underpinning of both fields is still evolving. Drawing on the resource based view and human capital theory, talent is operationalised as human and social capital in the TM literature (Dries, 2013). Other dominant theories underpinning TM research include social capital, social exchange theory (SET), psychological contract and institutionalism (Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo, 2015; Gallardo-Gallardo &

Thunnissen, 2016). Coaching theories include adult learning, positive psychology and human resources development concepts (Schutte & Steyn, 2015). SET and the psychological contract have recently emerged as a relevant theoretical lens to explore both positive and negative effects of coaching in organisations (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019).

Social exchange theory stipulates that individuals develop relationships based on a cost-benefit analysis whereby mutual gains are made over time and are reinforced by the reciprocal benefits generated by this social exchange (Blau, 1986). The concept of psychological contract derives from SET, and refers to the implicit and mutual expectations and duties that individuals develop as part of their employment relationship with their organisation (Rousseau, 2011). In this study, the SET and the psychological contract are used as a theoretical lens to make sense of the data. The two concepts have been identified as emerging frameworks in both TM and coaching studies. They have selected for their relevance and usefulness to understand the relationship dynamics between the coach-coachee and organisation which emerged as an unexpected pattern in the participants' accounts. The next section discusses the research design adopted for this study.

Methodology

Based on the review of the TM and coaching literature, this study addresses the following questions:

1. How do multiple stakeholders (talented employees, HR managers and coaches) perceive the contribution of coaching in the context of TM and leadership development programmes in a multinational company?
2. What is the perceived role of coaching for talented employees receiving coaching at various stages of their careers in a global organisation?
3. How is coaching characterised in the context of global TM and leadership development?

The research aims to secure an in-depth understanding of the perception of coaching as a contingent and subjective phenomenon. The researcher's philosophical stance is in line with the interpretivist paradigm (Creswell, 2013). The methodological design of the study is qualitative, idiographic and abductive. The data analysis draws on abductive reasoning which emphasises the familiarity of the researcher with the literature and existing theoretical frameworks as a starting point to understand the phenomenon studied in real life (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Van Maanen, Sørensen, & Mitchell, 2007). The familiarisation allows the researcher to explore the relationship between theory and the data. Hence, abduction is used as a form of scientific inference to solve a puzzle, to look for an explanation for a surprising phenomenon or unanticipated findings (Welch, Plakoyiannaki, Piekkari, & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2013). The abductive approach has been selected because the dominant theoretical frameworks in TM and coaching including human and social capital theories cannot account for the set of reciprocal obligations and the development of strong ties in the triangular relationships formed by the coach-coachee-organisation in the context of TM. The SET and its derived concept of psychological contract have emerged during the analysis phase as a useful lens to understand how talent coaching is experienced as a pivotal career-event and how it may strengthen the triangular coaching relationships.

The research design is a single case study seeking an in-depth understanding the role of coaching delivered in TM programmes in a multinational organisation in the banking and financial services sector. The case study research design has been selected to provide an in-depth qualitative analysis of the role of coaching for talented employees at various stages of their career (Gaya & Smith, 2016). The case organisation is a global bank operating in more than 160 countries. The investigation focuses on four TM programmes delivered by the company in the Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) region, which accounts for 56 countries. Purposive sampling and the interview recruitment protocol were discussed and agreed with the company's EMEA Head of

Organisational Development to ensure access to appropriate data and anonymity of the participants.

The primary data includes 30 semi-structured interviews of employees participating to at least one of the TM programmes deployed in the EMEA region as part of the global TM strategy of the company. Each programme targets leaders at a specific hierarchical level of management within the organisational structure of the firm, from junior leaders up to senior executives and CEOs. The organisation has also designed a TM programme for women leaders at senior level to support their career progression. This programme is also included in the study, so that all TM programmes deployed in the EMEA region can be analysed. In addition to the talented employees taking part in these programmes, the study participants are composed of HR managers, internal and external coaches to provide an in-depth understanding of coaching in TM programmes from multiple perspectives.

Each interview was audio-recorded then professionally transcribed. Following a first round of interviews, a second round was organised to get further details from the same participants and confirm the themes emerging from the first data set. 23 participants were interviewed, and 7 of these were interviewed a second time, which makes up a total of 30 interviews.

Table 1: Data collection and interviews with different stakeholders

Talent management programmes	1st interview	2nd interview	
Programme A - junior leaders	3	1	
Programme B- growing leaders	4	1	
Programme C- women leaders	3	1	
Programme D- senior leaders	2	1	
External coaches	3	2	
Internal coaches	2	1	
HR managers and internal coach	3	0	
Programme managers	3	0	
Total:	**23**	**7**	**30**

The data set is analysed using a thematic approach, suitable for qualitative inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and is supported by the software Nvivo. The data collected was analysed based on the audio-recordings and the field notes composed by the researcher following each interview. These notes are complemented by memos which document the researcher's theoretical and reflective thoughts including potential codes/themes (Gibbs, 2002). Based on prolonged engagement with the data set and analysis of the field notes, thematic analysis is conducted to identify emerging topics (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Then, the Gioia methodology is used to define the data structure with aggregated dimensions and underlying themes (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013).

Findings

The study provides empirical evidence for talent coaching holding a pivotal role for the growth of talent leaders. This section explores the perceived factors of success and concerns generated by talent coaching at individual and organisational levels. To facilitate the reading and preserve anonymity, each study participant is allocated a fictive name and is identified according to the following denomination system : 'Name, Group of participants, Programme (if applicable), Interview round', such as 'Peter, T, C, 1'.

Table 2: Abbreviations used for study participants

Participants	Abbreviation
Talented employees	T
HR managers	HR
Internal senior business leader-coach	Int. C
External coach	Ext. C

Factors of successful programme talent coaching

First, the study reveals that participants involved in TM programmes acknowledge the benefits of coaching, especially when it involves a long-term, bespoke, developmental and inter-connective, trustworthy and reflective relationship.

Figure 1: The six factors of successful talent coaching
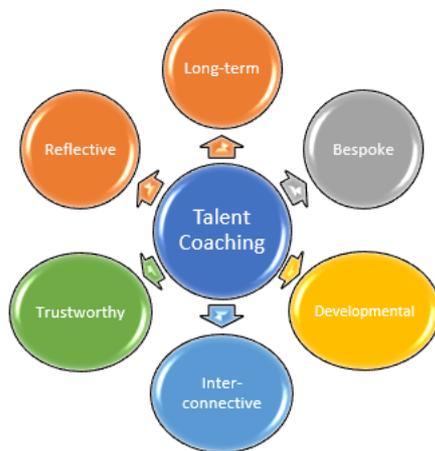
Long-term

The study participants often commented on the length of the TM programmes and the number of coaching sessions allocated, with typically two sessions at junior level and up to five at senior level. They argued that the limited number of coaching sessions offered within the timeframe of the TM programme was insufficient for any long-lasting outcomes, although coaching was experienced as a key event:

> *It was underwhelming, because it was half an hour (...) so, it wasn't very much. It was just a taste, but it is the bit I remember, really. (Oliver, T, B, 1)*

Some external coaches shared a similar view and claimed that programme talent coaching "is not coaching" (Paul, Ext. C, 1), due to its sporadic and short nature. By contrast, talented employees valued long-term internal coaching relationships to develop their leadership skills and map their career progression. Accordingly, they perceived the coaching relationship as successful when it continued beyond the timeframe of the programme. This suggests that when perceived as successful, talent coaching tends to evolve as a long-term relationship similar to mentoring.

Bespoke

Coaching was described as the "human and personal touch" (Emma, T, A, 1) in a large global organisation, allowing the coachees to step back, reflect and focus on their personal development. Specifically, talent coaching contributed to customise the formal training received as part of some TM programmes. For example, an external coach summarised:

My role is to tailor the learning experience for them [the talented employees] so they get the most out of it. (Paul, Ext. C, 1)

Leader participants agreed that the coaching agenda was flexible enough to address their personal needs such as work-life balance, leadership development, reputation building and career planning. However, readiness for coaching was highlighted as a critical factor for coaching success, albeit not all talented employees may demonstrate a propension to be coached:

Coaching is not for everybody. But people who will go to the coaching sessions with an open mindset are the people I think eventually go into the big leadership roles. (Georges, Int. C, 1)

This suggests that a positive attitude towards talent coaching may be interpreted as a signalling behaviour of leadership potential. Positive experiences of coaching and personal predispositions such as openness may contribute to successful coaching relationships (Mackie, 2015), therefore organisations investing in talent coaching may offer coaching as an intervention of choice, instead of a compulsory activity embedded in a talent scheme.

Developmental

All participants identified coaching as a developmental intervention as opposed to a remedial tool for performance management. This is because their talent status resulted from a talent-designation process led by line managers and based on high-performance and high-potential criteria. However, some talented employees perceived their nomination for a TM programme as unexpected and unclear since it may not have been previously discussed with their line manager. This may trigger a feeling of apprehension, stress or confusion regarding the purpose of talent coaching:

I was happy to do a programme, I was just apprehensive about what the objective of this one would be. (Carry, T, A, 1)

Additionally, some talented employees felt that their nomination resulted in an increased workload due to additional duties and responsibilities induced by the talent status. They questioned the heightened expectations from the organisation, especially when talent coaching was not conducive to a career promotion. Nevertheless, being identified as a talent was often experienced as a gratifying confidence boost.

Inter-connective

Coaching was delivered by external or internal coaches who play different roles for leaders at different stages of their careers. External coaches were allocated exclusively to senior managers or executives due to cost imperatives. At the highest senior level, coaching supported leaders to face challenges in transition between two positions, which is in line with the definition of executive coaching (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015). Also, it helped them to connect with the self to evolve as an authentic leader. By contrast, internal coaches holding RH or senior business management positions in the company, were allocated to more junior and middle managers. Participants explained that internal coaches often acted as "advocate, ambassadors and sponsors" (Adam, HR, 1; Eleonor, T, A–D, 1). They opened internal doors by establishing connections with people, business departments and geographical branches for future horizontal or vertical mobility. For example, one junior talent leader explained that talent coaching was critical in increasing her visibility and her capacity to navigate politics, and even to "game" the system:

I'm quite sure that coaching helps in the positive politics that you need to evolve in any firm. (Emma, T, A, 1)

This suggests that talent coaching incorporates some characteristics of mentoring and sponsoring, whereby the social capital and network of the coach is used to support the talented employee's

visibility. Surprisingly, the same participant commented on the reciprocal nature of the talent coaching relationship:

> *If you are positively impacted by a coach, you are the brand ambassador for him as well. Trust me, I know my coach. (Emma, T, A, 1)*

This suggests that talent coaching may develop a reciprocal set of duties between the coach and coachee, which is in line with the SET and psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995; Conway & Briner, 2005).

Trustworthy

Trust and confidentiality are often claimed as paramount for successful coaching relationships (Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014; Schalk & Landeta, 2017). This is also reflected in the views of participants. Indeed, they insisted on the privacy provided by the coaching space. This view was shared by the external coaches, who argued that the coach becomes a confidant, providing a space where talent leaders can disclose some of their challenges without exposing themselves. Yet, self-disclosure was seen as limited when participants were coached internally, due to the imbalance of power between the coach and coachee. This duality may give rise to confidentiality and ethical challenges. Nevertheless, participants emphasised the value of trust, built overtime with their internal coach in the form of an informal long-term relationship.

Reflective

Mirroring the seminal work of Nancy Kline (2009) on coaching as "time to think", the study participants emphasised the value of coaching as a safe space to mark a pause in a frantic and ultra-competitive work environment. Talent coaching was often defined by participants as a "luxurious" space (Carry, T, A, 1), where leaders can re-focus on themselves, explore options and define priorities regarding their career and personal growth, in opposition with the individualistic and performance-oriented organisational culture characteristic of the US banking sector (Thakor, 2015).

Besides, talent coaching was widely viewed as a unique opportunity to engage in reflective practice, considered as critical for transformational change at individual level. Further, talent coaching may support wellbeing and resilience since it helps to counter-balance the enhanced performance and heightened contribution expected by the organisation (King, 2016). In the TM context, coaching provided talented employees an opportunity to reflect, to recharge emotionally and develop their resilience.

Coaching culture and organisational leadership change

Besides the individual benefits of coaching, talented employees confirmed that they gained or extended their coaching skills during the process. Having personally benefited from coaching, they often felt inspired to use a coaching approach with their team and direct reports. HR managers and internal coaches strongly supported this view. They claimed that coaching is embedded in global TM programmes to create a coaching culture in the organisation and to enhance employee engagement through "better quality conversations" (John, HR, 1). Yet, the study participants outlined the challenges of using coaching as a leadership style. Indeed, coaching was perceived as a time-consuming and expensive activity, difficult to operationalise at local level due to limited internal coaching capability, capacity and ethical considerations.

In addition, the findings suggest that talent coaching is experienced as a pivotal career event that strengthens the psychological contract of talented employees. Specifically, talent coaching contributes to re-define the reciprocal duties and expectations as part of the strengthened psychological contract induced by the talent status (King, 2016). In this context, the talent coach

may act as a contract maker and intermediary in the triangular coaching relationship. This implies that talent coaching may not only be an intervention to develop individuals in a leadership pipeline, but also a strategic tool for promoting leadership change towards a coaching culture.

Factors of ambivalence of talent coaching

In addition to the characteristics of successful talent coaching, the findings reveal five different factors of ambivalence in the operationalisation of talent coaching at GlobalFinCorp.

Limited coaching capability and capacity

The internal coaching capability and capacity was often questioned by HR managers and talented employees. First, HR managers explained that providing coaching in TM programmes was part of an HR development strategy to build coaching capability and enable better conversations between managers and their subordinates. However, coaching training and supervision of internal coaches were not systematically provided due to limited funding. This was perceived as a major challenge by HR managers.

Also, some talented employees questioned the availability and commitment of their internal coach due to the hectic workload of senior business leaders, which may prevent them from engaging in the talent coaching relationship. Further, a talented employee, who was invited to act as talent coach after completion of his TM programme, claimed that expectations of internal and external coaching could not be equivalent. Comparing internal and external coaching, he justified his opinion by explaining that he was "not a professional person, not my day-to-day [job]" (Peter, T, B, 1). This suggests that talent coaching may be perceived as an additional task to the existing role of senior leaders at GlobalFinCorp, albeit a discretionary behaviour expected by the organisation. Therefore, both capability and capacity to coach others were questioned by study participants and identified as a challenge.

Another concern was the perceived variability of the quality of coaching in TM programmes across EMEA. This may be explained by the over-reliance on internal coaching and on the personal interest, availability, and commitment of internal coaches. Indeed, talent coaching was often viewed as an altruistic activity when delivered internally:

> *Truthfully, we do it because it's altruistic to a certain extent (...), but I don't think there's any reward or recognition for it. (Anne, T and Int. C, D; 1)*

This echoes the perception of talent coaching as a discretionary behaviour from the perspective of internal coaches. This represented a matter of concern for HR managers and senior leader coaches who deplored the lack of formal recognition of talent coaching as an essential leadership skill.

Furthermore, talent coaching was often perceived as a transient HR practice that was subject to variations due to the global economic context and company profits. For instance, referring to hardship during the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis and the multiple ongoing restructuring in the company, participants often referred to the suspension of coaching programmes during the financial crisis due to cost restrictions. One senior leader and internal coach suggested that internal coaches retracted from coaching others during a crisis: "On a battlefield, nobody's doing any coaching" (Georges, Int. C, 1). The personal commitment and time required by internal coaches to coach talented employees led them to question the sustainability of talent coaching as a TM practice.

Variations of views on talent coaching

Talent leaders and HR managers reported a variety of views as to the nature and purpose of talent coaching across countries in EMEA. One HR manager emphasised the complexity of ensuring a consistent approach in the delivery of coaching across countries and divisions, which might be interpreted as "training or consulting versus team-applied coaching" (Adam, HR, 1). As such, the high variability in the quality of coaching provision may be perceived as a barrier for the implementation of coaching as part of a global TM strategy and consequently on the capacity to create the global corporate coaching culture envisioned by the organisation.

The findings also reveal a disparity of expectations toward talent coaching, which represents another factor that may hamper the development of a coaching culture in GlobalFinCorp. An external coach summarised this disparity:

> *Sometimes, they expect a magic wand (...). Sometimes, their expectations are very low. If they have had poor experiences in the past of coaching, then they may not be expecting very much. (Catherine, Ext. C., 1)*

Notably, an HR manager reported that talented employees were initially seeking advice and operational expertise during programme talent coaching sessions. This echoes the view that junior and middle management level talented employees may expect a mentoring relationship instead of coaching. Nevertheless, the term 'coaching' was preferred by participants as it connotes a more rewarding and exclusive intervention than 'mentoring'.

Positive and negative reactions

The study participants expressed various reactions towards talent coaching. Although they widely acknowledged the benefits of coaching, some expressed considerable doubts and even reluctance regarding its added value for leadership development and career progression at GlobalFinCorp.
Some positive reactions to talent coaching referred to the non-directive approach adopted by some coaches. In addition, one senior leader recalled the enthusiastic reaction of fellow participants, while expressing a more neutral evaluation of coaching as a "nice chat" (Oliver, T, B, 1). So overall, participants described their experience of talent coaching as helpful and inspiring, especially regarding their capacity to evolve as manager-coach.

By contrast, some interviewees expressed frustration and disappointment related to TM and specifically the lack of subsequent career development opportunities. Indeed, some talented employees viewed the TM system and practices (including coaching) with cynicism and considered them ineffective in fulfilling the tacit promises made to them. For example, one talented employee referred to a "hard-landing" (Natalie, T, A-D, 2) after golden promises of fast-tracked career perspectives in the company. Another participant at junior level expressed frustration when her internal coach did not engage in the coaching process:

> *I don't think he was clued up about the course;(...) He didn't know anything about it. So, I don't feel I had any benefit from a coach. (Sarah, T, A, 1)*

Therefore, talent coaching was not perceived as systematically conducive to career and personal growth, but still appreciated by talented employees as a 'good-to-have'.

Ethical concerns in talent coaching relationships

The participants described some situations of conflicting interests and ethical concerns when talent coaching was delivered internally by senior business managers or HR managers. Indeed, breaches of confidentiality may occur due to the multiple relationships and the power dynamics involved in the talent coaching process. Additionally, the findings suggest that HR managers, internal coaches,

and talented employees are likely to have different agendas, leading to ethical dilemmas. For example, an internal coach found himself supporting the lateral move of one of his own departmental talented employees to another part of the business, hence incurring his own loss of talent. Another dilemma occurred when a coachee disagreed with her coach but felt that she could not express it because of the power and influence held by the coach. These results corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous work in ethical challenges in executive coaching (Fatien-Diochon & Nizet, 2015).

Furthermore, most talented employees exhibited little awareness of talent coaching being used as a mechanism for identifying internal coaches, who are subsequently positioned as talent elite in the leadership pipeline. It has been suggested that the multiple agendas set in the triangular executive coaching relationships can pose an issue when the coach is not fully aware of the organisational power dynamics at stake (Louis & Fatien-Diochon, 2018). The findings provide empirical evidence that external coaches and HR managers were aware of those dynamics to an extent. However, it was not the case for coachees at junior and middle management levels and for some internal coaches. Nevertheless, the participants identified power dynamics as a concern in the talent coaching relationship, especially when a disagreement or lack of engagement occurred. Otherwise, the imbalance of power was considered an opportunity for talented employees at junior and middle management level to gain access to senior managers.

In summary, the findings highlight the complexity of talent coaching relationships and the role of talent coaching as a catalyst for leadership change, in addition to underlining the structural barriers and the ethical concerns that may arise in practice.

Discussion and conclusion

This study sets out to examine how coaching is perceived by talent leaders, coaches and HR managers taking part in TM programmes in a large multinational company. The findings include specific insights on how coaching interventions can contribute to developing global leaders and support their career progression in the organisation through the identification of six factors for successful coaching in TM programmes. Further, it presents empirical evidence to the ripple effect of coaching at organisational level, whereby talent coaching may be used as a pivotal intervention for developing coaching culture and support leadership change. Moreover, the study provides an in-depth understanding of the perceived benefits and limitations of talent coaching from the perspective of multiple stakeholders in a global bank. In the context of TM, the complexity of coaching relationships is increased due to the numerous modalities and variations in the delivery of coaching (internal/external, by HR manager/by senior business leader, directive/non-directive approaches), which is coherent with previous studies on ethics in the executive coaching triangular relationship (Louis & Fatien-Diochon, 2014; Fatien-Diochon & Nizet, 2015; Pliopas, 2017; Louis & Fatien-Diochon, 2018). These results echoes the conceptual analysis of Shoukry and Cox (2018) of coaching as a social process, as well as empirical studies of Louis and Fatien-Diochon (2014, 2018), who advocated a definition of coaching as a political space in organisations. The social and political dimension of coaching is particularly striking in the participants' accounts in the current study, especially with the multiple roles played by the different stakeholders involved in the coaching process.

Contribution to knowledge

The contribution of this study concerns the tensions emerging from the operationalisation of coaching in a TM context. This study argues that talent coaching represents a developmental practice widely valued by the participants, yet comprising paradoxical aspects leading to ethical concerns. Participants shared contrasting views regarding the use of coaching in a TM context and outlined its limited and negative effects. This discrepancy suggests a disconnection between the

promissory structural signals—such as coaching—and the reality of TM and career progression in a large firm, which was perceived as context-dependant and not exclusively performance-related by the participants. Drawing on Rousseau (1995) and King (2016), a psychological contract breach could result from different interpretations of the TM and talent coaching deals, such as when commitments made by managers, expectations shared by talented employees, and HR practices are misaligned. Furthermore, some participants expressed a combination of cynicism and pragmatism regarding coaching as a one-fits-all TM practice: "Coaching is not a panacea" (Adam, HR, 1).

From a theoretical perspective, the study draws on the SET and psychological contract to examine coaching as a TM practice. Specifically, it argues that talent coaching plays a pivotal role in strengthening the psychological contract between talented employees and their organisation. Also, it positions the coach as contract maker and intermediary within the coaching triangle relationship to redefine the strengthened psychological contract induced by talent status. Therefore, this study offers a nuanced and contextualised analysis of coaching's effects for talented employees.

Contributions to practice and recommendations

This study's contribution to practice is threefold. First, from an HR perspective, talent coaching may be perceived as complex to operate due to the additional workload involved. As suggested by an HR manager, formal mechanisms of recognition for coaching could help to alleviate these concerns. But, if recognition is exclusively based on quantitative criteria (such as number of sessions), this may reinforce the perception of talent coaching as an additional managerial task as opposed to a leadership approach. This would be counter-productive if the organisation envisions talent coaching as a lever to change the leadership style and develop a coaching culture.

Second, from a coach and coachee perspective, ethical concerns may arise regarding confidentiality and conflicts of interest due to the power and influence of internal coaches (senior business leaders and HR managers) in the organisation. Consequently, internal coaches need adequate coaching training and supervision, particularly on their role as contract-makers of the strengthened psychological contract, especially when talented employees perceive that promises are unfulfilled.

Third, the findings suggest that talent coaching may support leadership change. In this endeavour, it appears critical to adopt a more transparent communication strategy regarding TM and the role of talent coaching for leadership development and career progression (Dries & Gieter, 2014; Sumelius, Smale, & Yamao, 2020).

Limitations and further research

First, methodological limitations to this study are related to its single case study research design, which cannot warrant for generalisation (Ellinger & McWhorter, 2020). Yet, the value of case study research design may emerge from theorisation and analytical processes (Ylikoski, 2019). Accordingly, this study does not aim to generalise from one case. Instead, trustworthiness and authenticity criteria have been applied to provide a context-sensitive analysis of talent coaching (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Second, the case company selected is a large firm operating in more than 55 countries in the EMEA region. Despite the collection of data from participants with international experience based in 10 different countries across EMEA, no participants originated from Africa. As such, further research is needed to explore talent coaching involving talented employees from the African continent, which echoes the previous calls from TM scholars outlining the paucity of empirical coaching studies in other African countries beyond South Africa (Anlesinya, Amponsah-Tawiah, & Dartey-Baah, 2019; Terblanche, Myburgh, & Passmore, 2019).

Third, this study reveals a variety of reactions to talent coaching and highlights the ambivalence of coaching in TM programmes. Further studies on the negative effects of talent coaching in different organisations and TM programme designs would contribute to advancing the coaching literature on the 'dark side' of coaching (Schermuly & Graßmann, 2019). This would also advance the TM literature on the negative impacts of TM (De Boeck, Meyers, & Dries, 2018; Sumelius et al., 2020).

Fourth, further research could also focus on the role of the line manager in TM systems. In this study, line managers were not interviewed, as they do not take part in TM programmes at GlobalFinCorp. However, the study participants highlighted their prominent role in the talent-designation process. Managerial coaching constitutes an emerging trend in the coaching literature (Lawrence, 2017). Surprisingly, there remains no empirical study concerning line managers' role as coach for TM purposes. As such, the line managers' perspective on talent coaching could be investigated in future studies. This would help to understand the challenges faced by line managers in managing talented employees, especially in relation to the ethical dilemmas highlighted by this study.

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