



# More Than Working Alliance

## Exploring the Relationship in Entrepreneurial Coaching

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### Abstract

The relationship between coach and client is an essential factor for coaching success. This coach-client relationship has previously been equated with the working alliance as the common agreement on tasks and goals, and the coach-client bond. As entrepreneurial coaching differs from other coaching formats due to the entrepreneurs' close connection to their company and the coaches being considered sparring and networking partners, the coach-client relationship may go beyond the working alliance in entrepreneurial coaching. The following exploratory study investigated within a standardized business-related coaching process with business coaches the effect of different coaching relationship factors on the success of entrepreneurial coaching in a field setting. Therefore, 18 male entrepreneurs participated in a three-month coaching with questionnaires before and after the coaching process. The results indicate that not only working alliance in terms of tasks and goals but also perceived empathy, closeness, and perceived need supportive behaviour matter for coaching success, suggesting that entrepreneurial coaching may benefit from a relationship that goes beyond the working alliance. As this study is exploratory without a control design, future research is needed to test this finding with a bigger sample and with different control and experimental conditions. Particularly interesting would be to test it with a mixed-method approach with a more varied sample including entrepreneurs of different age, gender, and demographical background. In addition, future studies could investigate this going beyond the working alliance in other coaching contexts, such as team coaching and peer coaching.

**Keywords** Coaching · Entrepreneurship · Interpersonal relationship · Coaching science

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Entrepreneurship is important for economic development and performance as it relates to productivity, wealth, and job creation, innovation, and competitiveness – and therefore is needed to tackle today's challenges (Kuratko et al. 2015; Spencer et al. 2008; Van Praag and Versloot 2007). In the United States alone, there have been over 30 million start-up businesses operating (Small Business Administration 2020) and there is an expected shift to even more self-employment in the future due to increased incentives for start-ups (Wiklund et al. 2019). However, it is estimated that up to 90% of start-ups fail (Cerdeira and Kotashev 2021; Marmer et al. 2012; Riedel 2013). This high failure rate has several causes, like entrepreneurs misreading the market (42%), running out of money (29%), or having the wrong team (23%) (CBinsights 2019). In addition, being an entrepreneur requires facing many challenges that salaried professionals do not have to deal with: They face longer working hours, greater time pressures, and more un-

certainty and complexity (Stephan 2018); moreover, they experience more stress (Cardon and Patel 2015), receive less social support (Tetrick et al. 2000), and must fit into a wider variety of roles, including roles within the firm (e.g., CEO) and roles outside the firm (e.g., shareholder) to increase their stake in the company (St-Jean and Audet 2012).

## 1 Supporting Entrepreneurs Via Coaching

Due to the aforementioned high demands on entrepreneurs, there is a growing awareness that they can benefit tremendously from external support in running and starting a business (Kutzhanova et al. 2009). This external support to mitigate the risk of failure and help with difficult challenges can be provided through entrepreneurial coaching (Audet and Couteret 2012; Saadaoui and Affess 2015). As the founders of a start-up are a key factor for its success, they need to be supported individually (Raposo and Paco 2011; Zalan and Lewis 2010). Thus, individual support in terms of entrepreneurial coaching, training or mentoring can be crucial development formats (Klofsten and Öberg 2012). In other words, a tailor-made designed intervention such as coaching (Grant 2006) can help entrepreneurs to meet the individual requirements as well as the changing conditions of a newly founded company (Mazra and Guy 2012; Walker et al. 2007) by enabling them to develop and acquire skills that are necessary for their own start-up-relevant goals (Audet and Couteret 2012; Wakkee et al. 2010). Thus, entrepreneurial coaching is a development measure used by most accelerator programs, that helps entrepreneurs with their start-up success (Mansoori et al. 2019).

Coaching entrepreneurs can be defined as empower them to self-reflect, develop their own solutions for problems they face (Audet and Couteret 2012; Kotte et al. 2021), and strengthen their capability of developing tailor-made solutions in their problem-solving process (Audet and Couteret 2012; Mühlberger & Traut-Mattausch 2015). Thus, coaching is about “provid[ing] the tools, skills, and opportunities they need to develop themselves” (Jones et al. 2015; p. 250). This differs coaching from mentoring, in which the mentor serves as an experienced role model, giving guidance, sharing experiences, and sharing networks (Jones et al. 2015; Oberursel 2004; Underhill 2006). In other words, mentoring entrepreneurs therefore involves having an experienced entrepreneur as mentor that serves as a role model and can give advice (St-Jean and Audet 2009). Similarly, in contrast to coaching, training and consulting are a much more directive service in order to help the client with advice, knowledge and tools to learn, build up competencies, and develop skills (Diller et al. 2021a; Grover and Furnham

2016; Pletcher et al. 2019). To sum up, coaching strongly focuses on self-empowerment and self-reflection.

## 2 Coaching Success Factors: The Coach-Client Relationship

Besides other factors, the coach-client relationship has been named as the central role in terms of coaching success, explaining a moderate and consistent effect on coaching success (Grassmann et al. 2019). In other words, the relationship between coach and client is a core success factor when it comes to executive coaching: “The relationship was the basis upon which the coaching was built and without a relationship the coaching would not be as effective as it could be” (Gyllensten and Palmer 2007; p. 173). Similarly, Behrendt et al. (2021) proposed that “relationship-oriented behavior that fosters effective working relationships and entails providing structured guidance, providing personalized support, and activating resources” is one of the key factors for coaching success (Behrendt et al. 2021, p. 1). Furthermore, Grant and Atad (2021) highlighted that supporting the coachee to foster his or her self-regulatory capabilities is not only success-critical but “a key tenet of the coaching relationship” (Grant and Atad 2021; p. 1) that differentiates coaching from positive psychology. The results of their comparison of Coaching Psychology and Positive Psychology indicate that only the “enhance[d] personal agency through goal-focused self-regulation” (Grant and Atad 2021; p. 1) enable higher scores in terms of goal attainment, self-insight, psychological well-being, and solution-focused thinking. In other words, the particular characteristics of a coaching relationship enable coachees to focus on their goals and translate aspirations into actions.

### 2.1 The Working Alliance

The coach-coachee relationship has mostly been conceptualized and evaluated in terms of the working alliance in the past (Baron and Morin 2009; de Haan and Mannhardt 2013; Duckworth and de Haan 2009). In a recent meta-analysis on working alliance, Grassmann et al. (2019) found that the working alliance predicts several positive coaching success outcomes, such as coaching satisfaction, perceived effectiveness, self-efficacy, cognitive outcomes, and results outcomes. A good coach-client working alliance is characterized by mutual agreement on goals to achieve during the coaching, on tasks that facilitate goal attainment, and on a bonding partnership (Baron and Morin 2009). Thus, the working alliance is based on three components to measure the quality of the interaction: the personal bond, the common agreement on the clients’ goals, and the shared understanding of the clients’ tasks (Bordin 1979). While the

working alliance is well-researched due to its link to psychotherapy outcomes (Grassmann et al. 2019), light needs to be shed on further components of the coach-client relationship. In other words, the coaching relationship has several other relationship factors that need to be included (de Haan and Gannon 2017). The relevance to examine these other factors in more detail in entrepreneurial coaching is reinforced by a recent study with 19 insolvent entrepreneurs, showing that a working alliance did not add to the positive coaching outcomes (Schermyly et al. 2021).

## 2.2 Relationship Factors Beyond the Working Alliance

Although the working alliance is a great measure of part of a coaching relationship, it may not grasp all aspects of the coaching relationship (de Haan and Gannon 2017; Jowett et al. 2012). For example, while the working alliance stems from psychotherapy research, also other factors like empathy matter next to the working alliance in terms of psychotherapy success (Wampold 2015). Similarly, previous research enhanced the importance of an empathic relationship (Baron and Morin 2009; Dagley 2010; de Haan et al. 2011; Neukom et al. 2011) and trustful relationship (Baron and Morin 2009; Duckworth and de Haan 2009; Jowett et al. 2012; Schiemann et al. 2019) in coaching. Behrendt et al. (2021) as well as Jowett et al. (2012) propose in their models that a relationship should further be need supportive and have a degree of closeness. Thus, a trustful, empathic, need supportive and close relationship may be essential beyond the working alliance.

**Trust** Although a trustful relationship is mentioned in the working alliance inventory's subscale *bond*, trust is a separate relationship factor that does not even correlate with the working alliance (Horvath 1981; Horvath and Greenberg 1989). Trust is therefore much more than a working alliance (Baron and Morin 2009; Boyce et al. 2010; Crits-Christoph et al. 2019; de Haan and Gannon 2017; Gyllenstein and Palmer 2007). Trusting someone involves three essential aspects, namely integrity, ability, and benevolence (Mayer et al. 1995). In other words, a coach needs to succeed in being perceived as authentic and integer, benevolent and well-meaning, and capable and competent as a coach by acting accordingly (Schiemann et al. 2019). In interviews with coaches and clients, both coaches and clients reported that the coach's trustworthiness plays an essential role in the coaching relationship (Rekalde et al. 2015).

**Perceived Empathy** Another aspect that is named as a fundamental component of the coaching relationship is perceived empathy (Baron and Morin 2009; de Haan et al. 2011; Gregory and Levy 2011). Additionally, in the coach and client

interviews, empathy was further named as an essential relationship component (Rekalde et al. 2015). While perceived empathy and working alliance are highly related, empathy is a relationship component different from working alliance (Horvath 1981). The coach's perceived empathy and trust in terms of benevolence are closely related (Schiemann et al. 2019). However, perceived empathy means more than just meaning well in terms of benevolence, as it is about understanding the other's situation and feeling with the other (Cuff et al. 2014). Kinder et al. (2020) reviewed over 1000 coaching processes and found that after adding perceived empathy and trust alongside working alliance, more variance was explained in predicting coaching success. Following, not only trust but also perceived empathy adds to explaining a good coach-client relationship beyond the working alliance.

**Closeness** In line with de Haan and Gannon (2017), Jowett et al. (2012) also propose that the executive coaching relationship goes beyond the working alliance. While they also highlight the importance of bonding as well as mutual understandings of tasks and goals like the working alliance, they enhance the conceptualization through adding perceived empathy and trust. Moreover, with their closeness scale, they further stress the importance of closeness between coach and client in the sense of general sympathy and feeling a connection that is not limited to the mutual work within the coaching. For example, Jowett et al. (2017) found a positive effect of closeness in the coach-athlete relationship on goal setting, planning, strategy, and skill development, indicating that closeness can be an essential factor.

**Perceived Need Supportive Behaviour** Based on new directions in self-determination theory (SDT) research, perceived need supportive behaviour became relevant in recent years as a coaching relationship component that helps increase intrinsic motivation, need fulfilment, and coaching success (Haerens et al. 2018; Diller et al. 2021a; Losch et al. 2016). Need supportive behaviour is characterized by showing empathy, unconditional appreciation, trust, and mutual support (Deci and Ryan 1985) and can be measured with the *Perceived Autonomy-Support Sports Climate Questionnaire* (PAS-SCQ; Baard et al. 2004). Therefore, coaches need to focus—among the other aspects mentioned above—on showing trust (Schiemann et al. 2019) and empathy (Diller et al. 2021b) to support their clients' needs. Moreover, research showed that perceived need supportive behaviour positively affects dyadic interactions in general (Mageau & Vallerand 2003). These considerations are supported by Gregory and Levy (2010) whose scale *Perceived Quality of the Employee Coaching Relationship* contains dimensions like effective communication and facilitating development,

underlining the importance of need supportive behaviour for the relationship.

### 3 Relationship Success Factors in the Context of Entrepreneurial Coaching

The relationship between coach and client is also perceived to be an essential success factor when coaching entrepreneurs (Audet and Couteret 2012; Levine-Finley 2014). Kariv (2011) stated that “The entrepreneur has much to gain from a successful coaching relationship” (p. 122). However, coaching entrepreneurs can be different to coaching executives or business coaching, as coaching an entrepreneur not only involves the individual and their work but also their venture and this interconnection (Berman 2019; Jayaraman et al. 2000; Kotte et al. 2021). This attachment may be characterized financially as owners and emotionally as creators of their business idea (Jayaraman et al. 2000). Moreover, entrepreneurs differ in their personality from managers and executives, such as scoring higher in openness to experience, achievement motivation, extraversion, emotional stability, and risk propensity (Brandstätter 2011). Therefore, coaching entrepreneurs is different from coaching executives or business coaching. Thus, research suggest that a coaching offer for entrepreneurs needs to be tailored to the needs of an entrepreneur (Fischer 2020; Mansoori et al. 2019). For example, entrepreneurs benefit from a competitive environment during the coaching (Mansoori et al. 2019) and input on dealing with stress (Fischer 2020). Thus, entrepreneurial coaching may differ from executive coaching and business coaching in its relationship success factors.

In a recent qualitative study on entrepreneurial coaching, Kotte et al. (2021) investigated the differences between coaching and entrepreneurial coaching via semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurial coaches and entrepreneurs. Due to the majority of literature focusing on working alliance when it comes to the coaching relationship, the authors also analysed the interviews concerning the three aspects of the working alliance. While they found all working alliance subscales being mentioned, they further found that need supportive coach behaviour (including empathic understanding) was an essential process factor. In addition, reflection-focused, skill-focused, and optimization-focused development behaviour as well as advising and guiding were named. While these coach behaviours can also be found in other coaching literature (e.g., Grover and Furnham 2016), there is one process factor that is not common in the ‘usual’ coaching literature: Connective behaviour by the coach. In other words, the entrepreneurial coach is not only a coach but also a network partner. Accordingly, entrepreneurial coaches do not only need to be ex-

ecutive coaches but also a “companion”, “sparring partner”, and “network broker” (p. 543; Kotte et al. 2021). Furthermore, Caliendo et al. (2014) found that a coach-entrepreneur matching process based on similarities can be decisive for coaching success.

### 4 The Present Research

To sum up, the coaching relationship is essential not only for coaching in general but also in entrepreneurial coaching. Nevertheless, based on findings on coaching success by Kinder et al. (2020), relationship aspects may go beyond the working alliance, including perceived empathy and trust as well. Furthermore, entrepreneurial coaching may even involve relationship aspects like closeness: Kotte et al. (2021) found that an entrepreneurial coach should be a sparring and networking partner as well, and Caliendo et al. (2014) found that similarities between coach and client play a role in entrepreneurial coaching. Therefore, the present research intended to investigate relationship factors that are essential for the success of entrepreneurial coaching by setting up 18 standardized entrepreneurial coaching processes during the winter term that lasted three months and included five sessions.

## 5 Method

### 5.1 Sample

By contacting different start-up centers and start-up networks, 18 male entrepreneurs, mostly with a university degree (89%) and between the age of 26 and 53, were acquired for free coaching consisting of five coaching sessions. The entrepreneurs’ share of the company varied between 6% to 28%, signaling that all of them co-founded the company with at least one other person. All entrepreneurs had accomplished the first foundation phase and most of them had a tech start-up (43%; see Appendix 1). Descriptive statistics on company size and duration of existence can be found in Table 1. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee and the entrepreneurs filled out an informed consent. The sample is small due to the standardized process of having coaching at the same time with not too many coaches as control variables. These coaches were trained for the structured process (three-hour training before the start of the project and 2-hour training in the middle of the project). The coaches had the similar age (24 and 27 years), amount of coaching experience (three and four clients before), and coaching training background (220-hour coaching education according to the career coaching concept of Braumandl and Dirscherl (2005)). Some level but not a high level

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics, Inter-Correlations, and Reliabilities

$\alpha$	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7a	7b	7c	8	9a	9b	9c	10	11	12	13	14
<b>Questionnaire before coaching</b>																				
	1. Age (in years)	33.39	7.55	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	2. Duration of existence (in months)	25.00	51.11	-0.06	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	3. Number of employees	5.33	4.10	0.01	0.05	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	4. CV: Propensity to trust (8 items)	4.06	0.62	0.29	-0.03	0.35	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Questionnaire after coaching</b>																				
	5. IV: Perceived empathy of the coach (3 items)	53.33	24.39	0.19	0.47	-0.07	0.07	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	6. IV: Perceived ISIO (part of perceived empathy of the coach) (6 items)	3.78	0.80	0.09	0.73**	-0.13	-0.19	0.72**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>7. IV: Perceived trustworthiness of the coach</b>																				
	7a. Integrity (4 items)	4.69	0.37	0.38	0.40	0.21	0.36	0.48*	0.32	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	7b. Benevolence (4 items)	4.46	0.46	0.37	0.47*	0.004	0.40	0.51*	0.47	0.75***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	7c. Ability (4 items)	4.53	0.51	0.20	0.27	-0.08	0.25	0.49*	0.31	0.83***	0.66**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	8. IV: Perceived need supportive behaviour of the coach (10 items)	4.52	0.58	0.37	0.30	0.02	0.31	0.62**	0.30	0.90***	0.65**	0.82***	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>9. IV: Working alliance</b>																				
	9a. Tasks (4 items)	4.39	0.55	0.39	0.45	0.22	0.35	0.65**	0.51*	0.74***	0.70**	0.75***	0.69**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	9b. Bond (4 items)	4.10	0.48	0.20	0.35	-0.04	0.41	0.65**	0.36	0.70**	0.65**	0.60**	0.74***	0.59*	-	-	-	-	-	-
	9c. Goal (4 items)	4.33	0.54	0.20	0.28	0.03	0.40	0.57*	0.27	0.79***	0.76***	0.85***	0.81***	0.76***	0.84***	-	-	-	-	-
	10. IV: Closeness (4 items)	3.52	0.95	0.42	0.42	0.02	0.21	0.77***	0.64**	0.52*	0.496*	0.48*	0.51*	0.64**	0.60**	0.53*	-	-	-	-

Table 1 (Continued)

	$\alpha$	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7a	7b	7c	8	9a	9b	9c	10	11	12	13	14	
11. DV: Perceived goal attainment via coaching (1 item)	–	76.67	21.42	0.11	0.31	0.23	0.14	0.56*	0.50*	0.58*	0.44	0.66**	0.51*	0.83***	0.45	0.60**	0.59*	–	–	–	–	–
12. DV: Coaching satisfaction (1 item)	–	87.22	14.06	0.14	0.13	0.24	0.34	0.59*	0.34	0.69**	0.53*	0.83***	0.67**	0.76***	0.61**	0.84***	0.60**	0.79***	–	–	–	–
13. DV: Coaching recommendation (1 item)	–	92.78	10.74	0.22	0.04	0.52*	0.49*	0.42	0.09	0.66**	0.34	0.55*	0.61**	0.51*	0.40	0.51*	0.53*	0.57*	0.74***	–	–	–
14. DV: Actual goal attainment during coaching (1 item)	–	5.06	1.59	0.24	0.46	–0.05	–0.07	0.29	0.40	0.13	0.18	0.11	0.11	0.48*	0.25	0.26	0.43	0.495*	0.20	0.01	–	–
15. DV: Client need fulfillment (after—before)	(0.82–0.91)	0.10	0.37	0.21	0.05	0.08	0.30	0.66**	0.42	0.53*	0.27	0.64**	0.64**	0.61**	0.54*	0.53*	0.57*	0.70**	0.77***	0.68**	0.10	–

Note. N = 18; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

IV independent variable, CV control variable (for trust computations), DV dependent variable

of coaching experience was required, as previous research shows that coach training and not coaching experience matters when it comes to successful coaching (including the independence of the coaches' age; Biberacher et al. 2010; Diller et al. 2020a). Furthermore, the two coaches received external supervision by a trained supervisor throughout the process. The coaches were unaware of the questionnaire and its results.

## 5.2 Coaching Process

The coaching consisted of five 90-minute in presence sessions over the course of three months with a clear session structure: Session 1 focused on goal setting and building a trustful relationship, as well as explaining the coaching procedure and used methods; session 2 focused on the analysis of strengths and development potential; session 3 concentrated on resources, competencies, and strategies; session 4 focused on planning and decision-making; and session 5 was about the transfer, closure, and evaluation. The coaching was free of costs and voluntary for the entrepreneurs. As part of the free coaching offer, the entrepreneurs completed two online questionnaires—one before and one after the coaching.

## 5.3 Material

The questionnaires before and after the coaching (LimeSurvey GmbH) were sent out to the entrepreneurs by a research administrative. The questionnaire before coaching included demographics, the propensity to trust scale, and a pre-measure of the client's needs; the questionnaire after coaching included the relationship factors and the coaching success variables—except for actual goal attainment which was assessed throughout the coaching process in every coaching session (at the beginning and at the end of the sessions) as part of the coaching. Descriptive statistics, inter-correlations, and reliabilities can be found in Table 1. Both questionnaires (before and after) can be found in Appendix 2.

**Working Alliance** The German version of the *Working Alliance Inventory—Short Revised* (WAI-SR) (Wilmers et al. 2008) was used with its subscales bonds (e.g., “My coach and I respect each other”), tasks (e.g., “As a result of the coaching I am clearer as to how I might be able to change”), and goals (e.g., “My coach and I agree on what is important for me to work on”). The statements were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*fully applies*). The WAI-SR is a common measurement to evaluate the coach-coachee relationship with high internal consistency ( $\alpha$  of the subscales between 0.81 to 0.91,  $N = 331$ ; see Wilmers et al. 2008) and proven convergent validity (e.g., “high correlation with the subscale Relation-

ship Satisfaction of the Helping Alliance Questionnaire”; Wilmers et al. 2008, p. 2).

**Trust** The coach’s trustworthiness was measured with a trustworthiness scale adapted for coaching (Schiemann et al. 2019) in terms of ability (e.g., “My coach is very capable of performing its job”), benevolence (e.g., “My coach is very concerned about my welfare”), and integrity (e.g., “My coach is straightforward and authentic”). The items ranged on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*fully applies*). The initial scale used to measure perceived trustworthiness is considered to be well-established (Mayer and Davis 1999; Schoorman et al. 1996) and had a high internal consistency ( $\alpha$  of the subscales between 0.82 to 0.89,  $N=166$ – $185$ ; see Mayer and Davis 1999). A confirmatory factor analysis has approved the different factors (ability, integrity, benevolence; see Mayer & Davis 1999). Regarding coaching samples, the internal consistency was found to be good in client samples (e.g., between 0.87–0.89 for the subscales; Schiemann et al. 2019). When measuring trustworthiness, a general propensity to trust is an important control variable. For this, the German version of the *Propensity To Trust Scale* by Mayer and Davis (1999) which was adapted according to Rotter (1967) (e.g., “Most experts tell the truth about the limits of their knowledge”) was also used but was excluded from further computations due to its low internal reliability (see Table 1) and no change in results when controlling for it. The general internal consistency of this control variable is assumed to be only mediocre ( $\alpha=0.55$ – $0.66$ ,  $N=166$ – $185$ ; see Mayer and Davis 1999).

**Perceived Empathy** Based on the empathy subscale definitions by Davis (1983), three items were used for situational perceived coach empathy in terms of perspective-taking (“In your opinion, how many times has the coach taken your perspective”), empathic concern (“In your opinion, how many times has the coach felt with you”), and emotional distress/emotion matching (“In your opinion, how many times has the coach felt the same or similar emotions as you”). All items ranged on an 11-point Likert scale from 0% (*never*) to 100% (*always*). In addition, an empathic perspective-taking scale was added. This scale was derived from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis 1983) but differs between the coach’s imagine-self and his imagine-other empathy (ISIO; Diller et al. 2021b; e.g., IRI original item: “Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place”; imagine-self: “My coach tried to imagine how he would feel if he were in my place”; imagine-other: “My coach tried to imagine how I feel my situation”). The internal consistency of the empathic perspective-taking scale (ISIO Scale; Diller et al. 2016) has been evaluated as good in a sample of

both coaches and clients ( $\alpha_{IO}=0.87$ – $0.89$ ,  $\alpha_{IS}=0.70$ – $0.90$ ; see Diller et al. 2021b).

**Closeness** Besides the working alliance, trust, and perceived empathy, a measure of closeness developed by French (2011) (e.g., “My coach is very close to me”) was added (note: the closeness scale has not been validated yet with a large sample size). The statements were again rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*fully applies*).

**Perceived Need Supportive Behaviour** To assess the perceived need supportive behaviour, the short scale of the *Perceived Autonomy Support Sports Climate Questionnaire* (PAS-SCQ; Baard et al. 2004; e.g., “My coach listens to how I would like to do things”) was used. The items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*fully applies*). Previous studies have shown good internal consistency ratings for the perceived need supportive behaviour ( $\alpha_1=0.79$ ,  $N_1=106$ ;  $\alpha_2=0.83$ ,  $N_2=45$ ; see Müller 2021).

**Coaching Success** Coaching success was measured following Bachmann, Jansen, and Mäthner’s (2004) remarks on coaching evaluation. Thus, coaching satisfaction (“How satisfied are you with the coaching?”), coaching recommendation (“How much would you recommend the coaching?”), and goal attainment via coaching (“How much has the coaching helped you to achieve your goals?”) has been evaluated. The three questionnaire items ranged on an 11-point Likert scale from 0% (*not at all*) to 100% (*totally*) ( $\alpha=0.79$ ).

Furthermore, actual goal attainment (regular goal-process evaluations before and after each coaching on a scale from 0 to 10) has been assessed as coaching goals should be achieved during coaching (Greif 2008). The actual goal attainment score was calculated by the difference between the goal status of the first session at the beginning of the coaching and the goal status of the last session at the end of the coaching. As seen in Table 1, the perceived and actual goal attainment correlated highly significantly with each other. Based on need fulfilment literature, we further assessed need fulfilment before and after the coaching as coaching is assumed to increase the need satisfaction of the three basal needs (autonomy, competency, relatedness; see Deci and Ryan 1985) (Moore and McBride 2016): For this assessment, the clients were asked about their need fulfilment before and after the coaching with a self-designed questionnaire (*F-DDP*; Brantl et al. 2019; 18 items; *Adjektiv-Aussage-Skala*; AAS; Brantl et al. 2017; 9 items) with a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*totally*) that was based on the Balanced Measure of Psychological Needs Scale (BMNP Sheldon and Hilpert 2012).

The internal consistencies of the basic questionnaire that have been combined for this study, were very good in pre-studies ( $\alpha_{F-DDP}=0.79\text{--}0.89$ ,  $N_{F-DDP}=171$ ; see Müller 2021;  $\alpha_{AAS}=0.95\text{--}0.99$ ,  $N_{AAS}=332$ ; see Diller et al. 2020b). Participants reported a high need fulfilment both before ( $M=4.31$ ,  $SD=0.36$ ) and after the coaching ( $M=4.41$ ,  $SD=0.50$ ). The difference between before and after the coaching (after minus before) was used for computations.

**Additional Variables** For exploratory purposes, seven items measuring the clients' hopefulness, that were adapted to coaching from the *Hope-Centred Career Inventory*, were added as a pre- and post-measure (HCCI; Niles et al. 2010; e.g., "I believe my dreams will come true";  $\alpha=0.50\text{--}0.74$ ). In addition, one question based on reciprocal cooperation was added (Lewicki et al. 2006): "We are considering offering a lottery as part of the study, with a prize of €250. Imagine you win €250. Would you share part of the prize with your coach? If yes, how much money would you give to your coach?". These two additional measures were not relevant to this study and were therefore omitted from the computations.

#### 5.4 Analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0. As both the working alliance and trust can have important subscales, these two factors were split into their subscales. At first, inverse items were recoded and scales were computed considering reliabilities measured by Cronbach's Alpha. Based on the low sample number ( $N=18$ ), Spearman-Roh was used to identify inter-correlations (see Table 1 for reliabilities and inter-correlations). As variables had different Likert scale ranges, all variables were z-standardized before computing regressions. To identify the best predictors for coaching success, multiple stepwise regressions with

a confidence interval of 95%, a change in  $R^2$  as well as a diagnosis for collinearity were calculated.

## 6 Results

As shown in Table 2, the stepwise regressions reveal that different relationship factors affect other aspects of coaching success. Working alliance in terms of tasks as the only included predictor positively influenced perceived goal attainment ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $CI(0.53; 1.13)$ ) and working alliance in terms of goals as the only included predictor positively influenced coaching satisfaction ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $CI(0.42; 1.11)$ ). Actual goal attainment was only predicted by closeness ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $CI(0.07; 0.97)$ ). Perceived empathy as the only included predictor positively affected client need fulfilment ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $CI(0.08; 0.98)$ ) and need supportive behaviour as the only included predictor positively affected coaching recommendation ( $p < 0.05$ ,  $CI(0.13; 1.00)$ ). All other tested variables were excluded from the stepwise regressions presented.

## 7 Discussion

When coaching entrepreneurs as well as coaching other clients, relationship factors are considered to be crucial (Audet and Couteret 2012; Grassmann et al. 2019; Kinder et al. 2020). These relationship factors include working alliance (Grassmann et al. 2019) but not only include working alliance, as also perceived empathy and other perceived supportive behaviour matter (Kinder et al. 2020). In other words, coaching relationship may go beyond working alliance (de Haan and Gannon 2017). Thus, this paper investigated which relationship factors predict coaching success when coaching entrepreneurs. The results show that not

**Table 2** Different Relationship Factors as Predictors for Coaching Success

Predictors	Coaching success					
	$T$	$R^2$	$F$	$\beta$	$SE$	95% $CI$
<b>Perceived goal attainment</b>						
Working alliance: Tasks <sup>a</sup>	0.38	0.68	34.67	0.83***	0.14	[0.53; 1.13]
<b>Actual goal attainment</b>						
Closeness <sup>a</sup>	0.27	0.27	5.93	0.52*	0.21	[0.07; 0.97]
<b>Coaching satisfaction</b>						
Working alliance: Goals <sup>a</sup>	0.19	0.59	22.57	0.77**	0.16	[0.42; 1.11]
<b>Coaching recommendation</b>						
Perceived need supportive behavior <sup>a</sup>	0.35	0.32	7.63	0.57*	0.21	[0.13; 1.00]
<b>Client need fulfilment</b>						
Perceived empathy <sup>a</sup>	0.29	0.28	6.10	0.53*	0.21	[0.08; 0.98]

Notes.  $T$  = Statical power based on the respective signifacnce level and sample size ( $N=18$ );  $CI$  = Confidence intervals (z-standardized variables).

\* $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

<sup>a</sup> All other independent variables were excluded from that stepwise regression



only the working alliance but also closeness, perceived empathy, and perceived need supportive behaviour matter for coaching success.

Thus, on the one hand, in line with previous coaching research, the working alliance in terms of tasks and goals positively influenced coaching success in terms of coaching satisfaction and perceived goal attainment (Grassmann et al. 2019). This task and goal agreement seems to have a lot to do with the client's perceived autonomy support, as the client-initiated goal and task agreement but not the coach-initiated goal and task agreement lead to coaching success (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld 2015). This finding is in line with recent coaching research on the importance of the coach's autonomy supportive behavior (Diller et al. 2021a). In the work context, the positive effect of perceived autonomy support on organizational measures such as affect, commitment, performance, turnover, or satisfaction has been widely recognized (Van den Broeck et al. 2016). In the present research, the coach's need supportive behaviour perceived by the coachee had a positive effect on coaching success in terms of coach recommendation. Coach recommendation is an essential outcome quality variable that has a great influence on future coaching success (Greif 2007).

On the other hand, forming a bond in terms of feeling liked may not be enough to establish a valuable coaching relationship. In support of this finding, Gessnitzer & Kauffeld (2015) further found no relation between bond and coaching success. Additionally, bond has been found to be the weakest predictor of coaching success when differentiating within the working alliance (e.g., Grassman et al. 2019). Furthermore, our results show that perceived empathy positively predicted coaching success in terms of client need fulfilment. Empathy is considered an important relationship factor for coaching success (e.g., Neukom et al. 2011; Rekalde et al. 2015) and has predicted client need fulfilment in past research (Diller et al. 2021b; Schiemann et al. 2018). Empathy is not part of the working alliance (Horvath 1981) and does not only influence social factors but also self-congruency, self-reflection, and self-access (Diller et al. 2021b; Schiemann et al. 2018). Over and above, the present results indicate an effect of closeness on the actual goal attainment. Previous models that suggested to go beyond the working alliance already mentioned closeness as one essential relationship factor (e.g., Jowett et al. 2012). In addition, previous research in work contexts has found that closeness can foster cooperative behavior and goal attainment (Fitzsimons & Fishbach 2010; Nielson 1998). Particularly in the entrepreneurship coaching context, coaches are needed more as a sparring partner (Kotte et al. 2021) and should therefore have similarities with the entrepreneur (Caliendo et al. 2014).

In sum, the study underlines the high importance of the working alliance in terms of client-initiated task and goal

agreement as a central but not exclusive factor for coaching success. Furthermore, empathy, need support, and closeness seem to matter in entrepreneurial coaching success. These factors have been identified before as relevant but not yet investigated alongside working alliance as coaching relationship factors. Therefore, this study is meant to be a trigger for a more discriminated research of relationship factors in (entrepreneurial) coaching and their impact on primary and secondary coaching outcomes.

## 7.1 Limitations

While this study contributes to a better understanding of entrepreneurial coaching, there are some limitations concerning the sample of the study. A first limitation addresses the gender of both coach and client. Regarding the client, female entrepreneurs are still very rare, as men show a higher entrepreneurial intent and are successful with starting their company than women (Canning et al. 2012; Zisser et al. 2019), also signaling that coaching female entrepreneurs or women with entrepreneurial intentions would be essential to foster. Regarding the coaches, the relationship factors may be different when it comes to female coaches, as previous research suggests that a male coach seems to be a better choice for male executives (Bozer et al. 2015). A second limitation addresses the sample. Only 18 entrepreneurs were coached over three months each with a specific coaching concept and in a German-speaking environment. This lowers the general validity, meaning that no general statements can be made regarding entrepreneurial coaching and results should be seen as more exploratory, especially because of the low statistical power. A third limitation is the use of only self-report data. Additional objective behavioral or performance data would have given an additional insight. The question however arises whether coaching success is dependent on an opinion outside of the client's view (de Meuse et al. 2009). A fourth limitation is that we used a variety of different questionnaires, some of which have yet to be validated in a standardized way. Before drawing conclusions on a general level, all measurement tools need to be validated methodically. Finally, the factors have not been actively manipulated, allowing only the evaluation of correlative effects and relationships. Thus, the results should be considered as guidance for future research following experimental designs.

## 7.2 Future Research

**Demographics** As mentioned in the limitations, only male clients were coached by male coaches. Thus, it is necessary to find out whether coaching success with female clients or female coaches depends on the same factors. It could be conceivable that coaching success depends on

the gender of the relationship partners, as other relationship motives may be more important to them. For instance, a study showed that when men work together, a special relational dynamic can emerge in the collaboration in terms of commitment and the quality of results (Kosuch 2018). Thus, both a study with female entrepreneurs and female coaches and a mixed-gender study should be carried out in the future to better generalize findings on coaching entrepreneurs. Furthermore, as the coaches were young and with only a few years of coaching experience, there might also be a difference when it comes to experienced coaches. For example, more experienced and older coaches ask for more money for their coaching (Diller et al. 2020a). In the present study, the coachings were free, as free coachings are often offered as part of accelerator programs (Mansoori et al. 2019) and therefore providing a more representative sample. However, the amount of money could affect the coaching process in terms of value and duration. Moreover, coaches with a proven track record in entrepreneur coaching may be capable of showing even more empathy as they have experience from different settings and empathy can be learned by experience (van Berkhout and Malouff 2016).

**Coaching Context** As explained, entrepreneurship coaching is a specific context with specific needs and interdependencies (e.g., Brandstätter 2011; Fischer 2020; Kotte et al. 2021). Thus, our findings cannot be generalized or transferred to other coaching contexts. Future research should therefore investigate relationship factors in other coaching contexts. Kinder et al. (2020), for instance, found that perceived empathy and trust play an essential role besides working alliance in business one-to-one coaching. However, group or team coaching again differs regarding the setting and could form a completely different coach-clients-relationship beyond working alliance (e.g., Britton 2015). Another example is the peer coaching context: As Kohler et al. (1997) point out, peer coaching is “reciprocal” where the coaches “observe one another and exchange support, companionship, feedback, and assistance in a coequal or non-threatening fashion” (p. 240). Thus, peer coaching forms another kind of relationship, making other relationship factors essential. As an outlook, future studies could also explore the relationship factors regarding other development formats, such as mentoring, training, or consulting (in the entrepreneurial or another context).

**Interdependencies in the Coaching Process** As an outlook, the mutual dependencies between the relationship factors could be evaluated to attain a holistic understanding of the coaching process and provide clear guidance to the coaches on how they can facilitate a flourishing coach-client relationship. Particularly, the interplay between coach and

client as well as both perspectives could be interesting to gain insights into this dynamic process.

**Mixed-method Approaches** In the present study, we focused on a quantitative field design. Qualitative research on relationship factors would however give an additional insight into differences among groups or of whether there may be a relationship factor that was not addressed. Kotte et al. (2021) have shown this with their qualitative approach on the coach-client relationship in entrepreneurship coaching, although focusing on the model of working alliance. A mixed method approach could give insights into the relationship and still show the effect on the coaching success.

### 7.3 Practical Implications

**Establishing a Relationship Beyond Working Alliance in Entrepreneurial Coaching** In the present study, working alliance, perceived empathy, perceived need supportive behaviour, and closeness predicted coaching success in entrepreneurial coaching. Accordingly, coaches of entrepreneurs should show corresponding behaviour that establishes a good relationship in terms of not only working alliance but also perceived empathy, perceived need supportive behaviour, and closeness. As the working alliance is still important, coaches should show dominant-friendly behaviour, a pleasant mood, reciprocal friendliness, and behavioural similarity regarding dominance and affiliation (Grassmann et al. 2019). Furthermore, being perceived as empathic is essential for coaches and entrepreneurial coaches, which can best be shown by imagine-other empathy in terms of (active) listening, paraphrasing, and verbalizing (Diller et al. 2021b). Similar to empathy but also going beyond empathy in terms of overall benevolent behaviour, closeness can be achieved by positive, caring and understanding behavior (LaVoi 2007). Closeness in relationships can occur especially when one believes that the partner is motivated to be there for them and to be approachable (Murray 2005). Additionally, need supportive behaviour needs to be perceived by the client; previous research suggests that motivational interviewing practices may be useful tools for need support (Markland et al. 2005).

**Training for Coaches** In this regard, training of future coaches needs to teach aspects of relationship factors to enable the coaches to build up a skill set for different coaching contexts. In terms of empathy, the meta-analysis of van Berkhout and Malouff (2016), has shown that empathy can be trained. The most common approach therefore is a mixed methods training that entails model learning based on self-experience (e.g., role-play), lecture-based education, and practical learning (exercises) (Lam et al.

2011). Such a mixed methods approach can be applied for all relationship variables and combined with an objective self-assessment based on recorded coaching sessions. The recorded session should additionally be rated by experienced peers and jointly analyzed in order to create self-awareness.

## 8 Conclusion

The present research indicates that relationship factors in entrepreneurship coaching go beyond the working alliance. In the present study, perceived empathy, closeness and perceived need supportive behavior further influenced coaching success. Future research should further investigate these factors in different demographical and coaching contexts as well as with a mixed-method approach. Practical implications on how to establish these relationship factors as well as how to train them are discussed.

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## 9 Appendix

### 9.1 Appendix 1

**Table 3** Absolute and Percentage of Frequency of Industries in Which the Founders are Active

Industry	Numbers in total ( <i>N</i> )	Share in percent (%)
Production	3	16.66
IT, online platform, technology, and media	8	44.44
HR, consultancy, marketing, and public relations	4	22.22
Education, gastronomy, tourism, service	2	11.11
Bike industry	1	5.55

Note. *N* = 18

### 9.2 Appendix 2

**Table 4** Questionnaire before coaching

Category	Detailed question
1. Age (in years)	Please state your age in years
2. Duration of existence (in months)	How long does your startup company already exist? Please state the age of your company in months
3. Number of employees	How many people do you currently employ in your company?
4. CV: Propensity to trust (Mayer and Davis 1999, adapted according to Rotter 1967)	<p>1 One should be very cautious with strangers.<sup>a</sup></p> <p>2 Most experts tell the truth about the limits of their knowledge</p> <p>3 Most people can be counted on to do what they say they will do</p> <p>4 These days, you must be alert or someone is likely to take advantage of you.<sup>a</sup></p> <p>5 Most salespeople are honest in describing their products</p> <p>6 Most repair people will not overcharge people who are ignorant of their specialty</p> <p>7 Most people answer public opinion polls honestly</p> <p>8 Most adults are competent at their jobs</p>

Note. *N* = 18.

<sup>a</sup> *Invers coded*

**Table 5** Questionnaire after coaching

IV: Perceived empathy of the coach (Scale in German based on Davis 1983, 3 items)		
	1	From your perspective, how often did the coach take your perspective?
	2	From your perspective, how often did the coach feel with you?
	3	From your perspective, how often did the coach feel the same or similar emotions as you?
6. IV: Perceived ISIO (part of perceived empathy of the coach) (6 items)		
	1	I had the impression that my coach was trying to understand my perspective from his eyes
	2	I had the impression that my coach was trying to understand my situation based on his own experience
	3	I had the impression that my coach was trying to relate to how he would feel in the situation
	4	I had the impression that my coach was trying to understand my perspective from my eyes
	5	I had the impression that my coach tried to understand my situation based on my descriptions
	6	I had the impression that my coach was trying to figure out how I felt about the situation
7. IV: Perceived trustworthiness of the coach (Adapted German version according to Mayer and Davis 1999, 12 items)		
7a. Integrity (4 items)		
	1	My coach behaves honestly toward me
	2	I would describe my coach as sincere
	3	My coach sticks to his commitments
	4	My coach is sincere and authentic
7b. Benevolence (4 items)		
	1	My coach is very concerned about my welfare
	2	My wishes and needs are very important to my coach
	3	My coach would not knowingly do anything to hurt me
	4	My coach will go out of his way to help me
7c. Ability (4 items)		
	1	My coach is very capable of performing his job
	2	My Coach is very successful at the things he does
	3	I feel very confident about my coach's skills
	4	My coach is well qualified
8. IV: Perceived need supportive behaviour of the coach (Adapted and to German translated version of the PAS CSQ, Baard et al. 2004, 10 items)		
Relatedness support (3 items)		
	1	My coach made me feel comfortable
	2	My coach made me feel in good hands
	3	My coach made me feel valued
Competence support (3 items)		
	4	My coach had confidence in my ability to do well
	5	My coach made me feel that I could achieve my goals
	6	My coach made me feel like I could handle personal challenges
Autonomy support (4 items)		
	7	My coach encouraged me to self-reflect
	8	My coach listened to me about how I would like to do things
	9	My coach encouraged me to think for myself about how I might best proceed
	10	My coach always gave me the opportunity to make my own decisions
9. IV: Working alliance (Working Alliance Inventory—Short Revised, German version according to Wilmers et al. 2008, 12 items)		
9a. Tasks (4 items)		
	1	My coach and I work together to set coaching goals
	2	My coach and I work toward goals we mutually agree on
	3	My coach and I mutually agree on what is important for me to work on
	4	My coach and I are in agreement about what changes would be good for me
9b. Bond (4 items)		
	1	I think my coach likes me
	2	I believe my coach and I care about each other
	3	I believe that my coach appreciates me
	4	I believe that my coach will stand by me even if I do something he doesn't agree with
9c. Goal (4 items)		
	1	Coaching makes me realize how I can change
	2	What I do in coaching provides me with new ways of looking at my problem
	3	I believe that what I do in coaching will help me achieve the change I aspire
	4	I believe the way we work on my problems is appropriate

**Table 5** (Continued)

10. IV: Closeness (Adapted German version according to French 2011, 4 items)	1	My coach is very close to me
	2	I feel connected to my coach
	3	I think my coach is very likeable
	4	My coach and I are on the same wavelength
11. DV: Perceived goal attainment via coaching	1	How much did the coaching help you to achieve your goals? <sup>b</sup>
12. DV: Coaching satisfac- tion	1	How satisfied are you with the coaching? <sup>b</sup>
13. DV: Coaching recom- mendation	1	How strongly would you recommend the coaching to others? <sup>b</sup>
14. DV: Actual goal attain- ment during coaching	1	<i>Measured by the coach before and after each session on a scale from 1 to 10, asking "To what extent have you already achieved the goal that we are working on in coaching?"</i>
15a. DV: Client need fulfilment (F-DDP, Brantl, Jonas, Mühlberger & Diller, unpublished, 18 items)		
Relatedness need fulfilment (6 items)	1	Being in contact a lot with people who are close to me
	2	Being rejected or excluded by other people. <sup>a</sup>
	3	Feeling close and connected to other people who are important to me
	4	Being valued by one or more people important to me
	5	Feeling a strong familiarity with the people I spend time with
	6	Having disagreements or conflicts with people I normally get along with. <sup>a</sup>
Competency need fulfilment (6 items)	7	Successfully accomplish a difficult task or complete a difficult project
	8	Demonstrating my abilities
	9	Taking on big challenges and being confident in overcoming them
	10	Having done something great and feeling competent
	11	Being successful even at difficult things
Autonomy need fulfilment (6 items)	12	Being good at what I do
	13	Having freedom to do things the way I want
	14	Not feeling pressure
	15	To shape actions so that they are expressions of the "real me"
	16	Being free to express my ideas and opinions
	17	Really doing what interests me
	18	To be able to be pretty much myself in my daily situations
15b. DV: Client need fulfilment (AAS, Brantl et al. 2017, unpublished, 9 items)		
Relatedness need fulfilment (3 items)	1	Together with others
	2	Along with others
	3	Connected
Competency need fulfilment (3 items)	4	Qualified
	5	Capable
	6	Competent
Autonomy need fulfilment (6 items)	7	Autonomous
	8	In harmony with myself
	9	Self-determined

Note.  $N = 18$

<sup>a</sup> Invers coded

<sup>b</sup> Scale divided into 10% increments, based on the Check-The-Coach questionnaire according to Bachmann et al. (2004)

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** S.J. Diller, M. Brantl and E. Jonas declare that they have no competing interests.

**Ethical standards** This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Salzburg.

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