“Tit for Tat”—The Outcomes of Coaching in Service Companies

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Abstract

Workplace coaching has been established as a popular managerial development tool to support employees on all hierarchical levels. In service industries, coaching is underrepresented. This is rather surprising because more than in any other industry, the employees’ attitudes and personal job satisfaction have an impact on customers’ service perceptions. Thus, taking care of the service personnel should be a top concern for service firms. This position paper therefore presents the challenges service employees are confronted with, according to their distance to the customer, and describes how coaching may help them to overcome those challenges from a conceptual point of view. Service employees may be influenced by workplace coaching, affecting not only their work performance (i.e. skill-based outcomes), but also their attitude and personality (i.e. psychological outcomes). Theoretically, this study adds on previous research, by presenting a conceptual discussion of positive outcomes of coaching for service organizations, which is supplemented by considerations about negative or unwanted effects. Service practitioners learn that coaching can be widely applied to different employee groups and gain a differentiated perspective about conceivable positive and negative outcomes.

Keywords Workplace Coaching · Service Management · Service Coaching · Positive Outcomes · Coaching Strategies

„Wie du mir, so ich dir“ – das Ergebnis von Mitarbeitercoaching in Dienstleistungsunternehmen

Zusammenfassung

Coaching ist seit einiger Zeit ein beliebtes Instrument um die Mitarbeiter auf allen Hierarchie Ebenen in einem Unternehmen zu unterstützen. In der Dienstleistungsbranche wird dieses jedoch nicht so häufig eingesetzt, obwohl gerade dort die Einstellung der Mitarbeiter und dessen Zufriedenheit ausschlaggebend dafür sind, was die Kunden vom Unternehmen denken. Dienstleistungsunternehmen sollten daher das Wohlergehen ihrer Mitarbeiter an die erste Stelle stellen. Dieser Artikel beschäftigt sich mit den Herausforderungen von Dienstleistungsmitarbeitern und beschreibt konzeptionell, wie Coaching sie bei der Bewältigung dieser Herausforderungen unterstützen kann. Einerseits kann Coaching die Arbeitsperformance der Mitarbeiter steigern und andererseits kann es auf die Einstellung und die Persönlichkeit einwirken. Dieser Artikel ergänzt die bisherige Literatur, weil er nicht nur die positiven Ergebnisse von Coaching für Dienstleistungsorganisationen aufzeigt, sondern auch auf potentielle negative Faktoren eingeht. Im praktischen Sinn zeigt der Artikel auf, dass Coaching bei vielen verschiedenen Mitarbeitern im Unternehmen unterschiedlich angewandt werden kann.

Schlüsselwörter Mitarbeitercoaching · Dienstleistungsmanagement · Arbeitsplatzcoaching · Coaching Strategien für Dienstleistungsbetriebe · Positive Ergebnisse für Dienstleistungsmitarbeiter

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1 Introduction

The complex business environment, with many new competitors entering and the constant struggle against stagnant markets, has driven organizations to install managerial development tools, aimed at keeping their competitive advantages and increasing employee performances (Pousa and

Mathieu 2014). One managerial development tool is workplace coaching, which has been especially praised by practitioners and scholars as key to enhance human resource assets (Ellinger et al. 2011). Coaching is a process that enables people to learn and achieve goals, but most of all, workplace coaching is a tool for taking care of the employees in the firm (Ellinger and Bostrom 1999; Deeter-Schmelz et al. 2002, 2008; Sherman and Freas 2004). Therefore, it is commonly used to enhance work performance and cultivate leadership of employees, in order to promote positive work cultures and to foster organizational well-being (e.g., Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson 2001; Jones et al. 2006; MacKie 2007). Moreover, previous research has shown that coaching can help to reduce stress and positively influences the employees' expectations on effectiveness, prioritizing capabilities, and work efficiency (Jones et al. 2016; Theeboom et al. 2014).

Coaching may be of particular interest for service organizations and in service-related areas of organizations, for different reasons. From a theoretical perspective, service offerings are marked by the fact that the service creation takes place in interaction with the customer, rendering the service employee-customer interaction as the focal point at which firm practices are eventually aimed at (Zeithaml et al. 1988; Vargo and Lusch 2004). A large body of research supports that employee satisfaction plays a central role in facilitating service productivity and quality, eventually translating into customer satisfaction and firm profitability (Hogreve et al. 2017). From a practical point of view, taking care of the personnel should be top of mind of service managers, because the way firms treat their employees, will be, in turn, how those employees will treat their customers (Heskett et al. 1994). Put plainly, happy and satisfied employees will produce happy and satisfied customers. The employee's motivation and productivity are thus the center of managerial attention and service excellence, having an impact on the customers' impressions of the brand and the service delivered (Martin and Bush 2006). As a consequence, the implementation of organizational development tools such as coaching may play a central role for service firms.

Surprisingly, there is relatively little research about effective coaching methods and its outcomes in service firms (Stock and Hoyer 2005). So far, coaching in service related research has been discussed in terms of a desirable management practice (managerial coaching). To this end, it has been mentioned as one out of many techniques supporting salespeople and frontline employees (Jackson et al. 2006; Jackson and Sirianni 2009) and initial findings indicate that frontline employee's perception of supervisory coaching practices can help the subjective job performance (Ellinger et al. 2011; Pousa and Mathieu 2014). Given these positive indications on coaching, the objective of this positioning research is to take the perspective of coaching

as a distinctive tool that is not tied to a specific role. Further, we conceptually discuss for different employee groups within a typical service firm (top and middle managers, back-office department employees, and frontline employees) potential positive outcomes of workplace coaching in light of their faced job challenges. To provide a differentiated perspective, we will also include potential negative effects into our considerations.

To align our analysis with previous literature on training and development (Kalinowski et al. 2013; Taylor et al. 2005), we lean our examination on Kirkpatrick's model (1967) and use it as a conceptual framework in this paper. We propose that coaching will positively impact service employees in terms of their work performance (i.e. skill-based outcomes) and also with regards to their attitude and personality (i.e. psychological outcomes). To align our analysis with literature on service management, we draw on the gap model of service quality (Zeithaml et al. 1988) for distinguishing the main employee groups, according to how close they are to the customer. We contribute to existing literature by presenting a conceptual discussion of positive outcomes of coaching for service firms, which is supplemented by considerations about negative or unwanted effects. Service practitioners learn that coaching can be widely applied to different employee groups and gain a differentiated perspective about conceivable positive and negative outcomes.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Coaching and its Practical Development

Coaching is typically defined as a one-to-one custom-tailored intervention that uses a collaborative, reflective, goal-focused relationship to achieve professional outcomes that are valued by the coachee (Smither 2011). The learning and development literature has distinguished some clear differences between coaching and other managerial development tools, such as traditional mentoring. Specifically, mentoring has the general objective of development and is more concerned with modeling, supporting and advocating behaviors. Coaching, however, is associated with a specific object of development and more concerned with goal setting, providing practical application, feedback and teaching (D'Abate et al. 2003; Passmore 2007). The core elements of a typical coaching process include the following four: First, the formation and maintenance of a helping bond between the coach and the coachee; Second, a formally defined agreement about setting personal development objectives; Third, the fulfilment of this agreement through interpersonal and intrapersonal development; and finally, the striving for growth of the people being coached by providing the tools, skills, and opportunities they need to

develop themselves and become more effective (Kilburg 1996; Witherspoon and White 1996; McCauley and Hezlett 2002; Bono et al. 2009; Smither 2011). Thus, the coach provides the coachee with the time, mental space, support, and guidance in their unique situation. Since there is a huge difference between teaching someone and helping them to learn, the coach acts as a facilitator of learning and helps the individual to improve their own performance (Whitmore 1992). Coaching may therefore also be seen as “the art of facilitating and unleashing of the people’s potential to reach meaningful, important objectives” (Rosinski 2010, p. 10).

2.2 Workplace Coaching and its Forms

Within organizations, workplace coaching has typically been perceived as an ‘executive’ development activity (Bono et al. 2009). Nowadays coaching is not necessarily limited to managers and executives. Many different coaching forms have emerged in workplace settings to guide all hierarchical levels of employees through challenging times and to help them achieve higher performances in their respective roles (Ellinger et al. 2011). One example may be developmental coaching, which is designed to help the coachee uncover their biggest goals and frustrations to finally achieve long-term change and personal growth (Cox et al. 2010). Compared to traditional coaching, it uses assessments, 360 feedback and takes into account past experiences of the coachees and their stage of development. Thus, a person who just finished university and has little experience will be coached differently than a long-term employee (Bachkirova 2011). Some researchers have also found a link between adult learning theory and coaching (Knowles 1978; Cox 2005). Just like in a coaching process, critical self-reflection is crucial for the learners to achieve their self-determined learning objectives (Rachal 2002).

However, no matter if companies decide to provide coaching in its traditional form or in any other, it may either be delivered internally or externally. External coaching is performed by professionals, who do not belong to the same organization where the coachee works. They may be self-employed consultants, or work as representants for an independent coaching association (Tyler 2000), thus, not occupying additional resources or employees. As a consequence, the role of external coaches is more defined, since they are exclusively hired for coaching. Moreover, external coaching is often used for people in complex roles, because due to their vast experience, collected within a number of different companies, their credibility may sometimes be greater (Smither et al. 2003). Disadvantages of external coaching may be the cost factor and the time external coaches may need to get familiar with the company and its procedures (Hall et al. 1999).

Internal coaches work in the same organization as the coachee. They can be managers at the same or higher hierarchical level, members of the human resource department, or they could be specialists responsible for coaching purposes only. Thus, they have more in-depth knowledge about the organization, its available resources and culture and they are easily contactable and cheaper because they reside inside the firm (Carter 2005). Depending on the company’s needs, internal coaches may focus exclusively on his or her coaching functions or may perform it in addition to their work as a part-time activity (Frisch 2001). However, Ellinger et al. (2008) found that coaching performed by internal managers was often associated with command and control by employees. For example, in a supervisor-subordinate relationship coaching might be perceived as obligation, being considered as part of the performance management process or proposed as a developmental intervention by managers. Thus, it might sometimes cause issues with empowerment and involvement of the staff, which was found as less effective and not as conducive, in comparison to an independent, external coaches (Feldman and Lankau 2005).

Organizations choose each type of coaching, or a mixed form in accordance with the aims and the culture of the company. No matter, which type is chosen, it should be effective to empowerment and conducive to involvement and not associated with command and control by the employees (Ellinger et al. 2008).

2.3 Outcomes of Workplace Coaching

In the learning and training literature, Kirkpatrick (1967) proposes a model of evaluation that includes three different outcome criteria. This three-component model has ever since been applied in numerous organizational studies, as well as coaching contexts (e.g., Kraiger et al. 1993; Taylor et al. 2005; Kalinoski et al. 2013). Based on Kirkpatrick’s framework, we therefore propose that the potential outcomes of coaching in service companies will be similarly separated into skill-based and psychological outcome criteria. Originally, Kirkpatrick labelled the psychological criteria as affective outcomes. Yet in our paper, we labeled them as psychological, due to a better fit for the purpose of this article. We further do not consider cognitive outcomes because they concern the organization as a whole, rather than the employees within (Kraiger et al. 1993). Examples of skill-based outcomes of coaching apply to the improvement and development of work-related activities to acquire, promote and enhance the employee’s skills. Psychological outcomes of coaching in this article represent all skills that benefit the employees’ personality, thinking and attitude, such as the development of self-efficacy and confidence, reduction of stress, increased satisfaction and motivation.

Fig. 1 Gap model of service quality. Source: Zeithaml et al. (1988), slightly modified

Organizational researchers and practitioners over the years have identified several potential benefits of workplace coaching, reaching back forty years (Evered and Selman 1989). Elevated role clarity is often emphasized as a potential outcome of workplace coaching (Ellinger and Bostrom 1999; Peterson and Hicks 1996). Increased satisfaction with work is another expected outcome, because employees who received coaching appeared to be more satisfied, and in turn were perceived to be more effective by their managers (Ellinger et al. 2003; Hargrove 2008). Workplace coaching is also likely to be linked to employee work-related motivation and commitment (e.g., career commitment and organization commitment) and thus improved job performance (Evered and Selman 1989; Ellinger et al. 2003; Hargrove 2008; Pousa and Mathieu 2014). Furthermore, recent meta-analyses found support for the positive impact of workplace coaching on stress reduction, prioritizing and improved work efficiency (Theeboom et al. 2014; Jones et al. 2016). Research specifically dedicated to commercial businesses emphasized increased self-efficacy and self-regulation as positive outcomes, which in turn, amplified the customer orientation of their frontline employees (Pousa and Mathieu 2015) and shaped relational behaviors of their managers (Ellinger et al. 2011).

However, despite the apparent potential advantages of coaching (Evered and Selman 1989), research has not kept pace with its growth in practice. Among scientists there is

still no clear agreement about the types of coaching outcomes that can be expected by the organization and how coaching schemes should be accessed. Thus, there is a lack of conclusive evidence regarding the effectiveness of coaching in organizational environments (Grant et al. 2010). Furthermore, there are not only positive outcomes linked to coaching. Coaching can likewise have negative effects for the coach as well as the coachee (Passmore and Gibbes 2007; Schermuly 2014; Schermuly et al. 2014; Graßmann and Schermuly, 2017). Just like in psychotherapy, coaches may suffer from emotional exhaustion and cynicism due to their intense interpersonal contact with their coachees and their high socio-emotional demands (Maslach and Jackson 1981). Also, coaches may sometimes be personally affected by the topics and may consequently experience stress and reduced accomplishment (Schermuly 2014). The negative effects for coachees, especially in the business context, may include unwanted modifications of the coaching goals without their approval, a decreased sense of meaning towards work, or the triggering of a topic that cannot be solved within the organization (Schermuly et al. 2014).

2.4 Gap Model of Service Quality

Modern business environments are volatile. Regardless of any organizational level, employees are confronted with different challenges at work and are regularly under pressure to

Table 1 Challenges and Outcomes on the different Employee Levels

Employee Level	Challenges	Outcomes of Coaching	
		Skill-based	Psychological
Frontline Employees	Being at the Interface between the Customer, the Back-Office and the Management	Greater Job Productivity	Higher Self-Efficacy
	Emotional Labor	Better Communication Skills	Greater Job Satisfaction
Back-Office Employees	Being at the Interface between Frontline Employees and the Management	Enhanced Relationship Management with other Departments	Role Clarity
	Sustaining the Information Flow within the Organization	Enhanced Job Performance	
Middle and Top Management	Managing Human Resources	More effective Leadership Skills	Higher Self-Awareness
	Control of the Market Situation and keeping the Competitive Advantage of the Company	Better Communication Skills	

achieve higher performance goals in their respective roles. Service companies, like no others, are particularly challenged, because financial gains for the firm depend on the relationship between employee satisfaction and customer loyalty (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman, 1993; Jackson and Sirianni 2009). Thus, this means that service organizations need to make sure that their employees are satisfied with their jobs first (Hogreve et al. 2017). Only then they are able, with the right attitude and behavior, to positively influence their customers’ satisfaction, as well as their perceptions of service quality (Schneider and Bowen, 1993).

Fig. 1 shows the gap model of service quality (Zeithaml et al. 1988). Originally, it was developed to conceptualize firm-sided factors that influence service quality, but advanced as an overarching framework for structuring service management tasks making it suitable for our context (Wilson et al. 2012). The central idea behind the model is that service quality can be defined as the gap (i.e., difference) between consumers expected and perceived service (gap 5), which is a function of four distinct gaps (gaps 1–4). The four gaps indicate discrepancies associated with key tasks or elements for the creation of services, vertically ordered according to their distance to the consumer. Based on those tasks (indicated in grey in Fig. 1) and associated responsibilities, we can identify three groups of employees with an increasing level of distance to the customer: (1) frontline employees, who directly face customers and deliver the service; (2) back-office employees, who perform the service behind the frontline, process information, and are the middlemen between the other two groups; (3) middle and top management, who are in charge of securing the firm’s market position by understanding consumer expectations and managing human resources. With regards to external communications, we do not see a specific role for employees in this area and rather consider them among back-office employees.

3 Coaching Strategies for Challenging Service Industries

3.1 Overview

Subsequently, we discuss for each of the three different employee levels first the challenges from their role within a typical service organization and then how coaching strategies may help to overcome those challenges, resulting in positive outcomes for the organization (i.e. skill-based) as well as the employees themselves (i.e. psychological). Table 1 provides a summary of these considerations. It is of note that the outcomes for each employee level are not exclusive for the respective group and so may also be achieved among the other levels, but rather reflect the most salient ones. For a differentiated picture, we also consider possible negative or unwanted effects of coaching.

3.2 Frontline Employees

3.2.1 Challenges

Frontline employees directly interact with consumers and clients and are responsible for selling products and services (Pousa et al. 2017). If customers are asked who first comes into their mind when thinking about the company, chances are great that they will mention one of the firm’s frontline employees (Heskett et al. 1994). Thus, the frontline personnel’s attitude and behavior can be an important source of differentiation, as well as a competitive advantage for service firms (Jackson and Sirianni 2009). Some would even argue that frontline employees should be the most valued people in the company because they not only shape their customers’ impressions of the brand and the service delivered, but they are the face and voice of the organization (Heskett et al. 1994). The reality, however, often looks different because as research shows, those people are typically underpaid, undertrained, overworked and highly stressed

(Weatherly and Tansik 1993). Mainly, they are challenged by being at the interface between customers, back-offices and management. In addition, they are engaging in emotional labor on a daily basis (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993).

Frontline employees play a vital role in the service profit chain by coordinating and fulfilling demands of others (Heskett et al. 1994). It is a real challenge because they work right at the interface between the customers, other departments of the firm and the management board. What they do, how they react and what they say is permanently monitored in productivity measures such as number of calls handled, average time between calls, number of complaints and time spent interacting with customers (Albrecht 1988). In addition to fulfilling productivity measures, frontline employees are likewise expected to deliver exceptional service while also being responsible to anticipate the customer's needs and to build longtime relationships with them. Thus, their performance is first assessed by clients, who decide if they are satisfied or not, second by the back-office workers, who measure their productivity rate and analyze customer loyalty; finally, the resulting financial gains are of great interest for the firm's management (Heskett, Sasser, and Schlesinger, 1997). This apparent tension of meeting productivity and quality goals at the same time emerges as a consistent pressure for frontline workers. Not surprisingly, those jobs are consistently found to foster burnout and high turnover rates (Henkoff and Sample 1994).

The second main challenge is that frontline employees are expected by their managers as well as by their customers to always be friendly, cheerful and smiling. Like with any human being, there are, however, situations during the day when employees do not feel such positive emotions, especially when they have to deal with an angry client, or if they have problems with friends or family in their private life (Heskett et al. 1994). Yet, they are required to simulate positive emotions in order to meet customer and management expectations (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). Thus, when interacting with a customer, frontline employees basically have to play a role. In other words, they act in a way to build trust, demonstrate promptness and reliability, and give a sense of personal attention (Hochschild et al. 1983). This constant struggle to pretend positive emotions is called emotional labor, which may lead to psychological suffering and inner conflicts. In the long term, it may even decrease the employees' satisfaction with work and finally may end up in burnout or dismissal (Blackman et al. 2016).

3.2.2 Coaching Outcomes

To overcome their challenge of being at the interface between customers, the back-office and the management, coaching may help to enhance job effectiveness and efficiency, thus fostering skill-based outcomes of the frontline

employees (Ely et al. 2010). By working with a coach, they could learn how to increase their output, so that productivity and quality goals are concurrently met to satisfy other departments, the management and most of all their customers' needs. Tricky situations in which the customer wants one thing and the management only allows another may therefore be handled with more adaptability and flexibility. Furthermore, previous research has shown that coaching may significantly enhance the coachee's communication skills (Stock and Hoyer 2005). By communicating openly with clients, customers may feel heard, knowing that the company tried to find adequate solutions and to respond appropriately to their needs. The result may be long-term relationships and customer loyalty (Kombarakaran et al. 2008). At the same time, an open communication may foster a positive intercourse with managers because they feel respected and perceive their rules as maintained.

To foster psychological outcomes, frontline employees may further be coached to build up greater psychological and physical resilience (Kauffman and Coutu 2009). Resilience strategies may be particularly helpful for frontline employees while dealing with their inner conflict of having to play the role of an "all-time cheerful and smiling service assistant", when in reality they may not feel that way at all times. Moreover, the constant pressure of satisfying the customers' needs, finding solutions for their complaints and handling recovery situations require a lot of self-confidence (Sonnetag and Kruel 2006). Working one-on-one with a coach may help to strengthen the frontline employee's self-efficacy and self-confidence, so that they can react more confidently to customer requests which, in turn, may also enhance their own motivation towards work. Also, they would have an easier time handling their emotional labor while increasing their capacity to recover more quickly from psychological suffering, which together may eventually lead to greater job satisfaction (Bozer et al. 2014b).

Coaching of frontline employees may also bear negative effects in two ways. First, the interaction with customers is an area that requires authenticity and also creativity by the frontline employees, especially when handling difficult situations involving service failures (Hart et al. 1990; Roschk and Kaiser 2013). To this extent, coaches have to be careful to not restrict the frontline employee. Also, while coaching may reduce sales orientation (and increase customer orientation) this may not be necessarily wanted, because sales orientation is positively linked to performance (Pousa and Mathieu 2014). Second, frontline employees face emotional labor on daily basis and because of that probably have a heightened requirement of the social-emotional support from the coach. Coaches should be prepared to meet those needs, otherwise the coachee may get the impression of insufficient dedication from the coach, thus jeopardiz-

ing the coaching process and even developing a decreased sense of meaning towards the own work.

3.3 Back-Office Employees

3.3.1 Challenges

Much of the current service literature highlighted the difficulties of frontline work (Herzenberg et al. 1998). Employees, who are working in back-office departments, are often overseen, since their daily tasks do not involve direct contact with service-recipients. The back-office, by definition, supports the front office to do a more effective job of serving customers. Thus, it includes all the resources of the company that are not directly seen by customers, but which are devoted to actually delivering a service (Safizadeh et al. 2003). Back-office work includes functions, such as administration, accounting, planning, inventory management, supply-chain management, human resources and logistics. Although back-office workers are not directly visible, they contribute greatly to the company’s success because their performance and operations affect the costs side of the business (Zomerdijk and Vries 2007). The challenges of back-office workers therefore mainly concern their difficult position inside the organization. First, they hold an interfacing role between frontline employees and the management. Second, they are responsible to ensure a correctly functioning information flow within the company.

Back-office employees are directly at the interface between customer-facing employees and the management board. This means that on the one hand, they primarily work for the management board, who expects them to operate fast and efficiently (Sturdy 1992). On the other hand, back-office workers are dependent on the frontline workers, who not always put the interest of the back-office workers first, but rather concentrate on customer-related tasks like building long-term relationships (Safizadeh et al. 2003). As a consequence, it becomes a challenge to find the right balance between the manager’s process measurement and the operation of customer-related norms from frontline work. The result is often an inner clash between working under a bureaucratic logic and working under a more customer-oriented logic, which may lead to questioning of not only their tasks, but their roles in the organization (Korczynski 2004).

Another challenge, back-office employees may struggle with, is the constant pressure of sustaining the information flow within the company. Their responsibility is to gather, process, and transfer information as quickly as possible and to ensure that information reaches the right people (Howcroft and Richardson 2012). Due to their intermediate position, back-office workers are often the crucial factor of providing information and maintaining communication

within the whole organization. Thus, their tasks require constant precision, accuracy, and alignment with other departments. At the same time, they are confronted with highly bureaucratic rules, where information paths are long and the pressure to deliver information as fast as possible is tremendous (Sturdy 1992). It is therefore not seldom that back-office workers feel overwhelmed by the number of requests they need to array within a short period of time and often find themselves pushing or pulling for information (Lacity et al. 2008).

3.3.2 Coaching Outcomes

Back-office work requires accuracy and alignment with other departments. In order to profit on a skill-based level, literature has shown that workplace coaching assisted employees in establishing an enhanced relationship management with others (Holland et al. 2000). A coach could help back-office workers with developing the ability to successfully organize, co-ordinate and influence their inter-personal relationship with co-working departments. Enhanced relationships as well as understanding other people’s strengths, weaknesses, and motivators can facilitate communication and cooperation within the company and so assist back-office employees with processing the right information to the right people. Moreover, coaching has been shown to result in the acquisition of using strategies to become more efficient and effective (Ely et al. 2010). Such strategies could help back-office workers with organizing and prioritizing their tasks and to retrieve, channel and process information correctly. The result of working more effectively and efficiently includes an increased job performance and the ability of completing the same amount of work in less time.

In order to profit also on a psychological level, back-office workers via coaching may be taught to enhance their self-awareness (Jones et al. 2016). A coach may help them to better interpret external stimuli and to bring them in accordance with the view of themselves. Since back-office workers often struggle between working under a bureaucratic or a customer-oriented logic, especially when directly working with other departments, a balanced consciousness of their personality may contribute to achieving role clarity.

Coaching for back-office employees may also lead to negative or unwanted effects. Coaching may trigger topics that cannot be solved within the organization (Schermyly et al. 2014). The back-office position seems susceptible to such topics given its middlemen position between the frontline and management, rendering job tasks to large extents as externally defined. Moreover, while coaching can facilitate role clarification, this may also cause unwanted effects. In this way, role clarification may lead to the coachee’s conclusion that the expected role is not the aspired one. This

may eventually facilitate the employee leaving the organization, if this is not seen as an opportunity for a change within the firm. In a similar vein, back-office workers may have chosen their job since it fits their accurate and precise temper, being then coached on efficiency may, if not done sensitively, attenuate their motivation towards work.

3.4 Management Employees

3.4.1 Challenges

Service businesses are marked by a wide range of inter-related tasks—as diverse as quality and productivity management, customer experience management, and market research, to name a few—that require integration and alignment for successful management of service firms (Wilson et al. 2012). Moreover, for service firms, leading managers are of particular importance for their function as role models, shaping in different ways the organizational culture and translating into the employee-customer interaction (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006; Zeithaml et al. 1988). Thus, leadership challenges revolve around managing human resources in terms of an effective organization of cross-sectional tasks and their function as role model. In addition to that, managers face with monitoring the market situation and securing the competitive advantage of their company a tremendous task, given often fierce competition and fast changing market conditions (Roschk and Hosseinpour 2020).

With regards to the management of human resources, interpersonal and leadership skills are at the heart of management, required to successfully lead a department or a company. Besides leadership itself, how managers lead significantly shapes the organizational culture and, in turn, employee's attitudes and behaviors, in different ways. While executive boards may not directly be responsible to hire people, the organization culture informs hiring decisions so that new employees culturally fit (Bowen and Ostroff 2004). It also acts as guidance for employees within the organization, who in their thinking and acting are influenced by the leadership and communication of the management (Liao et al. 2009). Research findings suggest that the quality of service provision by frontline employees is highly influenced by the commitment and behaviors of their managers (Singh 2000; Liao et al. 2009). Also, shared values of employees with the organization make them engage in extra-role behaviors in case of critical customer contact situations (Maxham and Netemeyer 2003). Findings further indicate that authenticity in service delivery translates into more positive consumer sentiments (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). In addition, the top management is responsible to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their managers to maximize their effectiveness and assign them to the right tasks (Beer et al. 1984).

Besides managing the human assets within the company, middle and top managers are also responsible to control the market situation and keeping the competitive advantage of the organization. Since the market situation of service companies is often volatile—sometimes even disruptive in the case of e-commerce and Airbnb's salient impact on the hotel industry (Zervas et al. 2017), an important challenge in this area is managing the increased complexity resulting from market changes (Wasylyshyn 2003). Service providers often struggle with keeping pace of technological advancements. For example, if firms use outdated systems, customers may believe that they are not putting consumer needs ahead. As a consequence, they need to continually improve and develop their processes in order to stay up to date with their service quality and to ensure that there is a culture that is supportive of service and change. Only then company growth may be fostered (Carneiro 2000). With the increasing transparency and globalization around the world, this task becomes even more challenging. Thus, managers are expected to combine knowledge from various sources with different leadership styles, visionary company goals and sharp decision-making skills (Swart and Harcup, 2012).

3.4.2 Coaching Outcomes

Many researchers have focused on coaching methods for executives (Bozer et al. 2014b; MacKie 2014; Theeboom et al. 2014). Within service environments, middle and top managers often struggle with being in charge of finding the right people for maintaining service productivity and quality. At the same time, they are required to monitor the market situation of the company and its competitors. Those challenges may be alleviated since workplace coaching can assist managers as an effective learning, training, and development tool to stimulate the managers' performance on an individual level and, subsequently, to achieve organizational-level goals and objectives (Ford et al. 2010). Coaches therefore could work with managers to significantly increase their leadership skills (MacKie 2014). Since the management sets the course for how the company works and acts as role model within the organization, an effective leadership style may be one of the positive skill-based benefits of coaching. If managers lead with a vision, functioning organizational cultures and employee commitment may be fostered. As a consequence, employees may be more committed to the company and satisfied with their work environment, which in the long run may even improve their performance (Theeboom et al. 2014).

Since managers need to know how to communicate successfully, workplace coaching is renowned for the furthering of communication skills (Stock and Hoyer 2005). As another positive skill-based outcome, top and middle managers may profit from coaching through successful com-

munications with their workforce. Especially, for service providers with high levels of market orientation, a better communication should be enforced to empower their staff to be responsive to customer requests (Bowen and Lawler 1992). Moreover, by communicating openly with the employees about career development and people demands, managers may successfully organize, control, and direct the progress of their employees’ working life.

Regarding psychological outcomes, workplace coaching may positively influence the managers’ self-awareness (Bozer et al. 2014b). Most of the times, top managers are used to monitor the behavior of their employees, but they barely monitor their own, which is however needed to develop and to maximize their work-related performance. Coaches therefore have to handle them with a lot of care, in order to not decrease their sense of meaning towards work. When managers are aware of their own feelings and behaviors, they are likely to develop a more differentiated understanding of the reactions of their employees (Coutu et al. 2009). Thus, an increased self-awareness, achieved through coaching, could help them to control and direct their managing behavior.

On the downside, coaching on management levels may also be associated with negative effects. This may include unwanted modifications of the coaching goals without their approval (Schermuly et al. 2014), which on the coachee’s side (i.e., the manager) may lead to reactance, impeding the coaching process. Similarly, while being coached, other sensitive topics may be triggered, which can be counterproductive (Schermuly et al. 2014). Managers of service firms face particularly complex tasks. If they additionally engage in coaching practices of their workforce, this may go beyond their capabilities and at costs of the task fulfillment in other areas. Moreover, it may lead to an emotional exhaustion, considering the high socio-emotional demands of coaching in general but also those of frontline employees.

4 Discussion, Implications and Limitations

4.1 Concluding Discussion

The benefits of coaching are widely recognized among scholars. Particularly, they have found evidence for positive outcomes in five areas: people management, relationships with others, goal-setting and prioritization, commitment and productivity, and communication (Stock and Hoyer 2005; Ely et al. 2010; Jones et al. 2016). Within the service industry, research on coaching is relatively scarce (Daugherty et al. 1998). This is rather surprising, considering that a service provider’s success highly depends upon its employees, their responsiveness to customer needs, and their ability to provide reliable service, even in complex and

unplanned situations (Parasuraman et al. 1985; Day 2000; Martin and Grbac 2003). Human resource practices, such as coaching, could therefore become effective empowerment and support instruments for employees at different levels (closer or more distant to the customer) within service organizations. Yet, when coaching is required is another relevant question. To this end, there appears a general need for organizations to evolve a sense whether help is needed by an employee. Sometimes overworked employees may not seem in need of help on the outside, yet underneath there could be a feeling of never working up to the expectations and suddenly they collapse under the stress and quit unexpectedly.

The objective of this research was to discuss workplace coaching and its outcomes for service employees. It argues that through coaching, service employees are not only able to overcome their individual challenges, but may benefit in a procedural (i.e. skill-based outcomes) and a personal (i.e. psychological outcomes) way. Skill-based outcomes include positive benefits regarding the employees’ working skills, such as a favorable behavior change (McDermott et al. 2007; Bozer et al. 2014a) and more effective leadership skills (MacKie 2014; Theeboom et al. 2014). Positive psychological outcomes regard the personal development of the service employees, where coaching may help to develop new attitudes such as self-efficacy, self-awareness, and sensitivity to others. Adaptability and flexibility in relations with others and increased emotional maturity and efficiency were likewise considered as positive affects (Kombarakaran et al. 2008).

Previous research about managerial development tools has frequently shown that coaching is an applied discipline and by definition draws on a multitude of interdisciplinary theories and subjects, such as psychology. It is a complex process that derives from the combination of diverse elements that enhances the mechanisms of practice (Theeboom et al. 2014; Pousa and Mathieu 2015; Jones et al. 2016). Our study adds to existing research, conceptually arguing for the potential value of coaching in service organizations; individuals from the frontline employee, via the back-office accountant, up to the CEO of a service company may positively benefit from coaching.

Furthermore, it is important to know that coaching may also have negative effects, such as attenuating motivation towards work, restricted creativity and triggering of a topic that may not be solved. But also heightened requirement of social-emotional support from the coach, unwanted role clarification and emotional exhaustion from coaching may be unwanted effects. Being aware of the existence of negative effects and their origins may help service practitioners to better decide when to use coaching and which employees and coaches to select. If for example practitioners are confronted with potentially difficult coaching situations, clients

could be made aware about the potential of negative aspects to prevent problems in the first place and help completing the coaching process successfully (Graßmann and Schermuly 2016). Negative effects on the coachee's side reflect their vulnerability during the coaching process, rendering the need for organizations to ensure that ethical requirements are fulfilled (Gray 2011).

4.2 Limitations and Future Research

The present research has some limitations and areas for future research. First, this research examines coaching and its outcomes on service employees from a conceptual point of view. Given the yet scarce findings on coaching in relation to service firms, more empirical work is much needed. Second, in our discussion of the coaching outcomes, we do not distinguish between different forms of coaching, given that there is yet no clear agreement about the outcomes of those on an organizational level. Thus, future research could for example compare internal versus external coaching methods, focus on distinct forms such as developmental coaching, and analyze mixed forms. Furthermore, a comparison with other techniques, such as mentoring, also appears of interest. Third, there are likely contextual factors that may act as possible moderators rendering favorable and unfavorable conditions for coaching, with the latter being a potential line of thought to analyze when coaching yields to negative effects. Those conditions may indicate, for example, when an employee is actually in a situation where coaching can be beneficial and how to set up the right conditions within the firm for effective coaching. They further may help to evaluate whether coaching was successful considering that the outcomes may depend on the coaching situation. Fourth, our considerations were rooted in Kirkpatrick's model and the gap model. Both models appeared as a good starting point, yet broadening the theoretical underpinnings may allow for further insight.

Conflict of interest C.-F. Feyertag and H. Roschk declare that they have no competing interests.

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