

Article published as

Almuth McDowall & Emma Short (2012): New case study guidelines - a call to arms for practitioners, *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 5:2, 154-159. To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2012.684695>

New case study guidelines – a call to arms for practitioners

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Abstract

This paper outlines our new journal guidelines for case studies to encourage practice-based submissions. We first outline how case studies have similarities with and may differ from case studies in psychology and Human Resource Management Research. This leads us to propose ten succinct guidelines for writing up case study submissions, covering formatting in terms of length and referencing, the need to cover both process and outcome(s) and as well as ethical ramifications and declarations of interest. We highlight the value of case studies for learning and professional development, and encourage in particular the consideration of the coachee perspective.

Introduction

The regular correspondence with submitting authors, and also our own experience from networking with practitioners at conferences and other events, has shown us one thing: many practitioners find the process of writing up their work daunting, and often don't know how to start. We can appreciate their resulting reluctance to engage in the process of documenting their work, but won't let our readership off the hook quite so easily.

We recently sought feedback from our editorial board and submitting authors on what they'd like to see more of in *Coaching: An international Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*. Overall, those who responded said that they value the content and format of the contributions. In particular the practitioners however would like to see more practice based contributions. This, we appreciate and we can assure our readership that we actively encourage such practitioner submissions. Thus, in addition to our regular full length contributions and our methods articles, we now issue an open invitation for authors from around the world to submit *Evidence-Based Case Studies* for possible publication in *Coaching: An international Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*.

We believe that developing such a series of *Evidence-Based Coaching Case Studies* will be a useful and engaging contribution to our journal in several ways. First, short and concise case studies will provide a way of bridging the gaps between coaching research and practice. Secondly, case studies have long been appreciated in other fields such as psychotherapy and counselling, for instance Freud's work is almost solely based on single case studies, in other words the observations on one client or patient (e.g. Freud, 1912; 1920). In Human Resource Management (HRM) research, case studies are also omni-present. Here, case studies have a rather different meaning however, as rather than referring to data from one individual, the case studies in this context refer to data from one organisation (Thornhill & Saunders, 1998). Although the unit of analysis differs between case studies in psychological research, where the unit is the individual, and HRM research, where the unit is the organisation, there is a shared underlying rationale for presenting such insights. The idea behind a case study is that the detail of a single situation or context, presented as it occurred in a real life situation, can provide insights to other researchers and practitioners and thus facilitate learning and development. Different parties will have different motivations for using and learning from case studies (Thornhill & Saunders, 1998). Practitioners located in organizations, such as HR professionals who commission coaching or coaching programmes, might be particularly interested in bench-marking against best practice. Coaches or coaching trainees might be particularly interested in tools and techniques and how these can be applied in practice. Academics or coaching students are likely to be focused on the evidence generated from the case study, and how this links to wider theory and concepts. Whilst it can be difficult to gauge in advance which of these audiences a particular case study is most likely to appeal to, it might be helpful in itself to think through the most likely audience, and tailor content accordingly.

Case studies have often been criticised for not being generalizable, for being overly subjective and for lacking in validity (Flyvberg, 2006). These criticisms are likely to stem from the fact that Popper's (1959) theorizing that we need to generate specific hypotheses, and then find evidence to test these (positivist thinking) dominates much research. Thus, there have been common misunderstandings regarding case studies which Flyvberg summarised (2006), including that one cannot generalise on the basis of individual cases alone, that case studies are biased by the researcher's preconceptions and that case studies are better for developing hypotheses than they are for testing hypotheses.

Several researchers, such as Campbell (1975) and Eysenck (1976) revised their opinions of case studies, revising earlier positions of finding no place for them, to recognise their learning value. Whilst we can compete with neither scholar in terms of the breadth and impact of their academic track record, we have come to recognise the value of case studies in our own practice and teaching. For instance, in my (first author) academic post, the results from yearly module evaluations collated from the postgraduate students always highlight that the deepest learning occurs when discussing case studies. Students always wish for more time to be devoted to talking through such case studies, rather than to formal

lecture structures. This is quite a formal use of case studies, where students are presented with a vignette or scenario, and different questions to debate and resolve. But coaching practitioners are also likely to be using case studies on an informal basis, for instance in peer discussion or supervision groups, where certain aspects of cases might be shared and debated.

What we hope is that the above brief discussion has established that case studies have great value, and that we recognise this. To this extent, we are encouraging all of our readers to submit in this format. To facilitate submission, we are now discussing our new case study guidelines as available on our web-site in more detail. In overview, case studies will be short in length and accessible in their language. The idea behind this is that a concise summary will be a valuable learning exercise for the author, by asking them to condense potentially rich observations, and informative for the reader, by providing maximum information in a minimal word count.

Is a case study in the field of coaching different to a case study in psychology, or HRM research you might ask? This is a good question, and we will do our best to answer this here. First, coaching case studies could be located at the individual level, so report on one or select coachee cases, but they could also be located at the organisational level, showing how a coaching programme was implemented. In other contexts however, the case study should document both the *process* and *outcomes* of any coaching or coaching programme undertaken, *with particular focus on any mechanisms of change*. In other words, it is important that specific contextual information is detailed that shows exactly in what way the coaching was instrumental (or not!) to contributing to successful outcomes. We are equally interested in receiving 'success stories' as honest accounts that detail some of the barriers to coaching, or to successful outcomes. Some questions to consider are:

- What was it about the coach that made this possible?
- What was it about the coachee that made this possible?
- What were the conditions in the environment, such as the setting for the coaching?
- What tools and techniques were used, were any of these more useful than others?

To assist our readers, we now offer the following ten guidelines for those who are interested in preparing an *Evidence-Based Coaching Case Study*:

1. **Abstract and key words**

The abstract should be between 80 and 100 words and summarise all aspects of the case study concisely. Two or key three words should be listed at the end, under the separate heading 'key words'.

2. **Informed consent**

Each case study submission requires a statement of informed consent on part of the coachee and/ or client (as appropriate) including contact details; this statement should

be included in a letter to the editor when authors are submitting their paper. This is to ensure that the case study is in line with ethical guidelines for practice and to ensure that no coachee or client details are released without explicit consent. The case study itself should also include at least one sentence to how consent was obtained.

3. Length and terminology

Case studies will be between 1,200 and 2,000 words in length and written in accessible language – remember that not everyone is familiar with ‘coaching jargon’! Any specialist key terms that the authors need to include to describe the coaching techniques reported should be clearly defined at the *beginning* of the case studies. Authors need to bear in mind that many of our readers might not know a particular coaching approach and specialist language which might go hand in hand with this. The best rule of thumb is to assume that the submission is written for a peer, however a peer who knows little about any coaching techniques used, or about the context.

4. Declaration of authorship and interest

The introduction will include a sentence or brief statement about the exact role of the author in the case study, and about their level of involvement. As part of this, authors need to declare any interests (for instance if the author trains other coaches in a particular technique or approach which is reported in the particular case study) in a transparent way.

5. Introduction: the context

This should state the context of the case study clearly, such as the reasons or impetus for the coaching, where the coaching took place (the geographical location, the organization where appropriate, the latter anonymised as necessary) and which stakeholder (s) commissioned the coaching (again, anonymised as necessary). Authors should also actively consider the potential or envisaged audience – is this particular case study likely to appeal to researchers, or to practitioners, or both? What are the implications for content and writing style, and assumptions about the prior knowledge of readers?

6. The Coaching process

At a minimum, the coaching process needs to be detailed by outlining the approach taken to coaching, how and with whom sessions were negotiated, and the content of the sessions. Case studies also need to outline the exact approach taken to coaching (for instance was this a behavioural, psychodynamic or integrative approach; see Whybrow and Palmer, 2007, for an overview of different approaches) as based on evidence, with selected in text references. In short, the authors need to highlight the evidence base which underpins the case study.

7. **Coaching outcomes**

The objectives of the coaching should be clearly stated, as well as how the coaching process worked towards these. State the expected outcomes, and how progress against these was measured and benchmarked. We welcome both quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods, as well as mixed approaches, as long as the respective approach is fully transparent and defended however.

8. **Lessons learned:**

The case study must contain an honest account of any lessons learned and insights gleaned and their implications for future practice and research, bearing in mind the involvement of and the particular perspective of the coach (for instance, did they deliver the coaching? What impact does this have on the outcomes of the case study?). Case studies which emphasize or indeed glorify the benefits of coaching, without detailing such learning, have less value to our readers. We all appreciate the benefit of hindsight!

9. **The coachee's perspective**

We welcome submissions where the perspective of the coachee has been actively acknowledged and detailed. The author(s) may base any considerations of the coachee point of view on their own observations, or even better include tangible data, such as feedback on the outcomes of the sessions, from the coachee and/ or client as appropriate.

10. **References**

Case studies will usually require a minimum of 5 but no more than 15 references. It is the mission of our journal to broaden and deepen the evidence-base in coaching for the benefit of academic and practitioners. This mission we can only achieve, with your help, if all submissions have an appropriate evidence base, including case studies. The references are *included* in the word count for case studies. All referencing must adhere to APA (American Psychological Association) format. The APA publication manuals (2001; 2009) are readily available and many web resources exist to support novel authors – but please note here that the 6th edition is an update and supplement to the 5th edition, so it's advisable to draw from both editions.

In summary, case studies have much to offer as they comprise in-depth, contextual information which otherwise may not be accessible. Thus, they have a valuable role to play in practice, in education and in research. We hope that the above guidelines will encourage practitioners, as well as regular academic contributors, to come forward with relevant and carefully considered case study submissions to showcase how they are integrating research evidence into coaching work. What are *you* waiting for? If you have any queries, then please do not hesitate to contact either editor, we will be only too happy to assist.

Please contact either editor, Almuth McDowall [[hyper link here](#)] or Emma Short [[hyperlink here](#)] with any queries.

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