

The Influence of Coach Characteristics on Coach Selection and the Relationship between Perceived Similarity and Coaching Outcomes

Tracy Duberman, Ph.D., Tara Satlow, Ph.D., & Kimberly Rubenstein, M.S.
The Leadership Development Group, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

In the executive coaching field, coach-coachee matching is considered integral to the success of coaching. However, 'match' is often defined in the eyes of the beholder, and executives may consider different factors when determining whether a coach matches their own needs. In our study, we defined 'match' as the executives' perception of the coach with regard to surface-level characteristics, deep-level characteristics, and experience factors. The purpose of the present research was to determine whether characteristics of the executive coach influenced participants' coach selection decision, and to assess the relationship between perceived coach-coachee similarity and coaching outcomes.

Research questions:

1. Which matching characteristics (i.e. surface-level diversity, deep-level diversity, or experience factors) contribute to coach selection?
2. Does perceived similarity on surface- and deep-level characteristics impact perceived coaching outcomes?

Coach Selection Process. As part of the coach selection process, the executive was presented with 2-3 selected coach biographies which included a picture of the coach, their coaching experience, coaching results, education, and philosophy. The 2-3 selected biographies were chosen based on an intake process in which the executive, their manager, and the HRBP described the executive's areas of development, experience in their profession, coach preferences, and prior coaching experience. Then, 1-on-1 meetings between the selected coaches and the executive were conducted, which provided both the opportunity to interview one another to assess chemistry and fit for the engagement. During these meetings, the executive may have asked questions such as:

- What is your professional training and experience as a coach?
- With what types of clients do you work best?
- Do you use any particular approach or methodologies?
- What values/beliefs underpin your coaching?
- How do your clients describe your coaching style?
- How do you evaluate the results of your coaching?

Executive Coaching Process. Once a coach was selected, stakeholder interviews were conducted to determine developmental opportunities. Psychometric assessments were also conducted to reveal values, traits, and personality factors that contribute to self-awareness. The results of the interviews and psychometric assessments formed the basis of the formal assessment feedback delivered to the executive in preparation for finalizing the coaching program goals. The coach and executive then co-created a development action plan specifying the coaching objectives and indicators of success, which were vetted with key stakeholders. The executive and their coach met regularly over the course of the assignment where learnings were translated into action in practical applications.

METHOD

An online survey was administered to executives from different organizations who had completed a 6-month coaching engagement with a certified coach. Some of the survey participants ($n = 16$) underwent a coach selection process, whereas others were assigned a coach ($n = 16$). Those who participated in a selection process were asked to rate the extent to which coach characteristics (surface-level diversity, deep-level diversity, and experience factors) contributed to their coach selection on a 5-point scale (0 = not at all; 4 = to a great extent). All participants were asked to rate their perceived similarity to their coach on the same surface-level and deep-level diversity characteristics. Finally, participants answered questions to assess their perceptions of coaching outcomes.

- **Coach Characteristics:**¹
 - Surface-level: race, ethnicity, gender, age
 - Deep-level: values/philosophy, personality
 - Experience factors: experience in industry, experience as executive coach
- **Perceived Outcomes:**
 - Coaching satisfaction
 - Coaching effectiveness²
 - Self-awareness³
 - Career satisfaction⁴
 - Affective commitment⁵

ANALYSES & RESULTS

Participants' ratings on the extent to which surface-level diversity characteristics, deep-level diversity characteristics, and experience factors contributed to their coach selection were averaged into three separate ratings. As can be seen in Figure 1 on the right, coachees who participated in a coach-selection process reported that deep-level diversity and experience factors contributed more to their selection of coach than surface-level diversity. There was no difference between deep-level diversity and experience factors in their contribution to coach selection.

Figure 2: Relationship between perceived similarity and coaching outcomes

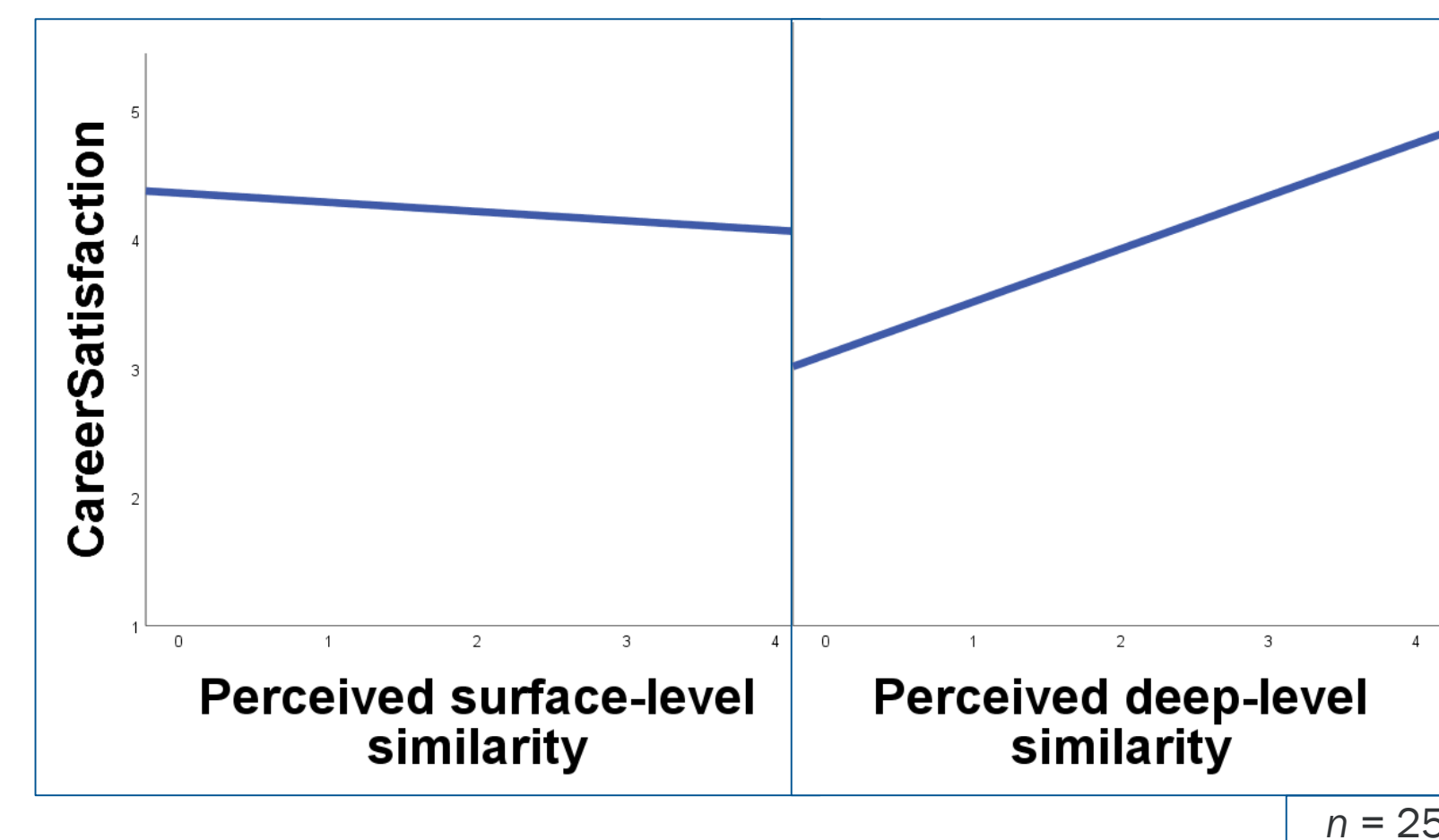
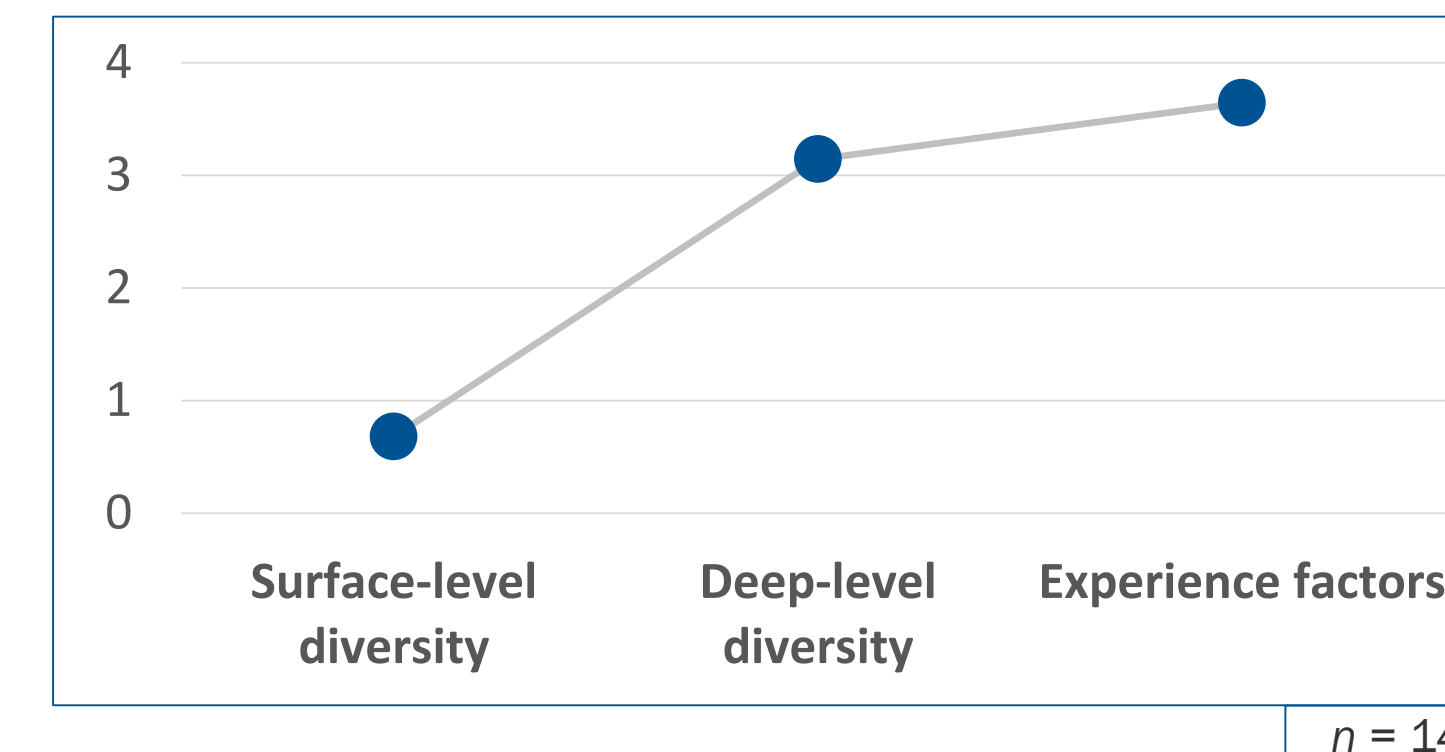


Figure 1: Coach characteristics' contribution to coach selection



Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine whether perceived similarity on surface-level and deep-level diversity characteristics impacted perceived coaching outcomes. Perceived similarity was determined by averaging ratings on surface-level diversity characteristics and deep-level diversity characteristics into two separate factors. Analyses showed that perceived similarity did not significantly predict perceived coaching satisfaction, coaching effectiveness, self-awareness, or affective commitment. As can be seen in Figure 2 on the left, perceived similarity on surface-level diversity did not significantly predict perceived career satisfaction, but perceived similarity on deep-level diversity was positively related to career satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

Executives who participated in a 6-month engagement with an executive coach identified deep-level characteristics (i.e. values/philosophy and personality) and experience factors (experience in the executive's industry as well as overall experience as a coach) as more important contributors to their selection of the executive coach than surface-level characteristics (i.e. race, ethnicity, gender, and age). Whereas surface-level characteristics are readily visible, deep-level characteristics and experience factors would only be made aware through individual meetings between the coach and the executive whereby the executive could gain a deeper understanding of the coach and make a more informed decision about whether the coach would fit their needs.

It is surprising that perceived similarity (overall) did not predict most coaching outcomes, however it is likely that our small sample size can explain these non-significant findings. Even so, we did find that perceived similarity on deep-level diversity predicted career satisfaction, whereas perceived similarity on surface-level diversity did not. The career satisfaction items of the survey asked participants to report their satisfaction with the progress they have made toward their career, advancement, and developmental goals. It is likely the case that coaches and executives who matched on values, philosophy, and personality engaged in more substantial and targeted coaching sessions, which in turn could have contributed to greater professional development and achievement of the coaching objectives.

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