Leadership coaching, leader self-efficacy, and trust in subordinates

A mixed methods study assessing leadership coaching as a leadership development practice

Abstract

In this paper, we used a two-phase exploratory sequential design consisting of qualitative and quantitative research methods and analysis to assess leadership coaching as a leader and leadership development practice. First, we addressed the need for appropriate outcome variables for leadership coaching. Analysis of a focus group study combined with a review of theory resulted in hypotheses linking leader self-efficacy and trust to coaching. We further hypothesized that the coach’s facilitative behavior would explain variation in these outcomes. We then tested the hypotheses using a pre–post comparison group design test on a sample of 24 leaders attending a six-month coaching program. We found that leader self-efficacy and trust in subordinates increased in the coaching group, but not in the control group. A regression analysis showed that the coach’s facilitative behavior positively affected the change in both outcome variables. Our findings support claims that coaching represents a promising leadership development practice.

1. Introduction

The development of leaders is an expressed goal in most organizations (Avolio & Hannah, 2009) and leadership development has become “big business” over the last decade (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2010: 13). Given the role leadership plays in the current malaise around financial crisis, climate control and ethical debacles, which the media characterizes as a “failure of leadership” (Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney & Claudia, 2010: 922-958), understanding how to facilitate the development of effective leaders is more crucial than ever. However, systematic investigations of leadership development interventions are rare in the literature (Avolio, Avey, & Quisenberry, 2010), and the practice of leadership development and its scientific foundation are disconnected (Day, 2000: 581). This shortage of systematic investigations and disconnection between theory and practice may result in costly leadership development programs that have unintended or no effects and may slow down the development of theory. Consequently, it is essential that leadership development program components are evaluated scientifically (Solansky, 2010) with robust theories that can be validated and tested across empirical settings.
Leadership coaching is presented as a promising leader and leadership development practice (Day, 2000; Ely, Boyce, Nelson & Zaccaro, 2010) and has become a widely used intervention for leadership development (Bono, Purvanova, Towler, & Peterson, 2009; Feldman & Lankau, 2005). Leadership coaching involves one-on-one counseling of executives, leaders, and managers about work-related issues with the purpose of improving their leadership effectiveness (Ely et al., 2010; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). The promising features of leadership coaching may be found in the way it addresses a traditional challenge in leadership development programs. When leaders enter into a common program they have differing experiences, skills, and learning styles (Solansky, 2010). Coaching is characterized by a custom-tailored development process (Bono et al., 2009; Grant, 2006) and consequently addresses the challenge of different individual starting points. However, in line with the previously mentioned gaps in the field of leadership development, there is also a lack of systematic evaluation of this particular leadership development practice (Ely et al., 2010). To advance the field theoretically and empirically, rigorous and systematic evaluations of the effects of leadership coaching are needed (Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas, & Kucine, 2003).

Due to the qualitatively different approach of leadership coaching compared with other leadership development initiatives, traditional training intervention evaluations may be insufficient to address these outcomes (Ely et al., 2010). Hence, Ely et al. (2010) provide a framework for evaluation of leadership coaching and argue we need both summative evaluation (assessing the effectiveness) and formative evaluation (identifying areas for program improvement) to further our knowledge of leadership coaching as a leadership development tool. Drawing on their framework, the purpose of the present study is to provide summative evaluation in the form of two outcome criteria that are based in theory and practice (leader self-efficacy and trust in subordinates), and formative evaluation investigating how the coach’s facilitative behavior may affect these outcome variables.

In order to assess the impact of leadership coaching and add to the knowledge base of summative evaluation, it is important to determine appropriate outcome criteria (Smither et al., 2003).
However, there have been “no universally accepted criteria for what constitutes (a) successful outcome” in leadership coaching (MacKie, 2007: 310). The present study attempts to address this gap by suggesting two generic outcome variables. Because leadership coaching attends to the particular needs of the leaders, one may find that they have a large number of diverse goals and desired outcomes from coaching. We believe the idiosyncrasy of these different goals should be taken into account when determining appropriate outcome criteria. At the same time, we need generic outcome variables based in theory that may be measured as a difference in state before and after coaching and across studies. To balance idiosyncrasy with generality we propose leadership self-efficacy (LSE) as a core outcome variable of the coaching process. LSE may be defined as “a leader’s confidence judgment in his or her ability to carry out the behaviors that comprise the leadership role” (Paglis, 2010: 772). This implies the leaders (rather than the researchers) may determine the vital elements of their particular leadership role, to what degree they have confidence in their abilities to attend to these, and set their individual goals for coaching accordingly. LSE represents an outcome variable that both addresses the idiosyncratic nature of leaders’ coaching goals and is generic enough to be compared before and after coaching, and across leaders. Another appropriate generic criterion for assessing the impact of leadership coaching is trust in subordinates. Leaders need to create results through other people and trust in subordinates is a prerequisite for the willingness to delegate tasks and responsibilities, thereby empowering employees to exercise agency (Spreitzer & Mishra, 1999). We suggest that the learning process in coaching will result in increased trust in subordinates. The present study develops and tests hypotheses on these expected outcomes.

Further, responding to the call for formative measures that may provide prescriptive information to improve coaching (Ely et al., 2010: 591), we investigate how the coach’s facilitative behavior will affect the outcomes of leadership coaching. In line with the framework of Ely et al. (2010) as well as a large body of literature on coaching, we suggest that three types of facilitative coach behavior impact on learning outcomes: challenge, support, and feedback. We develop and test hypotheses on how
the coach’s facilitative behavior increases the outcomes of leader self-efficacy and trust in employees. The objective of the study is first to contribute to substantive theory building on leadership coaching as a leader and leadership development tool, which is useful for further systematic evaluation across settings and organizations. We suggest that leader self-efficacy and trust in subordinates should be included in conceptual models of leadership coaching. Secondly, the study contributes empirically through a rigorous test of the outcomes of coaching as well as antecedents to coaching effectiveness. Overall, we aim to contribute to both theory and empirical research on leadership coaching and leadership development, as well as generate knowledge that may benefit practitioners and human resource managers responsible for leadership development in their organization.

The study was conducted in several steps using a mixed methods design in which elements of qualitative and quantitative research methods were combined (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). A two-phase exploratory sequential design (Creswell & Clark, 2011) was chosen to address different research questions: What generic outcome criteria should be used to assess the effect of leadership coaching? Does leadership coaching have a positive effect on these outcome criteria? To what extent do differences in facilitative coach behavior influence this effect? An additional reason for choosing this research design was that it enables a more comprehensive account of our phenomenon of interest: coaching effectiveness in terms of leader and leadership development. In the first part of our study, we conducted a focus group discussion with experienced coaches to provide us with valuable outcome variables that were based in both practice and theory. Second, we conducted a quasi-experimental field study with leaders who attended a six-month coaching program. We gathered pre- and post-test measures from the intervention group in addition to a control group. In this second step, we tested the effects of the coaching program on the outcome variables that were revealed in the first part of our study (leader self-efficacy and leader’s trust in subordinates [LTS]) and compared the intervention group with the control group. Third, we conducted regression analyses on the intervention group of 24 leaders regressing leader self-efficacy
and trust on the coach’s facilitative behavior (controlling for the variance at baseline) to test the effects of the coach’s behavior on the outcome variables. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to assess the outcome of leadership coaching with a mixed methods design comprising a focus group study and a quasi-experimental field study.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Leadership coaching

Leadership coaching (also referred to as executive coaching) is coaching of executives, leaders, and managers. It is a formal one-on-one relationship that involves counseling about work-related issues with the purpose of improving their leadership effectiveness (Ely et al., 2010; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). It is important to distinguish between leadership coaching and the “manager as coach” (Joo, 2005: 464). Leadership coaching refers to a leader being coached by a professional coach (mostly external) while the “manager as coach” implies a manager playing the role of coach (Joo, 2005). Despite a wide range of theoretical coaching frameworks from behavioral and cognitive, to psychodynamic- and solution-focused, a common set of principles run across these: “collaboration and accountability, awareness raising, responsibility, commitment, action planning and action” (Grant, Curtayne, & Burton, 2009: 397). Another hallmark for leadership coaching is the strong focus on goal-directed interaction (e.g. Burke & Linley, 2007; Grant & Cavanagh, 2007; Joo, 2005; Spence & Oades, 2011; Sue-Chan, Wood, & Latham, 2010). The unique nature of leadership coaching lies in the way it attends to the particular needs of the leaders and their respective organizations and the flexible individualized process to achieve the desired results (Bono et al., 2009; Ely et al., 2010; Smither et al., 2003). Although the coaching process is custom-tailored to the individual, it involves certain core elements: assessment (feedback), challenge, and support (Bono et al., 2009; Ely et al., 2010; Grant et al., 2009; Tobias, 1996). Coaching has been found to have a
positive effect after only one coaching session (Burke & Linley, 2007). However, the process usually implies several coaching sessions as leadership development is a process that takes time.

The growing body of literature on leadership coaching has largely taken the practitioner perspective, and academic research on leadership coaching has lagged far behind (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). Among practitioner evaluations of the effectiveness of coaching, it has been popular to measure effect as return on investment (ROI) (Linley, 2006; MacKie, 2007). The reported financial numbers in these studies have been very high, which argues for the use of coaching. An example of such a study is McGovern et al. (2001), who argue leadership coaching had a ROI of 545%. Another one is the much cited study by Olivero, Bane, and Kopelman (1997), in which 31 managers received coaching for two months as a transfer-of-learning tool and reported an average increase in productivity after training alone of 22.4%, and after both training and coaching a stunning increase of 88% (Olivero et al., 1997). However, both McGovern et al.’s (2001) and Olivero et al.’s (1997) findings should be treated with caution as the figures were collected only after the coaching intervention was effectuated. Such a retrospective approach to evaluation risks a number of biases such as recall errors (Grant et al., 2009). Unfortunately, this kind of research design with post-test only has been typical for many coaching studies, and the results are potentially erroneous. There are relatively few longitudinal leadership coaching studies that use a pre–post and control group design (Grant, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010). A literature review conducted in 2008 by Grant et al. (2009) found 42 empirical studies examining the effects of leadership coaching interventions, out of which only 11 used within-subjects design (pre–post test) and 3 used between-subjects quasi-experimental design.

Among the rigorously designed coaching outcome studies, we have a study by Luthans and Peterson (2003). Using a single-group, pre–post within-group design, they found that a combination of 360-degree feedback and systematic coaching focused on enhancing self-awareness and behavioral management resulted in improved manager and employee satisfaction, commitment, and intentions to turnover (Luthans & Peterson, 2003). Using a quasi-experimental pre–post control group design,
Smither et al. (2003) explored how coaching would enhance the impact of 360-degree feedback. Out of the 1,361 senior managers participating in the study, 404 received coaching. The managers who worked with a coach improved more than the other managers in terms of direct report and supervisor ratings, however the effect size (d=.17) was small. Smither et al. (2003) suggested that a reason for the small effect size could be due to their measurement tool being too broad to detect the impact of coaching. They propose that future research should determine more appropriate outcome criteria and suggested the use of more individualized criteria such as, e.g., progress toward specific self-set goals (Smither et al., 2003).

Individualized outcome criteria of coaching are found in studies by Grant and colleagues. Grant (2003) found significant progress toward self-set goals as a result of coaching. A randomized pre–post-test and control group design study by Green, Oades, and Grant (2006) found cognitive–behavioral, solution-focused life coaching enhanced goal-striving, well-being, and hope. The first to use such a randomized control group design with leadership coaching were Grant et al. (2009), who found a combination of 360-degree feedback and a cognitive–behavioral solution-focused approach to coaching had a positive effect on the participants’ goal-achievement, resilience, and well-being. Moen and Skaalvik (2009) investigated the effects of leadership coaching on psychological variables affecting performance with the use of a pre–post test and control group design (not randomized) and found significant changes in self-efficacy, goal setting, intrapersonal causal attributions, and need satisfaction as a result of leadership coaching. Despite a growing number of well-designed studies in the field of leadership coaching, still more systematic evaluations containing appropriate criteria that link theory and practice are needed to further our knowledge of this fairly new leadership development practice (Baron, Morin, & Morin, 2011; Ely et al., 2010).

While summative evaluation may provide us with findings indicating whether or not the coaching process has produced effects, it is equally important to know what helped cause these effects and to help pinpoint problems to “refine and improve the coaching intervention” (Ely et al., 2010: 591).
Studies that provide formative evaluation addressing the mechanisms that facilitate the outcome are warranted (Baron & Morin, 2010; Ely et al., 2010; Smither et al., 2003). To date, leadership coaching studies that provide both formative evaluation and summative evaluation with the use of a rigorous research design are almost nonexistent. An extensive search in the PsycINFO database in January 2013 revealed only four studies of this kind, one by Boyce, Jackson, and Neal (2010), two by Baron and Morin (2009, 2010), and one by Baron et al. (2011). Boyce et al. (2010) found that relationship processes of rapport, trust, and commitment positively predict coaching program outcomes in terms of satisfaction and utility of coaching. Furthermore, they found that the client–coach relationship fully mediated two match criteria (compatibility and credibility) with coaching outcome (Boyce et al., 2010). However, despite the pre- and post-test measures and the fairly large sample size for coaching studies in their rigorously effectuated study (74 client–coach relations), it has an important limitation. Their coaching outcome in terms of leadership performance was only assessed with post-test measures: “As a result of my coaching I am more effective performing my leadership activities” (Boyce, et al., 2010: 921). The absence of a pre-test makes it difficult to know if a change has indeed occurred (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). Due to the characteristics of the item, the answers may have been subject to the influence of social desirability (Boyce, et al., 2010).

Baron et al. (2009, 2010, 2011), however, used both pre- and post-test measures to evaluate the effects of coaching in a leadership development program. They found the number of coaching sessions received was positively and significantly associated with the leaders’ post-training self-efficacy when controlling for pre-training self-efficacy (Baron & Morin, 2010). In another paper, Baron and Morin (2009) assessed the coach–client dyads. They found the coach–client relationship played a mediating role between the number of coaching sessions received and the development of the leaders’ self-efficacy (Baron & Morin, 2009). Finally, in a paper from 2011, Baron et al. (2011) tested the effect of working alliance discrepancy (over/underestimating the working alliance) on the leaders’ self-efficacy growth, but did not find evidence supporting their hypothesis that underestimating the working alliance would lead to more self-efficacy growth. These studies are a
first step toward understanding the elements that may increase the effectiveness of leadership coaching. More studies are needed to further the development of what seems to be a valuable practice of leadership and leader development.

2.2. Defining variables through focus group discussion

Two important objectives of the present study were to reveal appropriate generic outcome variables and to investigate whether coaching produced these wanted outcomes for the leaders, not as a subjective, post-hoc measure, but as a difference in states before and after coaching. As leadership coaching is a fairly new field in need of theory development we chose an explorative method—the focus group discussion—to help determine outcome criteria that could be developed further with the use of related theory. Furthermore, there have been calls for “scientist–practitioner dialogue” to help develop a common knowledge base on coaching outcomes (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007: 252). To address this call for dialogue and gain new insight into what could be appropriate criteria, we invited the participating coaches to discuss their experiences in relation to the typical goals set by leaders during coaching. As previously mentioned, we believe empirical research on the effects of leadership coaching should take into account the idiosyncratic nature of individually desired outcomes and at the same time provide general outcome variables. Consequently, during the focus group study, the challenge was to find outcome variables that were specific enough to be meaningful for each participating leader and still general enough to enable comparison across leaders and situations. The resulting survey questionnaire connects theory and practice and consequently addresses this previously mentioned challenge of disconnection in today’s research on leadership development (Day, 2000). The questionnaire was used in the second and main part of our study to test the hypothesized effects of leadership coaching.

Focus groups can be particularly useful for a comprehensive elucidation of people’s ideas, opinions, and understandings that are difficult to obtain in individual interviews (Wilkinson, 2008). Further, it is
a method for efficient data collection when there is a focused topic that can be discussed. Starting with the idea that the leaders’ individual goals are at the core of coaching, we anticipated that experienced coaches were particularly valuable sources of information as to what these goals are and how the outcomes of the coaching are related to these goals. In addition, as coaches are experts in communication, a focus group discussion of the topic of goals and outcomes in coaching was considered particularly valuable. Out of the seven coaches in the project, we were able to gather five for a two-hour discussion. One researcher served as the moderator and took notes during the discussion, while the other researcher observed and took notes, which provided two sets of notes to compare during our analysis. In accordance with recommendations in the literature (Krueger, 1997), the group was quite homogeneous, and the moderator was well acquainted with the topic. There was a shared curiosity among the participants, including the moderator, about the discussion of goals in coaching. The aim of the discussion was to get a better grasp of what is meant by the clients’ goals: what type of goals are the most common, and whether there are some typical goals or if all goals are individually very different. To obtain a sense of how outcomes are assessed relative to the initial goals, we asked the coaches to share experiences and discuss their perceptions of goals and outcomes. We were looking for reflections related to what clients consider to be goal attainment at the end of the coaching period.

In line with recommendations for focus group research, we had a conversational approach to facilitate the discussion (Krueger, 1997). First, we asked a general question to encourage the participants to share experiences and opinions. We then had follow-up questions to elaborate on the discussion as well as to encourage disagreements to be expressed and discussed (Smithson, 2010). The first question asked by the moderator was “What goals are typically expressed by your clients at the start of the coaching period?” The general reply was that the goals were closely related to the present job situation of the client:
Ida: If I am contacted by a client directly, it is often because they are in a difficult situation, e.g. an organizational change or a negotiation with their supervisors. In those cases, their goals are to master this situation.

Rikke: I often have clients that have negotiated funding from their employer as a developmental effort to improve their leadership skills in general. But when we meet, I realize that there is often a specific problem they want to solve.

Ruby: My impression is that the reason for wanting coaching is that they have general problems in mastering their leadership role.

As the group elaborated further on these initial goals, we learned that goals usually change over the coaching period, so initial goals are seldom relevant later in the coaching relationship:

Helga: Goals always change during the coaching relationship, so the goals stated initially by the client are seldom relevant later.

Grete: I once coached a client out of her job, so the initial explicit goals were obviously not the “real” goal.

Helga: I have done that several times: coached a person into another job.

We then asked what induces these changes in goals and the following discussion indicated that the changes were related to increased awareness obtained through the coaching sessions:

Rikke: When we dig into their specific problems in the job, the focus is on increased awareness of how the leader her/himself is related to the problems. It is a lot about how they are affected by their job environments and how they impact on their environments.

Helga: We ask “what is the real problem” because our job is to make our clients see and understand the complexity of their role.

Grete: And they gain an increased awareness of their relationship to their subordinates.

Rikke: This is also my experience. Clients may complain about the employees and they become aware that as leaders, they are part of the problem. Sometimes the reason for
subordinates not taking responsibility is lack of delegation from the leader. How can you demand trust from your employees if you do not trust them?

It appeared that this development of awareness of oneself and the job situation gradually led to a new perspective on goals:

Grete: The general goal over time develops and revolves around how to thrive and master the job. If the clients experience mastery, they are able to tackle the specific problems they had at the start of the process.

Rikke: Yes, and the process to get there is at the core of the coaching. Mastery is the goal.

Moderator: And how can you describe this mastery, what is it about?

Rikke: It is a belief that one can handle problems when they arise.

Grete: I also think it is about being proactive, which is another side of the same thing: that you do not sit and wait until other people take initiative, you grasp issues at once when they come to your attention.

Helga: And at the same time, it is about knowing when to take initiative and when to sit back and rely on your subordinates to take responsibility. Insecure leaders are often “control freaks”, and they may do a better job when they can loosen up their control and delegate more often.

There is agreement around how goals always change during the coaching process as a consequence of self-reflection and greater awareness. The goals may initially be specific, but over time, they tend to reflect a more general sense of mastery of the leadership role. According to the coaches, leaders who attend coaching work to become more proactive, agentic, and self-confident, and often refer to this as “mastering their leader role”. The leaders were also concerned about developing an awareness of their context and how they affect others and are affected by others. Furthermore, some of the problems related to subordinates expressed by the leaders at the beginning of the
coaching relationship turned out to be defined as general challenges about confidence in subordinates as well as self-confidence later in the process.

Based on the focus group discussion, two types of confidence stood out as valuable and appropriate outcome criteria for evaluating coaching effectiveness: confidence in one’s ability to be an effective leader, and confidence in subordinates as to their ability to take on responsibility. Searching for relevant theories to address these two kinds of confidence, we found confidence in self to be similar to definitions of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) as well as leadership efficacy (Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008; Hoyt & Blascovich, 2010). While confidence in others is reflected by LTS, delegating tasks, and the need for control, we found a study by Spreitzer and Mishra (1999) in which trust is perceived as a substitute for control. To advance our theoretical development of leadership coaching and assess this practice as a leadership development tool, we draw on these two conceptual strands. In the following paragraphs we argue that leader self-efficacy and trust in subordinates are generic outcome criteria that should be evaluated when assessing the effects of leadership coaching, and present hypotheses as to why coaching will influence these.

2.3. Leader self-efficacy

Albert Bandura’s (1997) famous construct of self-efficacy refers to “an individual’s confidence about his or her abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources and courses of action needed to successfully execute a specific task within a given context” (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998: 66). Recently self-efficacy beliefs have been connected to the domain of leadership and are referred to as Leader Self-Efficacy (LSE) (Anderson, Krajewski, Goffin, & Jackson, 2008; Paglis, 2010). This is a natural connection as research on self-efficacy has found efficacy beliefs contribute to a strengthening of effort toward action and perseverance in the face of obstacles, both of which are vital behaviors for leaders (Anderson et al., 2008; Paglis, 2010). LSE may be defined broadly as “a leader’s confidence judgment in his or her ability to carry out the behaviors that comprise the leadership role” (Paglis,
2010: 772). There have been attempts at developing more fine-grained taxonomies and measures of this construct (e.g. Anderson et al., 2008; Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000). An example of this is the taxonomy developed by Anderson et al. (2008) based on identifications of the behaviors that constitute effective leadership.

However, not surprisingly, given the lack of consensus in the literature on what leadership really is, researchers diverge at the level of specificity in their approaches to studying LSE (Paglis, 2010).

Rather than attempt to present an extensive list of effective leadership behaviors to measure LSE, we conclude that a generalized leader self-efficacy is appropriate in our setting. We agree with Paglis (2010) that “the flexibility of the definition and measurement of LSE is appropriate and consistent with self-efficacy’s theoretical foundation” (Paglis, 2010: 773). In line with Bandura’s original theory on self-efficacy (1997, 2001) and our focus group findings, we highlight confidence, self-reflectiveness, and agency as the main elements of leader self-efficacy influenced during coaching.

Self-reflectiveness is the “metacognitive capability to reflect upon oneself and the adequacy of one’s thoughts and actions” (Bandura, 2001: 10). LSE in this study refers to the leaders’ awareness of and confidence in their abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to master the tasks involved in their leader role successfully.

There are strong indications of the salience of LSE as instrumental to leadership performance. Leaders are required to have the agency to positively influence employees’ culture and performance (Hannah et al., 2008). The leaders’ confidence in their ability to perform well in their leadership role may influence employee engagement and perceived leader effectiveness (Luthans & Peterson, 2003). Chemers et al. (2000) found that leadership efficacy was strongly related to leadership performance ratings. This is in line with Lester et al. (2011), who found leader efficacy predicted rated leader performance. Anderson et al. (2008) have also found similar results that related leader efficacy on specific tasks to aspects of the leadership role. We argue that leader self-efficacy also has merit in itself as a psychological state that leaders aspire to and strive for, as reflected in the focus group
discussion. A leadership development program that can influence leader self-efficacy should be valuable on several levels for the organization, subordinates, and individual leaders.

Leader self-efficacy has been shown to have strong personality correlates, prompting a discussion of its trait- vs. state-like properties (Hannah et al., 2008; Paglis, 2010). Although scarce, there are empirical indications of organizational contextual antecedents to LSE (Paglis & Green, 2002) and we argue LSE can be developed systematically with the use of leadership coaching. Bandura specifically discussed how individual mastery experiences inform judgment of self-efficacy and how context-specific mastery experiences are generalized to other tasks and situations (Bandura, 1997: 53). A leadership development practice that enables leaders to experience mastery in certain contexts should contribute to generalized leader self-efficacy over time. Successful accomplishments, vicarious experiences, and verbal persuasion are important elements that have been found to facilitate the development of the individual’s self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). These are strategies incorporated into the typical coaching methodology (Gjerde, 2003). During the coaching process, the leaders will set goals and break these down into smaller and more manageable steps (Finn, Mason, & Bradley, 2007), they will be challenged into action and new perspectives (Neenan & Dryden, 2002), and they will reflect upon ways to use their strengths to address challenges they meet (Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007). Leadership coaching should facilitate mastery experience and consequently augment their self-efficacy beliefs related to their leader role. It is therefore not surprising that scholars have found a positive relation among the few empirical studies that link leadership coaching to self-efficacy.

A study investigating the effect of a leadership-training program of which leadership coaching was one component found coaching had a positive effect on self-efficacy assessed as confidence in performing transformational and transactional leadership (Finn et al., 2007). Moen and Skaalvik (2009) found coaching had a significant positive effect on the managers’ self-efficacy beliefs in leadership capabilities predefined by the participating leaders. Evers, Brouwers, and Tomic (2006)
used a “GROW” model (Goal, Reality, Options, and Will power) (Whitmore, 2002) to coach managers and found a positive effect of coaching on their self-efficacy beliefs in setting their own goals compared with a control group. A study by Baron and Morin (2010) found a positive relation between leadership coaching and self-efficacy beliefs in supervisory coaching behavior skills. Neither of these studies refers to the self-efficacy beliefs as “leader efficacy”. The only study we found linking an individualized intervention to “leader efficacy” was one by Lester et al. (2011), who found a positive relationship between mentoring and leader efficacy. Their measure for leader efficacy focused on self-regulation and action in relation to various leadership behaviors, and they argue highly customized leadership development practices should be especially effective in enhancing leader efficacy (Lester et al., 2011). Based upon our focus group findings, theoretical reasoning, and previous empirical results, general leader self-efficacy represents an appropriate outcome variable that should be measured when assessing coaching effectiveness, and we expect a positive relationship, hence the following hypothesis:

_Hypothesis 1: Leadership coaching will positively influence leader self-efficacy_

2.4. Trust in subordinates

Leadership entails creating results through other people (Bandura, 2000; Hannah et al., 2008; Watson, Chemers, & Preiser, 2001) and today’s leaders need confidence not only in their own ability to accomplish their tasks, but also in their subordinates’ ability to do their tasks as well. Leaders need to trust their subordinates enough to delegate responsibility and provide them with enough freedom to effectuate their work without micromanaging and preventing the experience of autonomy and competence, both of which (in addition to relatedness) are “essential for optimal functioning in a broad range of highly varied cultures” (Deci & Ryan, 2008: 183). Trust may be defined as a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). This implies that a
leader expects her/his subordinates to have positive intentions, and is willing to refrain from detailed control of their behavior and/or to delegate decision-making authority. We argue LTS is a crucial condition for effective leadership, both in terms of working through their subordinates and influencing their intrinsic motivation and in terms of freeing up their own time and resources for more strategic issues.

However, despite the extensive body of literature on trust in leader–subordinate relationships, LTS has received little attention (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). In their review of literature on trust across levels in organizations, Fulmer and Gelfand (2012: 1214) reported that there were not enough studies of trust in subordinates to do a proper theory review. One of the few empirical studies that address the leader’s trust in employees is Spreitzer and Mishra (1999). They reported that trust in employees could act as a substitute for control as trust in employees was positively related to managerial involvement of employees in decision-making, and further, that higher levels of managerial involvement of employees were positively associated with organizational performance.

The antecedents to trust are defined as an assessment of other peoples’ trustworthiness combined with one’s own willingness to take risks (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007; Spreitzer & Mishra, 1999). The willingness to take risks has been argued to be based on a trait such as general propensity to trust (Mayer et al., 1995) or propensity to relate (Brower, Schoorman, & Tan, 2000). Trust is inherently a relational concept and we argue that leadership development practices should take into account the reciprocal nature of the relationship between leaders and their subordinates. We suggest that a leader’s propensity to trust subordinates in specific contexts can be a state developed through experience, specifically through reciprocal interaction between leader and subordinates. There is some empirical support for this argument. For example, Watson et al. (2001) found that leader confidence had an impact on the collective efficacy of college basketball
teams, and Hannah et al. (2008) proposed that leader efficacy may contribute to collective efficacy. Further, collective efficacy implies agency at lower levels of the hierarchy, and thus employees who are empowered, have a voice, and are responsible (Gao, Janssen, & Shi, 2011).

Suggesting the reverse direction of influence, Luthans and Peterson (2002) proposed that employee engagement may affect a leader’s confidence, because “… as the manager’s employees become more engaged in their work, their manager acquires confidence and belief in her/his abilities to create and build an engaged team or group successfully” (Luthans & Peterson, 2002: 379). Further, Paglis and Green (2002) found that managers who gave their employees high marks for various performance characteristics tended to have higher LSE than those who were less impressed by their subordinates. There are also indications that trust between a leader and subordinates is reciprocal in nature such that LTS may facilitate reciprocal trust from the subordinates (Serva, Fuller, & Mayer, 2005). To sum up, while trust and efficacy at the individual and group level appear to be related, there is insufficient evidence about the trust relationship between leaders and their subordinates to suggest a causal relationship in one particular direction. However, what the literature seems to indicate is that individual efficacy and collective efficacy may be closely associated and that LTS may play a crucial role in the development of both.

In order to advance theory and research on this issue, we propose that leadership coaching impacts not only on leader self-efficacy, but also on trust in subordinates. We focus on LTS related to the delegation of tasks and responsibilities. Based on the above-mentioned arguments and previous empirical findings, we propose that leadership coaching will influence leaders’ trust in employees, as coaching may facilitate the leader’s willingness to engage in risk-taking behavior through sharing authority and delegating responsibilities. Hence the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Leadership coaching will influence leaders’ trust in subordinates
2.5. Coach behavior

In addition to providing summative evaluation of the effects of leadership coaching, the objective of this study was to indicate what formative evaluation may contribute to prediction and explanation of the outcome. Ely et al. (2010) suggest that certain components of the coaching process, such as assessment, challenge, and support, are factors that may be valuable for this purpose. We take them up on their suggestion, only instead of addressing challenge and support as process elements, we define these as coach behaviors that should facilitate the leaders’ goal achievement. Instead of “assessment”, we suggest feedback as part of facilitative coach behavior. Hall, Otazo, and Hollenbeck (1999) interviewed 75 executives and found they valued honest, realistic, and challenging feedback as an important factor of coaching effectiveness. Feedback is used in different ways throughout the coaching process: as a starting point to set goals and identify areas for behavior change, as a benchmark and a way to evaluate progress, in addition to dictating the nature of the coach–client relationship (Gregory, Levy, & Jeffers, 2008). Due to its vital role in the coaching process, feedback is regularly mentioned as a requisite coaching competency in leadership coaching (Ely et al., 2010; Gregory et al., 2008; Hall et al., 1999; Heslin, Vandewalle, & Latham, 2006). Feedback is one of the elements in what we argue constitutes facilitative coach behavior.

The ability to challenge the leader is another core coaching skill (e.g. Ely et al., 2010). The coach challenges the leaders to set goals, to make action plans, to initiate action, and to reassume action when experiencing relapse or procrastination, in addition to challenging their perspectives and cognitive structures to facilitate learning (e.g. Neenan & Dryden, 2002; Grant, 2006). We suggest challenge is part of facilitative coach behavior. Finally, we suggest support as the third type of behavior to comprise facilitative coach behavior. Providing the leaders with support toward the attainment of their goals during what may be a challenging endeavor has been suggested as the coach’s main responsibility (e.g. Baron et al., 2011; Ely et al., 2010). Support may be given in various
ways from empathetic and active listening to provide a safe and nonjudgmental space for reflection, to active championing and a structure that helps uphold focus and persistence (Gjerde, 2003). A leadership coach will use a wide repertoire of behaviors to offer an individualized learning process for leaders and their respective organizations. However, challenge, support, and feedback represent the core of what we argue is facilitative coach behavior that will cut across different individualized processes and theoretical approaches.

As previously mentioned, the few empirical leadership coaching studies that investigate self-efficacy as an outcome variable find a positive relation between coaching and post-intervention self-efficacy (Baron & Morin, 2010; Evers, et al., 2006; Finn, et al., 2007; Moen & Skaalvik, 2009). Baron and Morin (2010) found that the higher the number of coaching sessions, the greater the changes in self-efficacy. We argue facilitative coach behavior represents an additional active mechanism in the coaching process that will help explain and predict changes in leader self-efficacy. During the coaching process, in which the coach challenges, supports, and provides the leader with feedback, the coach will persuade the leader into action and thus enable the leader to gain new experience to learn from. As coaches hold a solution- and resource-oriented mind-set (Gjerde, 2003), he/she will encourage the leaders to reflect upon their successful accomplishments stemming from new and previous experiences, and to look to others to learn from vicarious experience. As these important strategies were found to enhance a person’s self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997), we expect that facilitative coach behavior will affect leader self-efficacy.

**Hypothesis 3: Facilitative coach behavior will affect leader self-efficacy**

Facilitative coach behavior should also influence the leaders’ trust in their subordinates. Before trusting others, individuals will assess the other persons’ trustworthiness combined with their own
willingness to take risks (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006; Schoorman et al., 2007; Spreitzer & Mishra, 1999). We argue that a leader’s propensity to trust subordinates in specific contexts can be a state that may be developed through experience initiated by and reflected upon during the coaching process. We believe the general principles of coaching—agency, accountability, and responsibility (Grant et al., 2009)—will influence how the leaders come to assess not only themselves, but also their subordinates. A natural consequence should be that the leaders put more trust in their subordinates. We suggest the influence of these principles on leaders’ propensity to trust subordinates will be stronger when the coach displays high levels of facilitative coach behavior, which gives us Hypothesis 4.

_Hypothesis 4: Facilitative coach behavior will facilitate an increase in trust in subordinates_

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedures

The second part of this study was a field experiment chosen to test the propositions and hypotheses developed in the first part of the study. The objective was to reveal the effect of coaching on leader efficacy and trust in subordinates compared with a control group (between-group analysis), and to test if facilitative coach behavior would predict variation in these two outcome variables (within-group analysis). We collaborated with a small coaching company that invited coaches from their network into the project. In total, seven experienced leadership coaches volunteered to participate, all International Coach Federation (ICF) certified and trained in Co-Active Coaching. Co-Active Coaching is a solution-focused, strength- and resource-centered, action- and learning-oriented methodology (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2007). The coaching program comprised eight sessions, each lasting between one and one-and-a-half hours. The participating leaders were leaders
at middle and upper levels in their organizations. They were invited to the study through invitations sent to the coaches’ client organizations and offered coaching over a period of six months. The organizations received a reduced price for the program, and in return had to provide the researchers with participating leaders as well as corresponding leaders for a control group, and the participants were obligated to reply to a survey before and after the coaching period of six months. As coaching requires effort and commitment on behalf of the participating leaders, the invitation made explicit that we preferred self-selection of leaders to the program. For each participating leader, the employers were to recruit a corresponding leader from their organization with similar responsibilities and authority level for the control group. Our objective was to control for the impact of possible events in the organization that could bias the results. Twenty-seven leaders volunteered for coaching. Unfortunately, the organizations were only able to provide seven corresponding leaders for the control group, either because their organization was too small to have several leaders in similar positions, or because the potential participants in the control group declined to spend the time and effort required. In total, 34 leaders were recruited into the program.

The questionnaire developed during the first part of the study was distributed to the 34 participants one week before the coaching sessions started. Four of the participants did not respond, despite two reminders. After the six-month period of coaching ended, a follow-up questionnaire was sent to the 30 participants who replied in the first round. Of these, five did not respond, and the final sample included 24 participating leaders, which represents a response rate of 73%. Of the seven participants in the control group, six responded at both times. The final control group comprised six leaders.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Leader self-efficacy
As previously mentioned we decided to address leader self-efficacy generally and adopted the leadership role level of specificity (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Chemers et al., 2000; Hoyt & Blascovich, 2010). In line with Bandura’s (1997, 2001) theory of self-efficacy, we focused our measure on agency, self-reflectiveness, and confidence in general leadership tasks. The statements were: “I feel I master every aspect of my job as a leader in an excellent manner”, “I am well aware of the strengths I have in my job”, “I am fully aware of what aspects of my leadership I can develop”, and “I take action to handle a problem as soon as it is brought to my attention”. Following Hannah et al.’s suggestion that leader efficacy can be portrayed along a continuum of levels (Hannah et al., 2008: 675), the response format was a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scale demonstrated adequate internal reliability with a Cronbach’s alpha of .90. The reliability score for leader self-efficacy was based on the total sample (N=30) at baseline (before coaching, T1).

3.2.2. Facilitative coach behavior

In line with our previous arguments on what constitutes the core of coaching competencies, we measured the degree of facilitative coach behavior as comprising three types of behavior: challenge, support, and feedback. Coach behavior was measured using three questions, one for each type of behavior, and participants were asked to what degree the coach had challenged them, supported them, and given them feedback throughout the coaching program. The response format was a four-point scale, ranging from 1, not at all, to 4, to a great extent. The scale provided a Cronbach’s alpha score of .88 and was assessed using the subsample of participants that received coaching (N=24), measured six months after baseline (T2).

3.2.3. Trust
In this study, LTS is defined as manifested by the assessment of another person’s trustworthiness and willingness to be vulnerable through transferring authority or delegating tasks and responsibilities to subordinates. This is in line with earlier studies (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006; Schoorman et al., 2007; Spreitzer & Mishra, 1999), and is similar to the definition of Spreitzer and Mishra (1999) (however, their study measured trust solely as a perception of the employees' trustworthiness). To measure LTS, we applied two items based on earlier measures that focus directly on the trustor’s willingness to be vulnerable (Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Mayer & Davis, 1999; Mayer & Gavin, 2005; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 1996), and two items intended to capture subordinates’ trustworthiness regarding agentic behavior (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006). The four items measuring trust were: “My subordinates will always act responsibly to solve problems occurring in their job”, “My subordinates would always take responsibility if I were not able to attend to a situation”, “If I were absent for a period of time, I would not hesitate to leave the responsibility to some of my subordinates”, and “I often entrust tasks to my subordinates without involving myself”. The two latter items should capture the leaders’ perceptions that she/he actually is engaged in risk-taking behavior, and is thus a stronger indication of trust than mere willingness as a speculation (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006). The response format was a seven-point scale ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree. The four-item scale showed a Cronbach’s alpha of .89. The reliability score for trust was based on the total sample (N=30) at baseline (before coaching, T1).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

The descriptive statistics and correlations of leader self-efficacy, trust in employees, and facilitative coach behavior are shown in Table 1.

(Insert Table 1 about here)
Table 1 shows that the strongest correlations are between trust and leader self-efficacy at similar points in time. It is also worth noting that trust is not related across time, indicating that changes have occurred in this variable during the coaching period. Facilitative coach behavior is for obvious reasons assessed and correlated only at time 2 once the leaders have experienced the coaches’ behaviors.

4.2. Testing of hypotheses

We hypothesized that participation in the coaching program would be associated with increased levels of leader efficacy (Hypothesis 1) and increased levels of trust in subordinates (Hypothesis 2). To test these hypotheses we performed independent-samples t-tests comparing the means in the two groups at baseline and time 2. Ideally, in a field experiment, the participants should be randomly assigned to treatment and control groups, and the baseline score of the dependent variable should be similar across groups to present a proper counterfactual with which to compare and help rule out alternative causal explanations. However, the analysis showed that the coaching group had substantially lower levels of both leader self-efficacy and trust in subordinates at baseline than the control group. A similar pattern of baseline measures across the control and intervention groups has been found in previous field experiment studies on coaching and mentoring (Moen & Skaalvik, 2009; Lester et al., 2011). The mean level of leader efficacy for our coaching group was 3.26 on a seven-point scale, and 6.03 for the control group at baseline (Table 2). The difference in means was significant (t=4.04, p=0.00) at time 1. At time 2 the mean level of leader efficacy was 4.96 for the coaching group and 6.03 for the control group and the difference in means was no longer significant (t=1.73, p=0.09) implying a significant increase had occurred in the coaching group, which supports Hypothesis 1.

(Insert Table 2 about here)
Figure 1 illustrates how the significant difference in means for leader self-efficacy between the two groups at time 1 is no longer significant as the coaching group catches up to their level at time 2.

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

A similar pattern of change from time 1 to time 2 was found in relation to trust in subordinates. As Table 2 shows, the mean level of trust was significantly different across groups at time 1 (t=5.21, p=0.00), but at time 2 the difference between the two groups was no longer significant (t=1.84, p=0.07). This supports Hypothesis 2 and implies participation in the coaching program would lead to increased levels of trust in subordinates. Figure 2 illustrates the differences in means at time 1 and time 2 and shows how the significant difference in trust at time 1 becomes nonsignificant at time 2, which implies an increase in trust in the coaching group results as they catch up with the control group.

(Insert Figure 2 about here)

The difference in means at baseline for both leader efficacy and trust in subordinates may be an indication of selection bias, implying that only those who felt a need for leadership coaching would sign up. This would explain a lower level of confidence in self and others among leaders in the coaching group. Consequently, an alternative explanation for the changes in leader self-efficacy and trust could be that confidence in mastering the leadership role builds naturally with the passing of time and not as a consequence of coaching. Furthermore, statistical regression is another possible explanation, since a leader who scores low at baseline will probably not score as low at time 2 and a leader who scores high at baseline will probably not score higher at time 2, a phenomenon referred to as “regression to the mean” (Shadish et al., 2002). We performed a regression analysis to eliminate these potential explanations. The purpose was to investigate if variation in the increase of leader self-efficacy and trust among the participating leaders could be explained by a factor solely related to the coaching process such as variation in facilitative coach behavior. Such an analysis would also provide us with a formative evaluation to address an active mechanism at play during
coaching. For this purpose, we computed two new variables, “change in leader self-efficacy” and “change in trust”, by subtracting the means for leader self-efficacy and trust at T1 from their respective means at T2. Then we computed residual variables for “change in leader efficacy” and “change in trust” and entered these into our regression analysis to control for variation among the leaders’ scores at T1. The regression results are shown in Tables 3 and 4. We included the variance inflation factor (VIF) values as a test of multicollinearity between the two variables.

(Insert Table 3 about here)

The results show that approximately one third of the variation in the change in leader self-efficacy and one quarter of the change in trust in subordinates was explained by the coach’s facilitative behavior. This supports our hypotheses suggesting that facilitative coach behavior would influence leader self-efficacy (Hypothesis 3) and trust in subordinates (Hypothesis 4). It also implies that the increase in leader self-efficacy and trust for the coaching group should be related to the coaching program as such and not to the mere passing of time. Consequently, Hypotheses 1 and 2 suggesting leadership coaching will facilitate an increase of leader self-efficacy and trust in subordinates were strengthened further. The VIFs are far below a common cutoff value at 10 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010), indicating that multicollinearity should not be a concern.

(Insert Table 4 about here)

5. Discussion

Leadership coaching has been presented as a promising leader and leadership development practice (Day, 2000; Ely et al., 2010). This study investigated the effects of leadership coaching as a leader and leadership development tool and provides empirical evidence in favor of its practice. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first to assess the outcome of leadership coaching with a mixed methods design comprising a focus group discussion and a quasi-experimental field study. The objectives of
our study were twofold. The first objective was to provide appropriate outcome criteria that maintain the essence of coaching (idiosyncratic process and goals) and enable assessment of the effectiveness of leadership coaching as a leader and leadership development tool across leaders and organizations. Our analysis of the focus group discussion in the first part of our study led us to suggest leader self-efficacy (Hannah et al., 2008; Hoyt & Blascovich, 2010) and trust in subordinates (Spreitzer & Mishra, 1999) as appropriate outcome criteria that link both theory and practice. There are strong indications that leader self-efficacy is instrumental to leadership performance and leadership performance ratings (Anderson et al., 2008; Chemers et al., 2000; Lester et al., 2011; Luthans & Peterson, 2003). Furthermore, leader self-efficacy is a critical component in leader development, and in line with Lester et al. (2011) we believe it is an aspect that can be developed effectively. Trust in subordinates is another variable we argue is vital to leadership performance as leadership entails creating results through other people (Bandura, 2000; Hannah et al., 2008; Watson et al., 2001) and to do so leaders need confidence in their subordinates’ ability to perform their tasks. We argue these two outcome criteria should be assessed when evaluating the effectiveness of leadership coaching.

The second objective of the study was to test whether leadership coaching could influence our suggested outcome criteria in terms of increased leader self-efficacy and trust in subordinates using a rigorous research design. The purpose was first to provide summative evaluation and test our two suggested outcome criteria, and then to provide a formative evaluation explaining one of the mechanisms that contribute to the hypothesized changes in these outcome criteria. Findings from our quasi-experimental field study lend support to our four hypotheses. The leaders in the coaching group increased their levels of leader self-efficacy. This is in line with previous empirical findings linking coaching to self-efficacy (Baron & Morin, 2010; Evers et al., 2006; Finn et al., 2007; Moen & Skaalvik, 2009). However, our study addresses general leader self-efficacy beyond a specific leadership theory, and should thus make our findings more applicable to leadership development in general. We found that leaders who increased their leader self-efficacy had confidence in their ability
to master tasks in their general leadership role, self-reflectiveness, and agentic behavior. We also found that the leaders who participated in the coaching process increased their trust in subordinates (assessment of the subordinates’ trustworthiness and willingness to take risks). This is encouraging, as the willingness to take risks has been argued to be based on a trait such as general propensity to trust (Mayer et al., 1995) or to relate to subordinates (Brower et al., 2000). In challenging this trait perspective, our findings imply that LTS in specific contexts may also be open for development and may be influenced by leadership coaching. Furthermore, our findings reveal that facilitative coach behavior may explain the changes in both leader self-efficacy and trust in subordinates. In other words, the coach’s behavior—providing support, challenge, and feedback—played an important role in the leader and leadership development process.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study is a contribution to the leader and leadership development literature in general and to the research on leadership coaching in particular. As leader efficacy or self-efficacy appears to be a robust outcome of coaching, future research could build on these results while also taking into account recent developments within the literature on leader efficacy. For example, Anderson et al. (2008) suggest that efficacy beliefs can be related to some specific leadership behaviors (e.g. communication) more than others (e.g. change). Future research could investigate whether the general efficacy obtained through coaching affects some specific leader behaviors more than others. Ely et al. (2010) categorize self-efficacy as a cognitive learning outcome in their framework, and this variable could represent a valuable theoretical link between learning outcomes and leader behavior.

A second theoretical contribution relates to trust in subordinates as a vital outcome from leadership coaching. Most research on trust has addressed subordinates’ trust in their leader (STL). It can be argued that STL is based on different beliefs and has different contents and consequences from LTS (Brower et al., 2000; Kramer & Tyler, 1996). In the very definition of leader and subordinate lies the
difference in power and authority of the two parties (Kramer & Tyler, 1996). LTS will have different content and dimensions from STL, for example trust in the subordinates’ willingness to act in the interest of the organization or to act responsibly and proactively when granted authority. Sharing decision-making power with subordinates implies losing some control over the creation of these results (Spreitzer & Mishra, 1999). STL on the other hand refers to whether subordinates are comfortable with their leader having influence and control over issues that are important for them. Recent measures of trust in leaders reflect this direction-specific definition in the leader–subordinate dyad (Colquitt & Rodell, 2011; Mayer & Davis, 1999; Mayer & Gavin, 2005). Consequently, we suggest that LTS has substantively different content from STL, and should be addressed independently in models and measures of organizational trust (Brower et al., 2000; Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006; Kramer & Tyler, 1996). The findings from our study show that leadership coaching can increase leaders’ propensity to trust their subordinates and should consequently add to the scarce literature on LTS.

Trust is a relational phenomenon, and it has been suggested that trust is a core part of an organization’s social capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). McEvily, Perrone, and Zaheer (2003) suggest that trust may affect organizing by mobilizing resources from interdependent actors, because it motivates actors to contribute their resources and direct them toward the achievement of organizational goals. Further, trust influences processes of knowledge sharing through increased openness between actors (McEvily et al., 2003) as well as delegation of tasks and responsibilities (Spreitzer & Mishra, 1999). Assessing the influence of individual development processes on social capital is a recent and interesting line of research. In a case study of several different types of leadership development practices, Galli and Müller-Stewens (2012) found that individually designed development practices that enhanced self-reflection, such as coaching and 360-degree feedback, had positive effects on social capital, in contrast to collectively organized leadership development experiences. The present study indicates that leadership coaching may affect organizational
outcomes through increased trust in employees. Future research on the social capital effects of leadership coaching could explore these effects further.

Ely et al. (2010) recommend that future evaluations of leadership coaching should include distal outcomes of coaching, and data from multiple sources. Subordinates are clearly relevant in empirical studies of leadership coaching outcomes. Not all leader behavior is directed toward subordinates as such (e.g. making strategic decisions related to vision and mission) and the effects of different types of behavior are dependent on the situation (Vroom & Jago, 2007). However, the trust concept applied in the present study includes perceptions of leader behaviors that are directly related to subordinates, such as delegation of tasks. If future research on coaching should include data from subordinates, reciprocal trusting behavior might be a promising candidate to measure. Another interesting variable to include is the subordinates’ assessment of the leader’s authenticity (Shamir & Eilam, 2005) as an outcome of coaching, and future research could investigate how leader self-efficacy and subordinates’ perception of leader authenticity were related.

5.2. Implications for leadership development practices

Our findings are also relevant for practical purposes. In line with Day, Harrison, and Halpin (2009), we believe that to accelerate effective leader development, organizations could focus more on the interior processes and less on the exterior and observable competencies as primary outcomes of their leadership development programs. As leaders develop an “internal core”, acquiring the competencies to exercise effective leadership may follow as a natural “by-product” (Day et al., 2009: xiii). We argue leader self-efficacy is an internal process that is part of such an internal core, and the consequence of strengthening this may be accelerated leader development. The confident leader may increase his/her attempts to claim a leader identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Lester et al., 2011). This claiming of leadership will expose the leader to more leadership experiences to learn from, thereby creating positive learning spirals (Day & Harrison, 2007). In addition, leader self-efficacy may
influence leader development through self-motivation and perseverance (Hannah et al., 2008). We believe that leader development programs should aim at developing leader self-efficacy and our study shows leadership coaching is a leader development practice that may contribute significantly to this purpose.

Our formative evaluation indicates that facilitative coach behavior will influence the changes in leader self-efficacy and trust in subordinates. Organizations wanting to develop their leaders can offer leadership coaching as a development initiative, as our findings indicate it may increase levels of leader self-efficacy and trust in subordinates, both of which are vital to leadership performance and future leader development. However, to ensure effective leader development, organizations should make sure that their external and/or internal coaches are confident and competent enough to provide facilitative coaching behavior for leaders with support, challenge, and feedback during the coaching process. Furthermore, to ensure future development for both leaders and the field of leadership development, organizations should evaluate their leadership development initiatives using validated measures before and after the initiative, and not only at the end of the program.

5.3. Potential limitations and conclusion

The contributions of this research should be viewed in light of several limitations. First, the sample size represents a typical and important challenge that coaching studies meet when analyzing the coaching process with multivariate statistics as it may be difficult to produce enough statistical power (Baron et al., 2011). This study is no exception in terms of sample size. When a coaching program is offered in an organization, the number of participants is seldom higher than 100 (Baron et al., 2011) except for studies in organizations such as the military (e.g. Boyce et al., 2010; Lester et al., 2011). However, despite our fairly small sample size, our data still provided sufficient statistical power to reveal significant results, which indicates that the effects measured in this study may even be of larger magnitude.
Another limitation is the possibility of selection bias. In line with previous studies of coaching, this study has relied on voluntary participation (e.g. Bono et al, 2009; Moen & Skaalvik, 2009; Lester et al., 2011). This puts some limits on the generalization of our findings, and the study should only generalize to leaders motivated for leadership development. However, as “randomized allocation to intervention or control is often extremely difficult in real life field research” (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007: 245), a consequence is that most coaching studies have used a single-group, pre–post within-subjects design. On the other hand, our study did provide a control group (albeit small) with which to compare the coaching group and this strengthens our findings compared with single-group design studies. Furthermore, we address the possible selection bias through our regression analysis, in which we found that facilitative coach behavior explained approximately one third of the variation in leader self-efficacy change and one quarter of the increase in trust in subordinates; thus it is less likely that history and “regression to the mean” are alternative explanations for our findings. However, it is likely that leaders who experience low self-efficacy will profit more from a coaching program than leaders with high self-efficacy.

The self-report measures used in this study represent another potential limitation. Common method bias may follow from self-report measures, influencing the response process and creating inflated measures. The general reliance on client self-report data in the majority of coaching studies represents a limitation of the coaching literature (Ely et al., 2010). However, the concepts measured in the present study reflect leaders’ internal processes, which naturally call for subjective measures. Nevertheless, as common method bias may follow from self-report measures, we followed the advice of Podsakoff, Mackenzie, and Lee (2003) to attend to one possible bias, namely response patterns. To limit the consistency effect, in which the responding leader develops a response pattern due to “scale anchors” (when all scales are the same), the items of our different constructs were measured using a variety of scales.
The overall objective of this study was to contribute to the development of the theory of leadership coaching as a leadership development practice and respond to calls such as: “little attention has been paid to the emerging practice of executive coaching by HRD [human resource development] scholars and no efforts for theory building to guide future research have been made” (Joo, 2005: 464). Our study adds to the knowledge base of both formative and summative evaluation and argues that leadership coaching is a valuable leader and leadership development practice. The strength of our study lies in our use of a mixed methods design combining qualitative and quantitative methods, providing us with opportunities for expansion and development. Our combination of methods and data sources should give a more complete picture of the effects of leadership coaching as a leader development practice than any one of these alone.
References


