

Of SMART, GROW and goals gone wild – A systematic literature review on the relevance of goal activities in workplace coaching

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Goals are posited to play an important role in coaching. However, concerns have been raised about neglecting potential pitfalls of goal-focused coaching practice. Therefore, we investigate the occurrence of goal activities in workplace coaching and their association with coaching outcomes. We conducted a systematic literature review. We synthesised findings of 24 (quantitative and qualitative) empirical studies. Previously researched goal activities encompass goal setting, setting action/development plans and a goal-focused coach-coachee relationship. Coaches report to work with goals frequently, while coachees report this to occur less. Several studies suggest a positive relationship between goal activities and coaching outcomes, while other studies report no significant association. This lack of association seems to relate to both study design and chosen outcome measures. Initial findings point to possible moderating variables (e.g. coachee characteristics, initiator of goal activity) and potential challenges of involving organisational stakeholders in goal activities. The scarcity of empirical research stands in contrast to the prominent role of goals in the coaching literature. Goal activities take a wide range of different forms in practice and research. Inconclusive findings on the relationship between goal activities and coaching outcomes call for research on influencing factors, particularly contextual factors.
Keywords: goal activities; goal setting theory; workplace coaching; outcome; input factors; process factors; contextual factors; systematic literature review.

SINCE THE 1950s, goal setting and its enhancing effects on performance have been extensively studied and widely promoted in organisations (e.g. Drucker, 1954; Grant, 2012; Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002; Ordóñez et al., 2009). Scholars propose that ‘human beings are essentially goal-directed organisms’ (e.g. Grant, 2012, p.153). It is not then by chance that goals have been and currently are a central feature of coaching literature and practice (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2017). In fact, most definitions specify coaching as a goal-directed intervention and coaching interventions are considered a failure should the coachee’s goals not be attained (e.g. Grant, 2006; Schermuly, 2018; Sonesh, Coultas, Lacerenza et al., 2015). Goal setting and goal attainment are regularly described as key components,

unquestioned elements or even the central foundation of coaching practice (e.g. Clutterbuck & David, 2016; Cowan, 2013). Many coaching practitioners take goal setting as a given, ‘something that coaches [just] do’ (David et al., 2014, p.135). Notwithstanding this, there are ongoing controversial discussions among practitioners and scholars on the use of goals in organisations (e.g. Ordóñez et al., 2009) and coaching (e.g. Grant, 2012, 2018). Much of this discussion has focused on goal setting. Ordóñez and colleagues (2009) dissent from the ‘traditional view’ and declare that ‘goals [have] gone wild’ as they postulate that many organisations heavily rely on goal setting while very little attention is given to its potential negative side effects (e.g. neglecting important but non-specified goals). Previous research

findings suggest that goal setting in coaching can on the one hand have positive effects on outcomes but might imply potential pitfalls on the other (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018). In other words, focusing on specific goals in coaching can be helpful (e.g. in order to increase the coachee's motivation). However, it might equally be a restriction (Jinks & Dexter, 2012). For example, potentially 'hidden' or underlying issues might be neglected, or coach and coachee might blindly focus on the 'wrong' objective due to minimised complexity when setting specific goals right at the beginning of a coaching engagement (e.g. David et al., 2016), while goals might need time to emerge or change over the course of the coaching engagement (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2017).

Working with goals in coaching has been conceptualised in various ways beyond goal setting (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2017), including for example, a goal-focused relationship between coach and coachee. However, the literature is disjointed and an overview of the various ways of working with goals in coaching (i.e. using goal activities) is lacking to date.

Therefore, the current systematic literature review aims to provide a synthesis of previous research findings on (the occurrence of) goal activities that coach and coachee engage in (i.e. goal setting, setting action/development plans, goal-focused relationship between coach and coachee). Moreover, we present findings on factors that impact upon the occurrence of goal activities.

Regarding the influence of working with goals in relation to coaching outcome, scholars have postulated a gap in current research (e.g. Bozer & Jones, 2018). Thus, we seek to synthesise extant empirical studies that examine the relationship between goal activities and coaching outcome, that is, coaching effectiveness (e.g. increase in competencies, goal attainment). Furthermore, we summarise findings on variables that might affect the relationship between goal activities and coaching outcome.

Given that coaching has grown dramatically in popularity and actual use over the last years (e.g. Sonesh, Coultas, Lacerenza et al., 2015), the term 'coaching' has been applied to interventions in a wide range of fields (e.g. sports, health and clinical fields), as well as to a wide range of target groups (Grant, 2005). In light of recent calls to take the context of coaching into account (e.g. Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018) and meta-analytic findings on differences in outcomes for different samples of coachees (e.g. Sonesh et al., 2015), we focus our review on workplace coaching, that is, coaching adults with regard to professional issues. We define workplace coaching in line with Bozer and Jones (2018) as 'a one-to-one custom-tailored, learning and development intervention that uses a collaborative, reflective, goal-focused relationship to achieve professional outcomes that are valued by the coachee' (p.1).

Goals have been defined in a broad range of ways in the scientific literature (Grant, 2012). We follow Grant (2012, p.148) when defining goals as 'internal representations of desired states or outcomes'. Hence, goals may differ, for example, in regard to their level of abstraction (e.g. specific vs abstract) or temporal range (i.e. proximal vs distal) (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2017).

With this systematic literature review, we advance the coaching field by presenting what is currently known (and not known yet) about goal activities in coaching and their impact upon coaching effectiveness. On these grounds, we provide recommendations for future research and deduce evidence-based guidance on goal-focused coaching practice.

Goal activities in coaching

Even though the use of goals in organisations is criticised by some (e.g. Ordóñez et al., 2009), goals are a central feature of coaching literature and practice (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2017). The most prominent goal concepts in coaching encompass goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002), the GROW model (Whitmore, 1992),

the goal-related component of the working alliance (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989) between coach and coachee (e.g. de Haan et al., 2016), and Grant's goal-focused model of coaching (2006, 2012). As a background for our review of the empirical literature, we summarise ubiquitous goal-focused theories and frameworks in the following.

Goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002) – together with its popular applications – has been one of the most influential theories in coaching research and practice (Theeboom et al., 2017). Based on more than 35 years of empirical research on the relationship between goals and performance, Locke and Latham (1990, 2002) argue that the core to goal achievement lies in its specificity and difficulty level. Put differently, to achieve higher performance, goals should be specific (rather than vague) and challenging. The positive effect of goal setting is supposedly due to focused attention, encouraged effort, maintained persistence, and the harnessed knowledge and resources of the individual (David et al., 2014). In coaching practice, a ubiquitous application of goal setting theory is SMART goal setting (Clutterbuck & David, 2016), first mentioned by Doran in 1981. Following this model, goals are supposed to be specific, measurable, assignable, realistic and time-related. SMART goals are widely advocated for and practised within the coaching industry such that goal setting is often equated with and thereby limited to SMART goals (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2017; Grant, 2012).

Another prominent acronym-model of working with goals in coaching is the GROW model (Whitmore, 1992). It encompasses the stages of Goal setting (i.e. setting short- and long-term goals), reality check (i.e. assessing the current situation), options (i.e. discussing potential alternatives) and will or wrap-up (i.e. delineating action steps; deciding on what is to be done, when and by whom). These are regarded as the four key steps of a successful coaching process (Whitmore, 1992) and goal setting, the 'G', is seen as the fundamental basis of successful coaching engagements.

Adapted from psychotherapy, working with goals in coaching has also been conceptualised as a goal-focused relationship between coach and coachee. Bordin (1979) proposed that the working alliance between therapist and patient is an important success factor of psychotherapy. The most established measure of his conceptualisation is the Working Alliance Inventory (WAI; Horvath & Greenberg, 1989) which has been transferred to the field of coaching (e.g. de Haan et al., 2016; Graßmann et al., 2019). The WAI comprises three components, one of which is explicitly goal-related, namely, the mutual agreement on goals between coach and coachee. The other two components consist of agreement on required tasks and relational bonding.

Grant (2006, 2012) suggested an integrative model of goal-focused coaching that is closely tied to the concept of self-regulation. Accordingly, the coaches' task is to support their coachees in moving through the cycle of setting a goal, developing a plan of action, putting it into action, monitoring their performance and adapting their actions to better achieve their goals. More specifically, Grant describes the coach as a facilitator of his or her coachee's goal attainment. After the coachee perceives the need for coaching, the goal selection process starts which is affected by contextual or organisational factors (e.g. system complexity) as well as by the coachee's individual factors (e.g. personal needs). Moderators on the goal selection process stem both from the coachee him- or herself (e.g. level of change readiness) and the coaching session, that is, the coach's knowledge, skills and ability, for example, to support the setting of effective goals and to facilitate action planning. What follows are the final goal choice, deciding on action plans, monitoring the coachee's performance and eventually attainment of the goal(s).

In our review, we define working with goals as a broad range of goal activities, that is, all actions performed by the coach and/or coachee during workplace coaching

that concern coaching goals. Or put differently, specific goal-related behaviour that the coach and coachee engage in over the course of the coaching engagement (Kappenberg, 2008). We therefore concentrate on coaching session moderators of Grant's model (2012). This could be, for example, goal setting, setting action/development plans or the goal-focused aspect of the coach-coachee relationship.

Research questions

While goals enjoy great popularity in coaching research and (supposedly) coaching practice, diverging assessments on the value and risks of goal activity co-exist. The literature on goal activities in coaching lacks integration and scholars identified a research gap concerning the relationship between goal activities and coaching outcome (e.g. Bozer & Jones, 2018). We therefore propose the following research questions.

Research question 1a: Which goal activities do coaches and coachees engage in?

Research question 1b: Which factors impact upon the occurrence of goal activities?

Research question 2a: Which relationship emerges between goal activities and coaching outcome?

Research question 2b: Which factors impact upon the relationship between goal activities and coaching outcome?

Methods

We decided to conduct a systematic literature review to summarise what we currently know and do not (yet) know about the relevance of goal activities in workplace coaching. A systematic literature review not only integrates previous literature but also identifies the central issues of the addressed question (Briner & Denyer, 2012). Thus, it locates, appraises and synthesises 'the best available evidence relating to a specific research question in order to provide informative and evidence-based answers' (Dickson et al., 2017, p.2).

Literature search

We searched relevant electronic databases via EBSCO (i.e. Business Source Premier, EconLit, PsychArticles, PsycINFO, Psynindex and OpenDissertation) to find studies using the following search terms: Coaching and (goal* or target*) not (sport* or clinical). We deliberately did not restrict our search to 'goal setting' in order to capture the broad range of goal activities outlined in the coaching literature. We further searched in coaching-specific peer-reviewed journals in the English and German languages (i.e. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*; *International Coaching Psychology Review*; *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*; *The Coaching Psychologist*; *Coaching: Theorie & Praxis*), and checked Grant's (2011) compilation of abstracts from articles and theses on coaching. To find unpublished studies, we also sent out requests via mailing-list services of the Academy of Management and the German Psychological Society. Furthermore, based on the results of our search, we conducted a second systematic search on the following search terms: 'coaching and working alliance not (sport* or clinical)' in order to ensure that we would include all relevant studies that conceptualise goal activity in terms of the goal component of the working alliance. No further results emerged.

Inclusion criteria

We defined a thorough protocol following predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. To be eligible for further analysis, studies had to (a) be published as journal articles or so-called grey literature (i.e. dissertations, theses, conference proceedings); (b) use the English or German language; (c) be empirical (quantitative and/or qualitative study design); (d) be compatible with our coaching definition, namely, workplace coaching in a formal one-on-one (i.e. coach-coachee) coaching setting; and (e) report on goal activities (e.g. goal setting) applied during workplace coaching (e.g. 'executive' or 'professional' coaching).

Following other scholars (e.g. Bozer & Jones, 2018; Graßmann et al., 2019), we included grey literature in order to maximise study results within the rather young discipline of coaching research and to avoid distortions due to publication bias. Given that some of the most notable empirical research on the coaching process has been carried out in Germany (Bachkirova et al., 2015), we included studies in the German language in addition to English publications. As we aimed at summarising extant empirical research findings, we did not include conceptual or discursive papers, opinion pieces or practitioner contributions without empirical data. Given our focus on workplace coaching, studies on types of coaching other than workplace coaching of adults were excluded (e.g. clinical, sports or music coaching). Studies of student samples were only included when coachees were adults (i.e. over 18 years old) and coaching topics were work-related, for example, career coaching. Research on managerial/supervisory coaching (i.e. coaching provided by a supervisor with formal authority over the coachee) or group/team coaching was excluded. Managerial coaching differs from workplace coaching as it is hierarchical in nature and is therefore more a component of leadership (e.g. Graßmann et al., 2019). Group/team coaching was excluded as it deviates from our definition of a one-on-one coaching engagement. Studies that conceptualised goals only as a dependent variable (i.e. an outcome measure, e.g. goal attainment) without reporting goal activity measures as an independent variable (i.e. an input measure, e.g. goal setting) were ruled out. We focused our search on goal activities that the coach and/or coachee employed during coaching engagements (i.e. coaching session moderators; Grant, 2012). In other words, we excluded studies that only focus on coachee characteristics such as coachee goal orientation. Finally, we excluded studies that did not describe distinctive associations in terms of goal

activities to outcomes, but instead reported overall coaching behaviour or implemented additional interventions besides coaching at the same time (e.g. 360°-feedback, training and coaching). This is because it would not be clear how the two (or more) interventions individually influenced outcomes or if the multiple interventions interact in influencing outcomes.

Data set

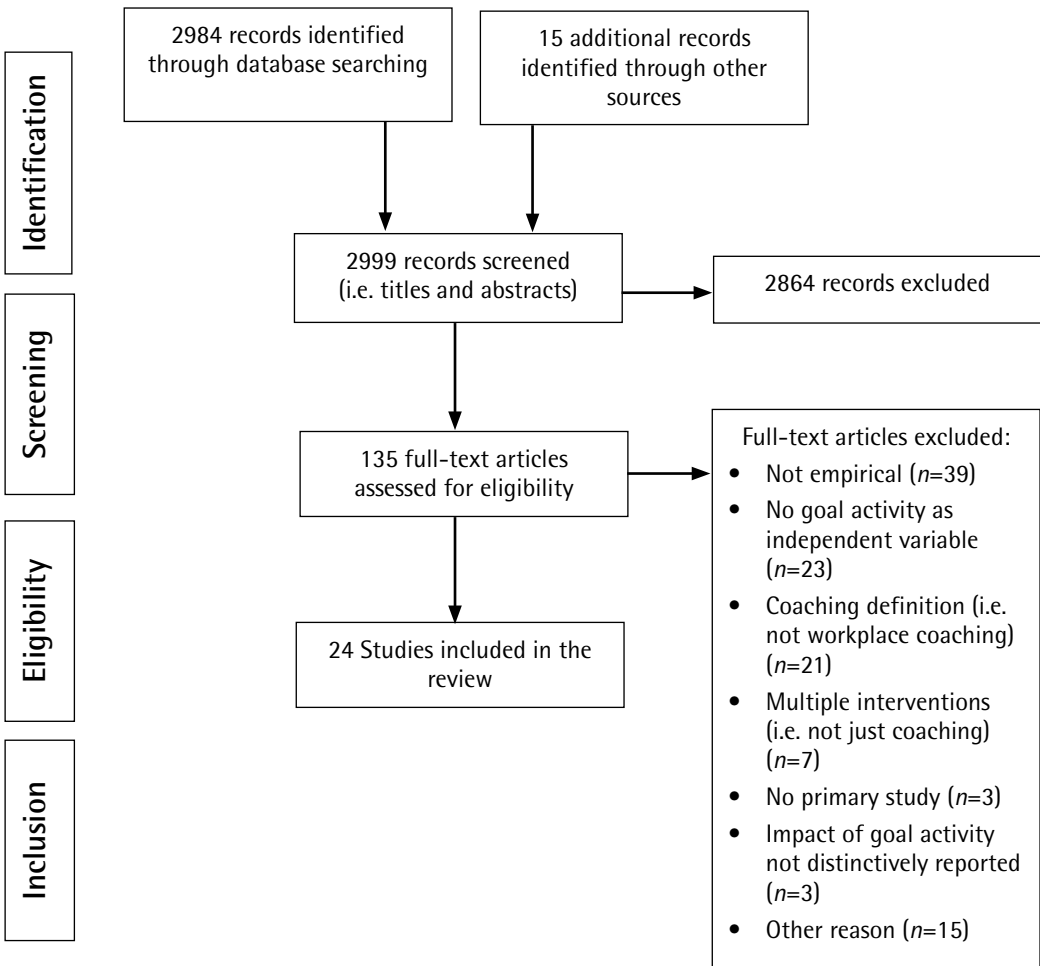
Our search of data bases resulted in 2984 studies. After the assessment of titles and abstracts (i.e. preliminary screening) and the addition of 15 studies from other sources (e.g. through citation chaining), 135 full texts were retrieved and checked for eligibility as per our inclusion criteria. As a result, 24 studies were included in the final synthesis.

Studies were assessed by three reviewers, the two authors and a graduate student. A coding protocol was developed jointly by the research team. Reviewers then screened and coded each study that met the inclusion criteria. In the case of any discrepancies between reviewers, a discussion was held until an agreement between all raters was reached. All studies that were included in the final synthesis are indicated with an * in our list of references.

Results

First, we describe study characteristics, reported goal activities and measured coaching outcomes of the included studies. This is followed by an outline of the findings of studies that reported the occurrence of using different goal activities in coaching (research question 1a) and research on factors that might impact upon the occurrence of goal activities (research question 1b). We then present the findings of research on the relationship between goal activities and coaching outcome (research question 2a) and on factors that might impact upon the relationship (research question 2b).

Figure 1: PRISMA diagram of systematic literature review process (adapted from Moher et al., 2009).



Characteristics of included studies and reported measures

Study characteristics

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of included studies. Out of the 24 studies included in our review, 13 studies were quantitative surveys or (quasi-)experimental studies, six were qualitative interview studies, two employed a mixed methods design and three were observational (case) studies. Nine studies concerned the status quo of goal activity behaviour in coaching without assessing coaching outcomes, while 15 studies also included coaching outcome measures. The majority of studies ($n=21$) employed field rather than student coach

samples ($n=3$). Sample sizes ranged from one participant to 1895 coach-coachee dyads. For those studies that used professional coaches and experience was reported ($n=13$), it ranged from two to 20 years of work experience as coach. Duration of the researched coaching process varied from one session of 30 minutes to eleven sessions. Goal activities were assessed through the perspective of coaches ($n=7$), coachees ($n=6$), both coach and coachees ($n=4$), or others (e.g. expert raters; $n=3$). In four studies, goal activities were manipulated through (quasi-)experimental conditions and therefore not ‘assessed’. A total of 15 studies were published in peer-reviewed journals, while

Table 1: Characteristics of studies included in the systematic literature review.

Author(s)	Year	Method	Measured goal activity	Data source: Goal activity	Measured outcome	Data source: Outcome	Time of measurement	Sample size	Content of coaching	Coach characteristic: experience/ internal vs external	Coachee characteristic	Coaching duration	Language/ nationality of sample
Bechtel	2018	Quantitative	Goal setting	Coachee	Goal attainment	Coachee	1, Retrospective	171	NA	NA/ external or internal	Executives, managers, supervisors or individual contributors	3-7 sessions or more	English/USA
Bono et al.	2009	Quantitative	Goal setting	Coach	No outcome	NA	1, Frequency in regular coaching practice	428	NA	M = 7.5-11.6 years/NA	Level of vice president, director and middle managers	NA	English/USA
Cowan	2013	Interview study	Goal setting	Coach	Reaction	Coach	1, Retrospective	6	NA (assigned goals)	5-20 years/ external	Corporate clients	NA	English/NA
David et al.	2014	Quantitative	Goal setting	Coach	No outcome	NA	1, Frequency in regular coaching practice	194	NA	NA	NA	NA	English/ International sample (USA & Europe)
de Haan et al.	2016	Quantitative	Goal-focused relationship (coach-coachee)	Coach + Coachee	Over-arching effectiveness	Coach + Coachee	1, Retrospective	1895 coach-coachee dyads	Varied (e.g. management skills, personal development, leadership development)	M = 13.3 years/ external or internal	NA	Modal duration: 4-6 months	English/ International sample (NA)

Author(s)	Year	Method	Measured goal activity	Data source: Goal activity	Measured outcome	Data source: Outcome	Time of measurement	Sample size	Content of coaching	Coach characteristic: Experience/ internal vs external	Coachee characteristic	Coaching duration	Language/ nationality of sample
Fenner	2019	Observational study	Goal setting	External rater	Over-arching effectiveness	Coachee	Ratings: over entire coaching process (all sessions); Effectiveness: 1, post-coaching assessment	3	Varied (e.g. leadership development, career coaching)	M = 12 years/ external	NA	2-8 sessions	German/ Germany
Gesrnitzer & Kaufeld	2015	Observational study	Goal-focused relationship (coach-coachee)	External rater	Goal attainment	Coachee	Ratings: over entire coaching process (all sessions); Goal attainment: 2, pre-coaching + post-coaching assessment	31 coach-coachee dyads	Career coaching	Novice (student)/ NA	Collegiate clients (students)	5 sessions, 3 months	English/ Germany
Grant	2014	Quantitative	Goal-focused coaching relationship	Coachee	Learning + Goal attainment	Coachee	2, pre-coaching + post-coaching assessment	49	NA	Novice (post-graduate students)/ NA	Collegiate clients (post-graduate students)	4 sessions, 10-12 weeks	English/ Australia
Greif	2015	Observational study	Goal setting	External rater	No outcome	NA	Ratings over entire coaching process (all sessions)	1	Transition coaching	NA	NA	3 sessions (7 hours)	German/ Germany
Gyllenstein & Palmer	2007	Interview study	Other (i.e. working towards goals)	Coachee	Reaction	Coachee	1, Retrospective	9	Varied (e.g. self-confidence, promotion)	NA/ internal	NA	NA	English/ International sample (UK & Scandinavia)

Author(s)	Year	Method	Measured Goal activity	Data source: goal activity	Measured outcome	Data source: Outcome	Time of measurement	Sample size	Content of coaching	Coach characteristic: Experience/ internal vs external	Coachee characteristic: Managerial or team lead level	Coaching duration	Language/ nationality of sample
Jansen et al.	2004	Quantitative	Goal setting	Coach + Coachee	No outcome	NA	1, Retrospective	89 coaches; 74 coaches	NA	M = 8.60 years/ external	NA	NA	German/ Germany
Janson	2016	Quantitative	Goal setting, setting development plans	Coachee	No outcome	NA	1, Retrospective	351	Varied (e.g. performance, development, career coaching)	NA/ external or internal	Managerial or team lead level	6 months – 1 year	English/ USA
Kappenberg	2008	Mixed methods (we included only qualitative findings)	Goal setting	Coach	Reaction	Coach	1, General attitude/ overall experience	8 (interview) (36, survey)	NA	M = 11.5 years/ internal	NA	6–12 months	English/ USA
Kotter et al.	2018	Interview study	Goal setting	Coach	No outcome	NA	1, Frequency in regular coaching practice	20	NA	M = 12.1 years/ external or internal	NA	NA	English/ Germany
Newsom & Dent	2011	Quantitative	Goal setting	Coach	No outcome	NA	1, Frequency in regular coaching practice	130	NA	6–10 years/ external	NA	NA	English/ International sample (NA)
Pywys	2012	Quantitative	Goal setting	Experimental condition (randomised controlled between-subject design)	Goal attainment	Coachee	2, pre-coaching + post-coaching assessment	48	Varied	Novice/ collegiate clients (post-graduate students)	10–15 years of professional management experience	15 hours, 4 weeks	English/ USA

Author(s)	Year	Method	Measured goal activity	Data source: Goal activity	Measured Outcome	Data source: Outcome	Time of measurement	Sample size	Content of coaching	Coach characteristic: Experience/ internal vs external	Coach characteristic: external	Coaching duration	Language/ nationality of sample
Rank & Gray	2017	Quantitative	Goal setting	Coachee	Learning	Coachee	1, Retrospective	59	NA	Min. 10 years/ external	Managers (varied levels of seniority); either unemployed or at risk of losing their jobs	10 hours, 3 months	English/ UK
Scoular & Linley	2006	Mixed methods (we included only quantitative findings)	Goal setting	Experimental condition (randomised controlled between-subject design)	Reaction + Goal attainment	Coach + Coachee	1, Retrospective	117	Varied (e.g. work-life balance, career coaching)	NA/ external	NA	1 session, 30 minutes	English/ UK
Smith & Brummel	2013	Interview study	Setting development plan	Coachee	Behaviour	Coachee + Expert rating	1, Retrospective	30	Varied	NA/ external	Level of upper management	NA	English/ NA
Terblanche et al.	2017	Interview study	Goal setting	Coach, Coachee, HR	Reaction	Coach, Coachee, HR	1, Retrospective	16	Transition coaching	NA	Senior leaders	NA	English/ South Africa
Vandaveer et al.	2016	Mixed methods	Goal setting	Coach	No outcome	NA	Typical coaching practice	27 (inter-view) 282 (survey)	Varied (e.g. performance, development, transition coaching)	M = 24.3 years/ external or internal	Senior executives, high potentials	NA	English/ USA

Author(s)	Year	Method	Measured goal activity	Data source: Goal activity	Measured Outcome	Data source: Outcome	Time of measurement	Sample size	Content of coaching	Coach characteristic: Experience/internal vs external	Coachee characteristic: Internal vs external	Coaching duration	Language/nationality of sample
Wastian & Poetschki	2016	Interview study	Goal setting, action plans	Coach + Coachee	No outcome	NA	Retrospective after coaching engagement	42 coaches, 16 coachees	Varied (e.g. performance, development, career coaching)	3-31 years/ MA	Executives, professionals	2-11 sessions	German/Germany
Williams	2012	Quantitative	Other (Goal-focused coaching)	Experimental condition (random assignment/switching-replication design)	Behaviour	Coachee	3, pre-coaching, post-coaching + follow-up assessment	64	Leadership development	Min. 2 years/ external	Senior executives (at least level of middle management)	4 sessions, 4-6 weeks	English/USA
Williams & Lowman	2018	Quantitative	Other (Goal-focused coaching)	Experimental condition (random assignment/switching-replications design)	Behaviour	Coachee	3, pre-coaching, post-coaching + follow-up assessment	64	Leadership development	Min. 2 years/ external	Senior executives (at least level of middle management)	4 sessions, 4-6 weeks	English/USA

the other publications can be categorised as ‘grey literature’, that is, five dissertations, one master thesis, two books or book chapters, and one conference proceeding. Most manuscripts ($n=20$) were written in English, while four were in German. Study participants came from a range of different countries: USA ($n=8$), Germany ($n=6$), UK ($n=2$), Australia ($n=1$) and South Africa ($n=1$). Four studies encompassed international samples (e.g. participants from UK and Scandinavia), whereas two primary studies did not mention the nationality of participants.

Reported goal activities

Primary studies applied a wide range of conceptualisations and operationalisations of goal activities, with the majority of studies using self-developed scales rather than standardised measures. We sorted the goal activities of the included studies into the following four categories: (a) Goal setting, (b) Setting action or development plans, (c) Goal-focused coach-coachee-relationship, and (d) Other goal activities.

a) Goal setting

Seven studies operationalise working with goals as goal setting, goal development or goal clarification. They describe them as activities whereby coach and coachee establish coaching goals or the coach gives the coachee a clear direction to work toward, partly resorting to specific underlying models and techniques (e.g. goal attainment scaling, GROW model). In observational studies, goal setting was rated as one of several success factors in coaching (Greif et al., 2010).

b) Setting action or development plans

Three studies considered setting action or development plans. Setting action/development plans goes beyond goal setting as it also explicitly includes the incorporation of plans for achieving and implementing these goals. For example, Vandaveer et al. (2016, p.123) define action planning as ‘agreeing on appropriate measures or indicators of progress and success to reaching coaching goals and developing a plan for achieving those goals’.

c) Goal-focused relationship between coach and coachee

Three studies in our review conceptualise the goal-related coach-coachee relationship. For example, Grant (2014) operationalised it as the assessment of goal-focused interactions between coach and coachee from the coachee perspective. De Haan et al. (2016) and Gessnitzer and Kauffeld (2015) focus on the agreement on goals between coach and coachee; either operationalised through a component of the working alliance inventory (WAI; Horvath & Greenberg, 1989) from both coach and coachee perspectives or observational other-ratings utilising a specific coding system.

d) Other goal activities

Goal activities that we classified as ‘other’ were rather general. They were described as ‘working towards goals’ (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007) or following a goal-focused coaching approach (vs process-oriented coaching; Williams, 2012; Williams & Lowman, 2018).

Measured coaching outcomes

Coaching outcomes can be manifold, and studies vary in their operationalisation of coaching success (e.g. Graßmann et al., 2019). In order to summarise and compare different outcomes in our review, we use the evaluation framework by Kirkpatrick (1967) which consists of four different levels: Reaction, learning, behaviour and result. Within the included studies, we identified outcome measures that fit Kirkpatrick’s levels of reaction (i.e. subjective overall satisfaction with coaching), learning (i.e. cognitive and affective learning) and behaviour (i.e. changes in competency). Following Kraiger et al. (1993), we consider both cognitive and affective learning outcomes. Given that goal attainment can be seen as a key outcome in coaching (e.g. Graßmann et al., 2019; Spence, 2007) and that goals can be defined at each of the different levels and therefore goal attainment ‘cuts across’ the levels of the taxonomy, we maintained goal attainment as a separate outcome

category. We placed outcome measures that included more than one level of Kirkpatrick's taxonomy (e.g. satisfaction and competency) into the category of overarching effectiveness.

Therefore, we sorted study outcomes into the following categories: (a) Reaction: Subjective satisfaction with the coaching, (b) Learning: Cognitive and affective learning, (c) Behaviour: Changes in competency, (d) Goal attainment, or (e) Overarching effectiveness. Research teams mostly used self-developed measures to assess coaching outcome, only seven out of 15 studies used established scales.

a) Reaction: Subjective satisfaction with coaching success

To measure coaching success, coaches and/or former coachees were asked to indicate their subjective satisfaction with the coaching engagement (e.g. Scoular & Linley, 2006).

b) Learning: Cognitive and affective Learning

In order to identify learning in relation to different cognitive and affective constructs, two research groups applied established rating scales. Rank and Gray (2017) used scales of self-reflection and self-esteem. Grant (2014) utilised a self-insight scale and employed established scales to measure coachees' well-being and depression, anxiety and stress.

c) Behaviour: Changes in competency

In the studies included in our review, coachees assessed their leadership competencies themselves, described specific leadership situations they encountered that were then subjected to expert ratings and/or coachees' supervisors assessed their leadership behaviour.

d) Goal attainment

In order to measure goal attainment, coachees were asked to identify a goal they would like to achieve and rate the degree of goal attainment at the beginning of the coaching engagement (e.g. in the first coaching session) on a scale from 0 per cent (no attainment) to 100 per cent (complete attainment) and again at the end of the coaching process.

e) Overarching effectiveness

For example, Fenner (2019) merged ratings of an evaluation questionnaire with goal attainment ratings of coachees to create an integrated outcome measure for assessing coaching success.

Findings of included studies

Figure 2 summarises our research questions as well as findings on goal activities and their relationship to coaching outcome. We will address each research question in the following.

RQ 1a: Which goal activities do coaches and coachees engage in?

We identified 11 research articles that address the occurrence and/or perceived importance of goal activities (i.e. goal setting, setting action plans) during workplace coaching engagements, either from the perspective of coaches (Bono et al., 2009; David et al., 2014; Kotte et al., 2018; Newsom & Dent, 2011; Vandaveer et al., 2016), coachees (Bechtel, 2018; Jenson, 2016), both coach and coachee (Jansen et al., 2004; Wastian & Poetschki, 2016), or observers (Fenner, 2019; Greif, 2015).

Status quo on goal setting

Coaches reported frequently applying goal setting in their coaching practice (Bono et al., 2009; Jansen et al., 2004; Kotte et al., 2018; Newsom & Dent, 2011; Vandaveer et al., 2016). In fact, coaches surveyed by Newsom and Dent (2011, $n=130$) indicated 'frequently' or 'routinely' ($M=4.51$, $SD=0.44$) identifying coaching goals with the client. Psychologist ($M=4.40$, $SD=0.74$) as well as non-psychologist coaches ($M=4.42$, $SD=0.83$) from Bono and colleagues' study (2009, $n=428$) reported 'often' or 'always' applying goal setting in coaching engagements. In line with these findings, in Vandaveer and colleagues' mixed methods study (2016) of experienced coaching practitioners, three quarters of the sample ($n=212$) reported using goal setting in 66 per cent or more of their coaching engagements.

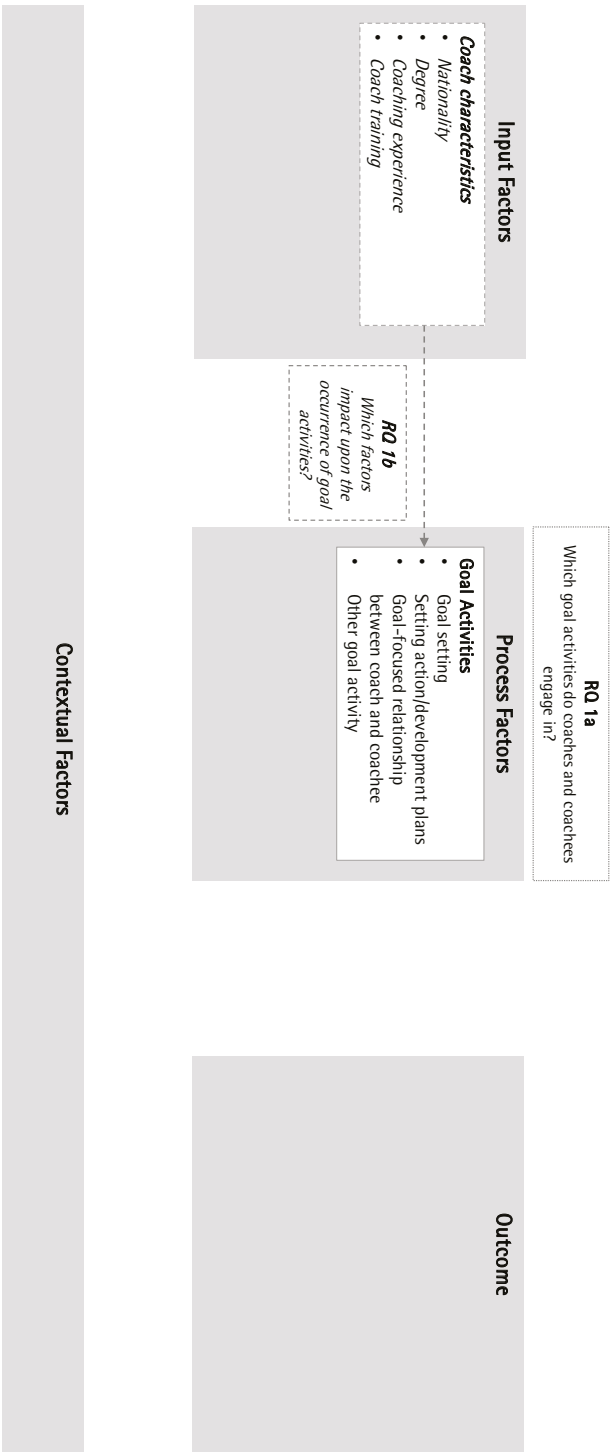
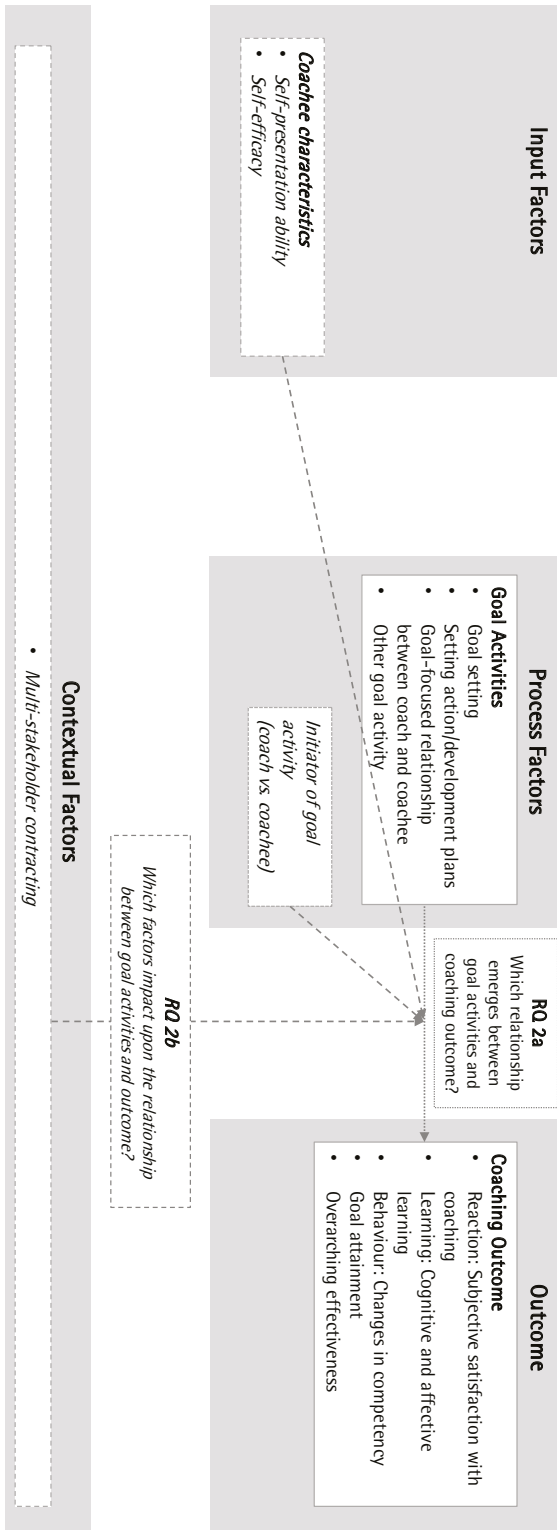


Figure 2: Research questions 1 and 2 and respective findings within an overarching coaching framework.

Figure 2 continued: Research questions 1 and 2 and respective findings within an overarching coaching framework.



Furthermore, the large majority (94 per cent) indicated goal setting as a 'very important' or even 'essential' part of their coaching practice. Findings of Kotte and colleagues' (2018) interview study with 20 experienced workplace coaches indicate that the large majority of coaches ($n=19$) conduct a goal clarification during the initial exploration in coaching. However, coaches describe it as an open process rather than, for example, applying SMART goal setting.

Regarding the perspective of coachees, findings by Bechtel (2018) point in the same direction. In fact, 98 per cent of coachees (of $n=171$) indicate retrospectively that their coach worked with them to set at least one coaching goal, thus being the most spread behaviour of described coaching sessions. Other studies suggest that the perspective of coachees differs substantially from that of coaches regarding the frequency of goal activities adopted in coaching. In Jenson's (2016) study, only 47 per cent of 351 questioned former coachees indicated having experienced their coaches practising goal setting behaviour during their coaching engagements (i.e. performance, development, career or transition coaching). However, 80 per cent of respondents reported that they formally negotiated and set goals prior to the coaching. Often multiple individuals were involved in this goal setting process (i.e. not only and necessarily coach and coachee but also coachee's supervisor in 46 per cent and coachee's organisation in 27 per cent of coaching engagements).

Jansen and colleagues (2004) conducted a survey with 89 coaches and 74 coachees. Coaches indicate having applied significantly more goal setting than their coachees report having experienced, $t(91.47)=2.25$, $p<.05$. Wastian and Poetschki (2016) also explored the perspective of both coaches ($n=42$) and coachees ($n=16$) on how coaches conduct goal setting. Coaches report engaging in setting specific (90 per cent), realistic (100 per cent) and attractive (65 per cent) goals more frequently than coachees report having experienced these during

their coaching engagements (specific: 30 per cent; realistic: 50 per cent; attractive: 50 per cent). By contrast, the degree to which changes in goals over the course of the coaching engagement were addressed is perceived more similarly between coaches (85 per cent) and coachees (70 per cent). In addition, two distinct patterns of coaches' working with goals were identified. While some coaches identified SMART goal setting as the focus of the coaching at the beginning of the coaching process, other coaches engage in a continuous process of goal clarification and adaptation throughout the whole coaching engagement.

Two observational case studies utilised the rating manual of coach behaviour by Greif et al. (2010) which includes (among eight success factors) the dimension of goal setting. The first observational study was conducted by Greif (2015). The single case that was examined encompassed three online coaching sessions (total of seven hours) of a coachee who was transitioning to a new role with more responsibilities. All success factors were demonstrated by the coach but differed in frequency. The most prominent coaching behaviour was support of the coachee's self-reflection (observed in 41 per cent of sequences of coaching sessions), whereas affect reflection had the lowest ratings (three per cent). Goal setting was rather prominently demonstrated in 34 per cent of all rated sequences and even more during the first session (50 per cent). Fenner (2019) examined audio material from three complete coaching processes that were conducted by three different coaches with a total of 16 sessions (total of 22 hours). Emotional support was the most frequently shown coaching behaviour (60 per cent), while goal setting was demonstrated least frequently, that is, in 11 per cent of all rated sequences. The findings by Greif (2015) and Fenner (2019) indicate that coaches seem to apply a variety of success factors during coaching sessions but differ in the individual frequency of demonstrating specific factors (e.g. goal setting).

Table 2: Summary of measured goal activities split by measured coaching outcomes.

		Outcome				
		Reaction: Subjective satisfaction	Learning: Cognitive and affective learning	Behaviour: Changes in competency	Goal attainment	Overarching effectiveness
Goal activity	Goal setting	4 Cowan (2013); Kappenberg (2008); Scoular & Linley (2006)*; Terblanche et al. (2017)	1 Rank & Gray (2017)		3 Bechtel (2018); Prywes (2012); Scoular & Linley (2006)*	1 Fenner (2019)
	Setting action/ development plan			1 Smith & Brummel (2013)		
	Goal- focused relationship		1 Grant (2014)*		2 Gessnitzer & Kauffeld (2015); Grant (2014)*	1 de Haan et al. (2016)
	Other goal activity	1 Gyllensten & Palmer (2007)		2 Williams (2012); Williams & Lowman (2018)		

Note: Some studies employed multiple outcome measures (marked as *).

Status quo on setting action plans

Three studies addressed the occurrence of setting action plans in workplace coaching. In Jenson's study, 43 per cent of surveyed former coachees ($n=351$) indicated that action plans had been made during their coaching engagement. Wastian and Poetschki (2016) report differences in perspective between coaches and coachees concerning setting action plans, namely, 60 per cent of coaches ($n=42$) indicate to have used them while only 30 per cent of coachees ($n=16$) describe this retrospectively. A similar difference in perspective appears in relation to

following up on action plans, that is, monitoring and evaluating goal progress during coaching (coaches: 85 per cent; coachees: 40 per cent). Vandaveer et al. (2016) report that interviewed coaching practitioners ($n=27$) described action planning (together with goal setting) as a usual step during their typical coaching processes in addition to the steps of needs assessment, contracting, general assessment and data gathering, feedback provision, plan implementation, evaluation of the progress and transitioning to 'post-coaching'.

RQ 1b: Which factors impact upon the occurrence of goal activities?

Given the substantial differences in the reported and observed frequency of goal setting and setting action plans, the question arises which factors impact upon the occurrence of goal activities. Only two studies so far provide initial insights. They focus exclusively on using goal setting as the type of goal activity and on coach characteristics as potential moderating variables. Findings suggest that the degree to which a coach uses goal setting might depend on the coach's educational background and region.

Newsom and Dent's (2011) findings from 130 coaches from different countries showed that coaches with a bachelor's degree reported performing goal setting more frequently than those with doctoral degrees. They further report that more experienced coaches (i.e. with five or more years of coaching experience) applied more goal setting than those with less coaching experience. According to the authors, the reasons for differences between coaches with bachelor versus doctoral degrees might be related to the desire of those with less educational credibility to demonstrate professional credibility by adhering to 'standard coaching practices'. Regarding the influence of the coaches' level of experience, they argue that more experienced coaches might have a deeper understanding of their coaching practice and therefore take coaching to a more advanced level by applying more goal setting.

David and colleagues (2014) surveyed 194 coaches from the USA and Europe. They showed that coaches who had undergone a coach training (lasting longer than five weeks) use goals more often in their practice than coaches who learned through experience only. In contrast to Newsom and Dent, David et al. discuss whether more experienced coaches rely more on their accumulated competency and eschew standard models of goal setting (e.g. SMART). Furthermore, they found that coaches from the USA reported applying goal setting more frequently than European coaches. They

argue that this could be explained by means of the respective cultural traditions from which coaching was developed in the USA and Europe.

However, we found no studies that examined contextual factors impacting upon the way in which coach and coachee work with goals.

RQ 2a: Which relationship emerges between goal activities and coaching outcomes?

In the following, findings on the relationship of goal activities on coaching outcomes are reported. Table 2 provides an overview of the measured goal activities and coaching outcomes of the included studies.

The relationship between goal setting and coaching outcome

Eight studies assessed the relationship between goal setting and outcomes.

Rank and Gray (2017) examined the association between goal setting and career-related self-reflection of 59 managers who received coaching as they were either unemployed or at the risk of losing their jobs. The coaching was sponsored by a regional economic-development agency. They found that goal setting correlated positively with career-related self-reflection ($r=.54$) and it emerged as a positive and significant predictor ($\beta=.32, p<.05$), whereas it did not predict career-related self-esteem.

Bechtel (2018) surveyed 171 former coachees. Participants reported coaching behaviours of their coach and self-rated goal attainment in retrospect. Results show that goal setting significantly correlated with goal attainment ($r=.41, p<.01$). Other measured coaching behaviours also correlated significantly (and even higher) with outcomes, that is, guidance ($r=.53, p<.01$), facilitation ($r=.54, p<.01$) and inspiration ($r=.45, p<.01$).

By contrast, the (quasi-)experimental studies of Scoular and Linley (2006) and Prywes (2012) contradict the previously reported findings. Scoular and Linley (2006) investigated the success of coaching sessions conducted in eight different organisational

contexts ranging from large multi-national organisations to small entrepreneurial firms across the southern UK. They did not find a significant difference between participants ($n=117$) of either goal setting or no goal setting conditions within an experimental between-subjects design on goal attainment or subjective satisfaction with coaching success. Prywes (2012) administered a between-subject design study with 48 postgraduate students and four conditions. Participants either received only a goal attainment scaling interview (GAS), only coaching, both GAS and coaching, or neither. Results show no significant main or interaction effects of coaching or GAS on coachees' goal attainment.

Kappenberg (2008) conducted in-depth interviews with eight seasoned internal executive coaches from one firm on factors that they experience as important for coaching success. Five coaches mentioned goal setting as an important step of successful coaching engagements. It was the second most frequently mentioned coach behaviour ($n=10$) that coaches referred to both within and across interviewees, while providing candid, honest and constructive feedback ($n=18$) was the most frequently mentioned.

Terblanche et al. (2017) interviewed 16 experts (i.e. recently promoted senior leaders, coaches, human resource partners and line managers) about their previous experiences with transition coaching (i.e. coaching during processes of promotion into a senior leadership position). Goal setting emerged as 'standard practice' and an important part of a successful coaching process from coaches' and coachees' perspectives.

In Cowan's interview study (2013), one of the key findings was that the beliefs of external executive coaches ($n=6$) about the relationship between goal setting and coaching success vary widely. Whereas some coaches describe goal setting as a necessary component of a successful coaching engagement, others assessed goal setting only as a starting point of the coaching that does not predict the coaching outcome.

Only one observational study on the relationship between goal setting and coaching outcome satisfied our inclusion criteria. Fenner (2019) conducted observational ratings of 16 workplace coaching sessions from three coaching dyads using audio material from the sessions. The coachees sought guidance concerning their work-life balance, leadership development and professional transformation. In a descriptive analysis, she found that in successful coaching engagements (i.e. higher goal attainment and satisfaction ratings of the coachee), the coach applied slightly more goal clarification (on average in 11 per cent of all sequences) in comparison to an unsuccessful coaching process (seven per cent).

The relationship between setting action plans and coaching outcome

We identified only one study (Smith & Brummel, 2013) that examined the relationship between creating an action plan during coaching engagements and coaching outcome, namely, competency changes (e.g. on communication or leadership). Smith and Brummel (2013) found that out of 30 executives, those who created a formal action plan (vs. creating an informal action plan or none at all) in the course of their coaching engagement (43 per cent) reported more self-rated competency changes than those who did not, $F(2,52)=4.58$, $p<.05$, $d=0.85$. However, there was no effect with respect to expert-rated, rather than self-rated, behaviour changes.

The relationship between goal-oriented coach-coachee relationship and coaching outcome

Three studies investigated the impact of a goal-focused relationship of coach and coachee on coaching outcome.

Grant (2014) examined the role of a goal-oriented coach-coachee relationship on coachee's goal attainment and coaching effectiveness in 49 coaching engagements from the perspective of coachees (postgraduate coaching students). He found

a significant positive correlation between the goal-oriented coach–coachee relationship and goal attainment ($r=0.43$, $p<0.01$) but not for changes in measures of self-insight, well-being, anxiety, stress or depression. Nonetheless, results indicated that a goal-focused relationship between coach and coachee was a significantly more powerful predictor of goal attainment than autonomy support or proximity to an ‘ideal’ relationship.

De Haan et al. (2016) analysed the relationship between coaching effectiveness and mutual agreement on goals between coach and coachee, that is, an adapted version of the goal-related subscale of the Working Alliance Inventory (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989). Findings of their large-scale study of 1895 coaching dyads (from 92 sponsors) suggest a positive correlation between a goal-focused relationship and coaching effectiveness both rated by coaches ($r=.56$, $p<.004$) and by coachees ($r=.56$, $p<.004$). Coach-perceived effectiveness and goal-focused relationship assessed by the coachee correlated significantly to $r=.23$ ($p<.004$), and coachee-perceived effectiveness and goal-focused relationship assessed by the coach showed a correlation of $r=.19$ ($p<.004$). Therefore, when coach and coachee rate both effectiveness and the goal-focused relationship, respectively, the correlation is highest. Given that correlations between the subscale of bond and coaching effectiveness are slightly smaller from coach ($r=.43$) and coachee perspectives ($r=.46$), the authors conclude that while the bond aspect of the relationship is important, coaches need to give particular attention to the coachee’s goals during coaching engagements.

In the study by Gessnitzer and Kaufeld (2015), the goal-focused relationship between coach and coachee was rated by means of behavioural data (i.e. sequential analysis of interaction coding data). When the goal behaviour was initiated by the coachee (e.g. the coachee stated a goal and the coach agreed), it was positively related to coaching success ($r=.32$, $p=.039$) whereas it had the opposite effect when it was initiated by the coach ($r=-.39$, $p=.015$).

The relationship between other goal activities and coaching outcome

Gyllensten and Palmer (2007) conducted interviews with nine former coachees from two large organisations (a UK finance and a Scandinavian telecommunication organisation) in order to identify components that they described as making the coaching engagement a beneficial experience for them. Besides the general coaching relationship, coachees highlighted working towards goals as an important factor of coaching success.

Williams (2012) and Williams and Lowman (2018) conducted a quasi-experimental field study on the effect of coaching on outcomes (i.e. leadership competency and behaviour) with 68 managers who worked for the same profit organisation. The coaching intervention was financed by research funds. Coachees either participated in a goal-focused coaching, a process-orientated coaching, or were in a waiting control group. Williams (2012) describes goal-focused coaching as being content-driven and based on goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990). By comparison, a process-oriented coaching emphasises interpersonal processes (rather than specific content or goals). Whereas coached individuals showed higher self-ratings of leadership competency and behaviour than the control group shortly after the coaching intervention and at the time of the follow-up assessment, there was no significant difference in outcomes between the two coaching groups. Namely, in both groups, regardless of the coaching approach, outcomes increased after receiving coaching. Williams and Lowman (2018) discuss the possibility that coaches might not have adhered to just a goal-focused or process-oriented coaching approach, or that the two approaches might not be readily separated. They further argue that in coaching, many variables are at play beyond using a particular coaching approach.

RQ 2b: Which factors impact upon the relationship between goal activities and outcomes?

Six of the included studies reported factors that impacted upon the relationship between goal activities and outcomes. Three quantitative studies found significant moderator variables (i.e. input and process factors) while findings of three interview studies suggest that contextual factors might influence the relationship between goal setting and coaching outcome.

Rank and Gray (2017) identified the coachee's self-presentation ability as a moderator variable on the relationship between goal setting and coaching outcome (i.e. self-reflection). More specifically, goal setting related more strongly to self-reflection among coachees high in self-presentation ability. The authors propose that coachees high in self-presentation ability may benefit more strongly from goal setting during coaching as a way of enhancing their introspective capabilities than coachees low in self-presentation 'because low self-presenters are anyway guided by their personal beliefs' (Rank & Gray, 2017, p.192).

In the study conducted by de Haan et al. (2016), coachees self-efficacy acted as a moderator variable on the correlation between a coach-coachee goal-focused relationship and coaching effectiveness. Coachees low in self-efficacy benefitted more strongly from a goal-focused relationship. The authors therefore argue that a strong emphasis on goals in coaching might partially compensate for low coachee self-efficacy.

Results of the study by Gessnitzer and Kauffeld (2015) indicate that the effect of a goal-focused relationship on outcomes may depend on who initiates the goal behaviour. Given that the goal-focused relationship only correlated positively with goal attainment when the goal behaviour was coachee-initiated rather than coach-initiated (e.g. the coachee stated a goal and the coach agreed), the authors argue that this effect might be explained by means of the roles of coach and coachee, respectively, during coaching inter-

actions. When coaches initiate too much goal activity, the coachee might feel as though he or she no longer 'owns' their goal.

In her interview study ($n=6$), Cowan (2013) addresses the influence of the organisational context on the goal setting during coaching engagements. More specifically, she investigates dynamics and possible challenges when not only the coach and coachee are involved in the coaching engagement and its goal setting, but when there is also 'a third party input' from the coachee's organisation concerning (assigned) coaching goals. She concludes that coaches' fundamental beliefs about goal setting are rather diverse. Some interviewed coaches stated that coaching needs goals in order to being able to evaluate the coaching success for the coachees themselves as well as for the coachee's organisation. In contrast, other coaches emphasised that setting goals at the beginning of the coaching engagement leads to only superficial goals being set and that assigned coaching goals have unhelpful consequences on coaching success for all the parties involved.

In Kappenberg's study, interviewed coaches ($n=8$) emphasised that goals not only need to be clear and agreed upon by the coach and coachee, but also mentioned the alignment of other stakeholders (e.g. coachee's supervisor) as important to the general success of coaching.

In the study conducted by Terblanche and colleagues (2017), interviewees ($n=16$) emphasised the relevance of goal alignment for coaching success, that is, goal setting that involves not only the coachee but also the organisation and includes each party's respective needs.

Assessing the risk of bias

In the following, possible biases of the included studies are discussed, more specifically concerning measurement and operationalisation of constructs, overall study design, study samples and sample size.

Regarding measurement and operationalisation, the majority of included studies reported self-ratings of the experience of

goal activities from only one perspective (i.e. coach or coachee). Specifically, (rather) objective other-ratings from expert raters are only seldom investigated. As Gessnitzer and Kauffeld (2015) point out, coaching research trails far behind psychotherapy research in terms of the use of behavioural data. Moreover, research findings indicate discrepancies between the perspectives of coach and coachee concerning the application of goal activities. Therefore, when using data only from one source providing both a predictor and criterion measure (i.e. self-reports of coach or coachee), study findings need to be interpreted with caution. Accordingly, there may be a risk of common method bias (e.g. Podsakoff et al., 2003) within the data set of included studies that should be acknowledged as it might lead to an overestimation of the relationship between goal activities and coaching effectiveness.

It should also be investigated if the chosen outcome measure (e.g. goal attainment) might be particularly sensitive to the effects of goal-oriented coaching approaches (e.g. following the GROW model) and therefore possibly lead to overestimated associations. Jensen (2016) argues that goal-specific evaluation criteria might produce larger effects than general criteria. Five of 15 studies that included outcome measures assess goal attainment as an outcome. For example, in the study by Grant (2014), goal setting was shown to positively correlate with goal attainment but less closely with less goal-related outcome measures, such as self-insight, wellbeing, depression, anxiety and stress. Furthermore, the majority of studies used self-developed questionnaires rather than standardised and validated measures. This circumstance makes it more difficult to compare findings across studies.

Regarding the study design, studies were mostly cross-sectional and retrospective and not longitudinal, that is, pre-coaching and follow-up assessments are rarely reported. Furthermore, out of the 15 studies assessing the relationship between goal activity and coaching outcome, only four were (quasi-)

experimental designs that allow for causal inferences. It is noteworthy that whereas none of the four (quasi-)experimental studies found a significant relationship between goal activities and outcomes, all correlational studies report at least partly positive associations. As discussed for example by de Haan et al. (2016), a correlation does not imply causality. Especially in regard to the goal-focused relationship between coach and coachee, effects in both directions seem plausible. Namely, a strong (goal-focused) relationship between coach and coachee might predict higher coaching effectiveness ratings, or higher effectiveness might be the reason for strong retrospective assessment of the relationship between coach and coachee.

With regard to study samples, in general, when the sample consists of students (i.e. as coach and/or coachee), the question of generalisability of findings arises. This was the case in three of the included studies. In fact, meta-analytic findings indicate higher effect sizes regarding the outcome of coaching students versus professionals (Sonesh, Coultas, Lacerenza et al., 2015). In other words, coaching behaviour that engenders results for students coached by fellow students may not be the same as what is needed for executives (e.g. Sonesh, Coultas, Marlow et al., 2015). Sonesh, Coultas, Marlow and colleagues (2015) argue that, for example, motivation of coachees might differ from one another in student versus field coachee samples.

Further reconsideration is necessary concerning sample sizes. Some of the included studies (both quantitative and qualitative) comprised comparatively small samples. For example, Prywes' (2012) and Williams' (2012) or Williams and Lowman's (2018) lack of findings might also be explained through low statistical power when conducting a between-subject study design with four conditions that involves only 42 or 64 participants, respectively. Although we acknowledge the difficulty of gathering field data, the small sample size and related lack of power limit the interpretability of the

(absence of) effects (e.g. Faul et al., 2009). Actual relationships between goal activities and coaching outcome might not have been detected. For qualitative studies, findings of interview studies with small sample sizes (i.e. below 10 interviewees) should not be over-estimated.

Discussion

We conducted a systematic literature review in order to shed light on what we know about the occurrence of different goal activities in workplace coaching and their relationship to coaching outcomes. A total of 24 studies met the eligibility criteria and were synthesised. We summarise our findings on goal activities within a conceptual framework that encompasses coaching outcomes, as well as input, process and contextual factors of coaching (Figure 2).

Summary of findings

We found that conceptualisations of ‘working with goals’ in coaching within prior research encompass a wide range of goal activities that could be grouped into four overarching categories, namely, (1) goal setting, (2) setting action/development plans, (3) goal-focused relationship between coach and coachee, and (4) other goal activities. Overall, goal setting is by far the most frequently researched goal activity (total of 17 out of 24 studies). By contrast, studies on supporting goal implementation (e.g. setting and supporting coachee’s development plans) or goal adaptation over the course of the coaching process are far less frequent and thus little is currently known about them empirically.

Concerning the status quo of goal activities, we found that coaches frequently indicate the application of goal setting in their coaching practice. Studies with coachee samples, however, show in part differentiating findings: Mostly, they indicate that coachees perceive goal setting (and other goal activities such as goal implementation support) as occurring less often than coaches describe.

While goal setting is assessed as promi-

nent coaching behaviour, it emerges as only one of many components of coaching practice together with other, generally more prominent coach behaviours (e.g. providing emotional support or feedback).

Initial findings indicate that coaches’ use of goal setting might depend on their regional and educational background. Research on factors impacting upon the occurrence of goal activities so far has, however, neglected to examine the potential influence of contextual factors of the coaching engagement.

Regarding the relationship between goal activities and coaching outcome, most frequently measured and reported are outcomes on the level of reaction and goal attainment (five out of 15 studies, respectively). Six out of 15 studies indicate that goal activities relate to positive coaching outcomes, while five studies found empirical support for only partly positive associations (i.e. depending on the perspective or assessed outcome measure). Four studies found no significant link between goal activities and coaching success. Within the quantitative studies, reported effect sizes range from $r=.32$ to $.56$ or $d=.85$, that is, they can be interpreted as medium to large effects (Cohen, 1988).

All in all, studies only rarely reported variables that might have impacted upon the relationship between goal activities and coaching outcomes. Hence, empirical evidence on possible moderators is rather scarce so far. Initial findings from quantitative studies suggest that whether the goal-focused relationship between coach and coachee impacts positively or negatively upon goal attainment might depend on process factors, namely, on who (i.e. coach or coachee) initiates the goal behaviour. Coachee characteristics (i.e. input factors) were also identified as moderator variables on coaching effectiveness, namely, coachee self-efficacy and coachee self-presentation ability. What is mostly absent from previous research are moderators that relate to the content of the coaching (and coaching goals) and the

context of the coaching engagement (i.e. beyond the general conclusion that goal alignment is relevant for coaching success).

Relative scarcity of empirical research on working with goals in coaching

One of the main findings of our review is the rather low number of studies that could be included, in spite of the extensive literature search. We can thereby confirm a – somewhat surprising – lack of empirical research on goal activities in coaching so far (Bozer & Jones, 2018), notwithstanding the prevalence and popularity of goals amongst practitioners and their uncontested place in most coaching definitions (e.g. David et al., 2014; Sonesh, Coultas, Lacerenza et al., 2015). Many articles that we found during our literature search had to be excluded as they were purely conceptual, descriptive or prescriptive, and did not include any empirical data. Others were not included because they simply claimed a positive effect of goals on the grounds of high goal attainment after coaching without assessing goal activities.

Manifold nature of working with goals in coaching research and practice

Another key finding of our study is the diverse array of goal activities besides (SMART) goal setting that has been examined in research so far. We advance the rather disjointed literature on goals in coaching by proposing a categorisation of goal activities and thereby providing an overview of different conceptualisations of working with goals in extant coaching research.

Concerning coaching practice, it has been criticised that many coaches tend to equate goal setting with SMART goals rather than considering different types of goals at different levels of abstraction (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2017). Here, our synthesis of empirical data provides support for a slightly different picture, indicating that coaches pursue various approaches of working with goals in coaching practice and conduct goal setting not necessarily (only) at the beginning of a coaching engagement.

For example, Wastian and Poetschki (2016) identified two distinct patterns how coaches report to work with goals in coaching that are in line with Clutterbuck and Spence's (2017) differentiation between a linear and a more systemic view on goals. While the linear (i.e. SMART-oriented) view assumes that coaching is a sequential process of relatively discrete events, namely, goal setting, action planning and goal-oriented action implementation, a systemic view considers goals to be rather unstable and contingent upon contextual influences, thereby requiring ongoing flexibility in discovering, formulating and adapting goals over the course of the entire coaching engagement.

Inconclusive research on the relationship between goal activities and coaching outcome

We found that the few extant findings on the relationship between goal activities and coaching outcomes are not as clear or unanimous as one might expect considering the central role that goals are assumed to play in coaching within the conceptual and practitioner literature (e.g. Clutterbuck & David, 2016).

Interestingly, a lack of (or limited) association was found in studies that implemented 'stricter' study designs, that is, a (quasi-)experimental study design, explored learning rather than reaction outcomes, or operationalised goal activities or outcome measures through other-ratings. Put differently, reaction and goal attainment seem to be related more closely to goal activities than other outcome measures (i.e. learning, behaviour) and effects appear more strongly when both goal activity and outcome were assessed by the same source (e.g. coachees) and in retrospective.

The empirical evidence to date therefore seems to resonate with rather critical voices that question the frequent advocating of goal setting as an imperative of successful coaching (e.g. Clutterbuck & Spence, 2017; Grant, 2012).

Neglected role of the (organisational) context

Few studies addressed potential moderating variables on the occurrence of goal activities or the relationship between goal activities and coaching outcome. These were coach or coachee characteristics, or whether the coach or coachee initiated the goal behaviour, that is, input and coaching process factors (see Figure 2). However, moderators that concern the content of the coaching (e.g. operational vs more holistic issues) or the organisational context (e.g. involvement of the coachee's organisation) are mostly absent from the current research.

More specifically, included studies rarely provided sufficient information about the content of the coaching engagements or their organisational embeddedness (e.g. who initiated or paid for the coaching, i.e. the coachee, the coachee's organisation or a third party). It was therefore not possible in our review to draw any conclusions regarding the impact of coaching content on goal activities.

Furthermore, we identified only three (qualitative) studies that addressed goal setting processes that include a 'third party input' (Cowan, 2013) or that touched upon the organisational context of the coachee, namely, the alignment of goals between coachees and their organisation (Kappenberg, 2008; Terblanche et al., 2017). However, coaching is increasingly discussed as a contextualised, triangular intervention, shaped by the organisational context it is embedded in (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Louis & Fatien Diochon, 2014). Against this background, the involvement of third parties and the organisational context might affect the goal selection process and goal attainment (e.g. Grant, 2006, 2012). Moreover, as Clutterbuck and Spence (2017) point out, the adequacy of different types of goals might depend on the degree of complexity and speed of change of the environment. They argue that while SMART performance goals might be adequate for simple problems in slowly changing environ-

ments, highly complex and/or fast-changing environments require flexible performance goals, learning goals and/or 'fuzzy' goals. Given that today's business world is commonly described as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA; e.g. Wilson & Lawton-Smith, 2016), it requires concepts of 'new work' (e.g. Schermuly, 2019) and in turn a context-sensitive approach to working with goals in coaching.

Implications for future research and practice

The current body of research suggests that coaching practitioners use a broad range of goal activities in coaching. However, the majority of included studies only addressed one specific goal activity in isolation. Hence, fertile areas for future research could be to investigate the (simultaneous) occurrence of different approaches of working with goals in coaching and their distinct relationship to coaching outcome. Ideally, this would be investigated both in large-scale survey designs (considering a range of goal activities as predictors of coaching outcome) as well as in (quasi-)experimental study designs (i.e. manipulating types or range of goal activities).

In light of the tentative findings that goal activities appear neither consistently beneficial nor uniformly harmful in relation to coaching outcome, more research is needed to better understand factors that impact upon the relationship between goal activities and coaching outcomes. Most of the reported studies rarely provided (sufficient) information on the organisational embeddedness of the coaching (or lacked an organisational context altogether by relying on student samples), let alone considered the potential impact of the organisational context or content of the coaching goal on goal activities and coaching outcome. Therefore, future studies should examine the influence of goal characteristics (e.g. specificity/level of abstraction, goal content) and contextual factors (e.g. third party involvement concerning goals, complexity and volatility of the organisational context, organisational

and societal culture) on goal activities and coaching outcome. This appears necessary in order to do justice to the allegedly rather complex relationship between goal activities and coaching outcome, and the likely impact of additional influencing factors. For example, the impact of goal alignment (and potential goal conflicts) among different coaching stakeholders (e.g. the individual coachee, organisational sponsors) on the goal setting process and coaching outcome could be investigated in additional studies.

Even though we strongly suggest that additional research is needed in order to gain a more differentiated understanding of goals in coaching and provide evidence-based guidelines for practitioners, first practical implications can be deduced. We reason that rather than arguing for or against (a certain way of) setting goals in coaching, coaches should adopt more nuanced perspectives that seek to determine how to work with goals in different ways and contexts, taking into account both the personal characteristics of their coachees as well as contextual factors (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2017). Furthermore, seeing that coach-initiated goal behaviour can also be negatively related to coaching outcome (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015), we agree with David and colleagues (2016) that coaching practitioners should keep potential pitfalls of (simplistic) goal approaches in mind, for example, focusing too fast on a 'wrong' objective or superficial goal, and hence neglecting the exploration of potentially 'hidden' issues.

Limitations

We discussed limitations that arise from included studies above, in particular the possible biases that result from operationalisation, design and samples. The main constraint of our review itself is the limited number of studies that could be included although we allowed for a broad scope of quantitative, qualitative and observational studies. Therefore, our findings are only tentative, given that they could not be grounded on an extensive empirical data base. We acknowledge that our

strict inclusion criteria may be a double-edged sword (e.g. Bozer & Jones, 2018), as there may have been studies that were excluded from our review due to our rather narrow focus. Namely, we chose to focus on goal activity, in other words, coaching session moderators (Grant, 2012). Consequently, studies that examined only goal-related coachee characteristics (e.g. motivation or goal orientation) or coach characteristics (e.g. coach's authentic leadership style) without also examining goal activity were not included. Furthermore, we focused on workplace coaching as life coaching usually deals with more holistic issues while the work-related focus that is at the core of our review constitutes only one of many possible coaching topics and of varying relevance (Grant, 2005). Finally, we only included studies in English and German. Therefore, findings concerning a broader spectrum of coaching topics or published in other languages are not contained in our review. Although the nationality of study participants was diverse, we cannot rule out potential biases of culture on the findings of the included studies. Put differently, the direction or existence of findings on the relationship between goal activities and coaching outcomes might (also) depend on the coach's and/or coachee's national and cultural background.

Conclusion

'Working with goals' in coaching is conceptualised in various forms in the extant research. Nonetheless, empirical findings on goal activities, especially goal activities other than goal setting, are rather scarce. A number of studies indicate that goal setting is reported as being applied frequently, but that perspectives of coaches and coachees might diverge. Findings suggest that goals may indeed play an important role in improving coaching outcomes. However, findings are not unanimous and the scarce empirical basis to date stands in stark contrast to the strong claims made about the central role of goals in coaching (e.g. Grant, 2012). Does our review challenge the 'sacred cow' (Scoular & Linley,

2006, p.9) of goals in coaching research and practice? Partly, yes. More research is thus warranted in order to further investigate the relevance of goal activities in workplace coaching. We take this as an opportunity

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to call for future research on moderating factors (i.e. input, process and contextual factors) that might affect the relationship between (a broader range of) goal activities and coaching outcomes.

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