



Reflecting pathways to  
learning and change



#### F. Campone, Inc. Newsletter

The *Currents in Coaching Research* newsletter has been dormant for a while but I'm back on track with updates and food for thought for my coaching colleagues who have curious minds. Instead of summarizing a research article this month, we take a look at an article about how we coaches might go about using a case study approach to study what we do. Enjoy and, as always, your comments and feedback are most appreciated.

## Currents in Coaching Research: Rethinking Case Studies

In a recent meeting of one of the coaching-related classes I teach, a couple of learners raised some interesting questions and perspectives on the use, validity and potential for bias in coaching research based on case studies. While I offered some opinions, I also recognize that this particular form is not one with which I have a great technical familiarity. So I explored some articles on the topic of case studies and found the one which is at the center of this month's exploration of what we can learn from coaching research:

Van Wynsberge, R. & Kahn S. (2007). Redefining Case Study. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 6(2). Article 6. Retrieved 12/24/07 from [http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/6\\_2/vanwysnberge.pdf](http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/6_2/vanwysnberge.pdf)

In the early days of coaching literature especially, many authors used case study to present their data and conclusions. Recently, the forms of coaching research have greatly diversified to reflect a broader range of research paradigms and methods. Nonetheless, case study is a potentially useful means for studying our coaching practices as well as collecting evidence which might inform coaching research. In our class discuss of case studies, there seemed to be a general assumption that we were all on the same page in our understanding of what constitutes a case study in social science research. Like most assumptions, this one appears to be entirely unwarranted. The authors note that they found “more than 25 different definitions of case study, each with its own particular emphasis and direction for research “ (p.2)

Van Wynseberge and Kahn clarify that “case study is neither a method nor a methodology nor a research design”. Instead, their revised definition positions a case study as a means of

focusing attention on the particular phenomenon we are studying and on the relationship of the whole with each essential element. Their redefinition- “case study is a transparadigmatic and transdisciplinary heuristic that involves the careful delineation of the phenomena for which evidence is being collected”- requires some explanation. In essence, the authors suggest that case study can be used in a variety of disciplines and is relevant regardless of one’s research philosophy or paradigm of research. The authors don’t discuss the concept of research paradigms in detail, although different research paradigms are referred to as the article offers examples of relevant case study applications.

To help those who would consider using case studies, the authors clarify that case study is not a method because a method prescribes how the data is to be collected. In a case study, data may be collected using a variety of methods, for example observer notes, interviews, self-assessment and survey forms. Case study is not a research design because a design “guides research from the questions to the conclusions” and includes the what and how of collecting and analyzing the data. A case study, on the other hand, does not predetermine every step of the process and the researcher applies analytic induction over the course of the unfolding investigation.

The authors do offer seven common features of a case study which are consistent with their redefinition of case study as a means of focusing attention on all relevant aspects of a phenomenon. First, a case study consists of a small number, as small as a single event if appropriate. Second the case study is intended to give the reader “a sense of being there”, i.e. a vicarious experience of the event studied. Third case studies comprise systematic studies of natural situations where many factors are uncontrollable. Fourth, case studies are bound- i.e. they identify a specific place and time in which the event unfolds. Examples of “bound” for coaches might include documenting work with a single client over a specified time, a formal coaching process within a single organization or a systematic application of a single coaching model.. Fifth, case studies include a working hypothesis and lessons learned: i.e. there is on-going awareness of what is discovered, revised, created during the course of data collection and analysis. Sixth, case studies use multiple data sources, enabling the researcher to triangulate data. Multiple sources in a case might include data from the coach, client and peers; from self-assessment and observation; or other strategies. Finally, the purpose of case studies is not to “prove” a point but to extend the reader’s experience and understanding of a particular phenomenon. This latter point is especially consistent with the concept of evidence-based coaching which entails the coach making appropriate choices for each client’s needs and the coaching context.

I found the section of the article debunking certain myths about social science research interesting and persuasive, especially as the authors addressed some of the concerns about bias and generalizability which class participants raised. The authors conclude with a detailed exploration of the “unit of analysis” – i.e. the specific phenomenon for which data is being collected. In a case study of how coaching culture develops in an organization, for example, the units of analysis might well include organizational policies concerning coaching, allotment of budget, confidentiality and other elements which are relevant to the author’s working hypothesis. This section includes a table demonstrating how different research paradigms might frame the units of analysis. For anyone new to qualitative

research, the table and accompany text are instructive. However, for a more thorough and accessible exploration of “cultures of inquiry”, readers may wish to consult *Mindful Inquiry in Social Research* (1998, Valerie Malhotra Benz and Jeremy J. Schapiro Sage Publications).

I confess that I came away from the article with a revised perspective on case study. Readers may want to consider the potential for applying case study in the context of reflective coaching practice as well as scholarship.

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