



## **A CASE ANALYSIS OF THE KNOWLEDGE SHARING PROCESS AND TRUST IN ENTREPRENEURIAL COACHING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper aims to examine the role of trust, knowledge sharing and commitment for building a strong relationship between coaches and entrepreneurs in the Tunisian context. We employ a comparative case study approach and data gathered using semi-structured interviews, including critical incident technique. We consider the strengths and weaknesses of this interaction and the role of trust, knowledge sharing and commitment to maintaining a successful business process. It was found that coaches and entrepreneurs considered it important to develop and maintain trust between them; they also have efficient methods for tapping into existing external and internal knowledge with teams at both an individual and a collective level. However, trust at an individual level raises certain challenges about timing and several perceptions of risk.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

From the perspective of management, the failure of a significant number of Small and Medium Enterprises is explained in principle by the inadequate administrative and strategic decision. Moreover, a skill gap is also considered to be a factor of dysfunction that can hinder the survival of the company (Julien, 2005). That's why; entrepreneurs need to establish a support structure that can help them to overcome barriers to develop a successful business creation process. Coaching and mentoring can have a positive impact on the performance and leadership effectiveness of managers.

Coaching has been defined in several ways: as all activities aimed at bringing out the potential of individuals (Hargrove, 2000). It is also considered all deliberate intervention activities used to help individuals to develop and achieve their specified goals (Aas and Vavik, 2015); a structured two way process to develop skills and competencies through "assessment, guided practical experience, and regular

feedback" (Parsloe, 1999:1); and a set of practices to help individuals to learn (Whitmore,1992).

In the last decade, the coaching and mentoring profession is booming and led to the development of the entrepreneur's competence. Recent studies propose that forward-thinking organizations seek to move towards team coaching (Griffiths, 2013). Which is the coaching of a team towards the achievement of collective goals (Thornton, 2010)? To this end, several factors are considered to be fundamental to create a high-performing team. Trust, knowledge sharing and commitment are the key elements in every social interaction that provides the foundation for effective relationships (Hardin, 2006; Reina & Reina, 2006). This is consistent with the view of some authors who find that in the coaching setting, creating a relationship of trust establishes a first step in the coaching process that allows the relationship to be developed while increasing the likelihood for elevated (Baron & Morin, 2009; O'Broin & Palmer, 2010; Peterson, 1996).

By harnessing studies on the entrepreneur/business coach relationship, we can find out the existence of some factors that play a key role than others, necessary for comfort especially during times of inconsistency and doubt, through which the two involved partners go. Then, it is deemed relevant to study the willingness of the entrepreneur and coach to share between them new ideas and knowledge especially to create and develop a new business unit. Indeed, Sammut (2003) adds that the exchange of knowledge rests on the quality of listening, attention, and trust. Moreover, Giordani (2004) highlights the importance of trust and commitment in business and the establishment of cooperative relationships between different economic agents.

In the Tunisian context, the problematic of coaching and mentoring practices has been largely ignored. Nevertheless, some recent studies highlight the critical role of entrepreneurial coaching. Ben Salem and Lakhel (2018), an advance that the coach's enforcement of standards and coach empathy are the main parts of the coaching practice adopted by Tunisian successors. From another perspective, as the concept of entrepreneurial coaching is less modeled in the management literature, Ben Salem and al., (2018) identify the adequate entrepreneurial support elements for business restarting after a business failure. They distinguish business planned failure from the unplanned one in terms of context and restarting business motivations.

The paper explores the mentoring and coaching experience. Yet, despite the apparent role of the coach in developing the business process, few studies describe the nature of the interaction between entrepreneurs and their coaches in the context of Tunisia. We consider the strengths and weaknesses of this interaction and the role of trust, knowledge sharing and commitment to maintaining a successful business process.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Coaching concept

Coaching is considered to be a complete entrepreneurial support practice that contains advice, training, and learning (Wu, 2016). Coaching is defined also as all deliberate intervention activities used to help people to develop and achieve their own goals (Aas and Vavik, 2015). During the coaching process, the majority of previous research projects have focused on the timing, longevity and the actors' relationship (Audet and Cauteret, 2013; Bruneel et al., 2012; Devine et al., 2013). Based upon recent management literature, Mansoori and al (2019) highlight the emergence of the role of coaches in accelerators interacts with the lean startup. Their findings are about the lean startup methodology which influences how entrepreneur-coach relationships evolve. Therapeutic coaching is based on achieving a profound inner change. Campbell & Gardner (2003) defined coaching as "a goal-directed, multi-faceted process for enhancing people, work and

life" (p.17). This definition acknowledges the commonalities that underpin most forms of coaching like goal-directed orientation and universal outcomes regardless of the coaching form being applied.

Moreover, entrepreneurial coaching is defined as the support that entrepreneurs receive in the early stages of their entrepreneurial activities to help them to develop and acquire necessary skills (Audet and Cauteret, 2013). The key to coaching, in general, and to entrepreneurial coaching, in particular, is the notion of learning (Bachkirova and al., 2014).

### 2.2. Knowledge sharing process

The knowledge management process is gained importance from around 1995 (Snowden, 2002). Besides, Parirokh et al. (2008) note how researchers from different disciplines have stressed the significance of knowledge management for organizational success. But there have been quite major shifts in how knowledge is considered. For example, Stacy (2001) argues that knowledge is a process rather than a thing and that it is an active process of relating. This process view is developed by the seminal work of Nonaka and Konno (1998) that showed how the concept of ba is a shared space for the interaction that transforms information into knowledge. In this conceptualization, codified (explicit) information is tangible but lies in media outside the space of ba. In contrast, tacit knowledge is intangible but resides in ba. But critically, this transformation is a process of sharing within this knowledge space called ba. Thus, for Nonaka and Konno (1998) knowledge creation is a process of interactions.

### 2.3. Mutual trust foundations

Trust is a key element in every social interaction which provides the foundation for effective relationships (Hardin, 2006; Reina & Reina, 2006).

The degree of trust between people as well as between people and institutions determines to a large extent structure, quality and efficiency of those patterns of interaction and transaction which connect the various actors in societies that are based on the division of functions and labour (Hohman and Malieva, 2002). According to Hatzakis (2009), trust is composed of two key foundations, a cognitive and an affective basis. The cognitive basis of trust is formed based on evidence, whereas affective trust is linked to human emotions. However, it seems that ambiguity is the major criterion in the majority of professional relationships. In the case of a cognitive-based trust, the knowledge we gain about the trustee (a party to be trusted) determines whether we are going to trust that person. When people trust, that means they know or think they know, just enough information needed for trust to develop (Markovic and al, 2014).

Recently, a more developed trust approach involves affective responses (Schoorman et al., 2007). Based on this approach, emotional states affect trust. For example, emotional attachment can

cause the trustor to take a risk not necessarily warranted by any evidence (Markovic and al, 2014).

Based on the entrepreneurial process, Mutual Trust remains the foundation of a successful coaching relationship. In this regard, Fayolle & Fillion (2006) argue that the beginning of the relationship relates to establishing a climate of trust and openness and if this step is overlooked it often results in negative consequences.

Sammur et al. (2005) noted that the traditional coaching relationship is known by a limited trust early in the process and then it turns into shared trust. Sammur et al. (2005) add that this trust is built throughout the coaching mechanism.

#### **2.4. Commitment: A key factor in maintaining an entrepreneur-coaching relationship**

Commitment is considered as one of the factors that ensures a more successful coaching relationship. Assoune (2009) argues that "without a commitment to the relationship or the organization, business coaches and entrepreneurs do not cooperate." Indeed, the relationship between a coach and an entrepreneur depends on their behavior to show their willingness to remain cooperative. In other words, they must mutually show commitment to implementing the project. As for the need to achieve or succeed, the entrepreneur seeks to be strongly committed.

Giordani (2005) argues that "the success of the relationship requires another condition, namely the mutual commitment of the parties which enhances the mutuality of the relationship." Furthermore, the author considers mutual commitment as "the will of the partners to make short-term sacrifices to achieve long-term goals," and he believes that the success of the coaching relationship depends on the level and quality of the commitment of the coach towards the entrepreneur and that the entrepreneur's commitment is "obvious from the start." Finally, the author adds that the "coaching relationship assumes a temporary but intense commitment of individuals within the coaching structures."

The next section presents the research methodology used in the study. Section 4 describes the main findings and a more detailed exploration of theme one; the role of trust, commitment, and knowledge sharing as a basis for building the relationship. Discussion and conclusion are presented in the last section.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

Our study aims to explore the importance that entrepreneurs and coaches attach to trust, knowledge sharing and commitment as fundamental tools used in creating a successful business process unit. As we had noted earlier, there is limited literature about entrepreneurial coaching, therefore we are based on an exploratory approach based on the case study method. According to Yin (1994), this technique is appropriate because the boundaries between

phenomenon and context are not evident. Moreover, Eisenhardt (1991) points out that such a method is well suited because it allows us to understand the respondents' experience from their perception (Gilmore and Carson, 1996). We adopt three case studies allowing more generalization and transferability from the single case approach (Benbasat et al., 1987). We contacted three coaches which are located in Tunisia. Our focus is on identifying coaches who have worked with entrepreneurs who eventually created their firms. The selected coaches have rich experience (between 7 and 15 years), important human capital and leadership development background. We used a semi-directive interview with coaches. We selected a purposeful sample, one that had the characteristics that interested us. Such sampling is sometimes referred to as "theoretical" cases (Anderson and Smith, 2007). The nature of the questions asked of all participants included a small number of critical incident technique (Byrne, 2001) questions, based on those originally developed by De Haan (2008) and included to facilitate the process of drawing out from participants, data about their experiences and perceptions relevant to the coaching relationship.

The interview schedule included open and flexible questions; this allowed respondents to express their views and experiences concerning the coached entrepreneurs. Questions were principally about mutual trust, knowledge transfer practices between entrepreneurs and coaches, and commitment. These entrepreneurs are creating their firms in the services sector. We asked, for example: "what are the most important knowledge you have exchanged between you and entrepreneurs?", "tell us about the level of trust you express toward entrepreneurs? Then, we asked" and "what type of collaboration you maintain with entrepreneurs?" Further questions arose during the interviews, enriching the data and enabling us to obtain additional details about practices and processes.

### **4. DATA ANALYZES AND FINDINGS**

Analysis of interview transcripts was carried out using a thematic approach, which was used because it is considered as a flexible technique, which is not tied to a specific research philosophy or theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and can, therefore, be used with most qualitative research methods (Boyatzis, 1998), including case study. Transcripts were read and re-read several times to identify themes relevant to the original research question (Aronson, 1995). Five key themes about the coaching relationship were then identified (see Figure 1 below) and revisited to identify possible sub-themes and ensure consistency in terms of the original data.

We first address the preliminary research question about the role of trust, knowledge sharing and commitment for building a strong relationship between coach and entrepreneurs. We found that in terms of the indicators in the literature all of our

cases adopted these practices. However, each one has specific features. Trust between coach and entrepreneur seems to be not the only important factor in this relationship, various kinds of knowledge are generated and shared in the firm. Moreover, the mutual commitment of the parties exists.

### **Theme 1: Knowledge sharing between coaches and entrepreneurs**

The business process between coaches and entrepreneurs is mostly based on mutual respect, confidence and sharing knowledge between them. However, these practices differ from one process to another. In fact, with the first team, several kinds of knowledge are generated and shared between the entrepreneur and his coach. They ensure that they usually exchange both tacit and explicit knowledge among them and their peers. Internally, the first steps of the creative process of the firm are painful for both members due to barriers encountered by the entrepreneur in the financial and strategic level. Nevertheless, knowledge and new ideas diffusion cannot evolve if valuable information is not exchanged rapidly and clearly between them. That's why, in all the cases, to facilitate such exchanges; they hold regular and frequent meetings. These exchanges are facilitated through an informal style of collaboration. New knowledge and capabilities are also acquired and developed through self-learning practices. The coaches interviewed show a very favorable attitude towards the questions asked by the entrepreneurs about details concerning the creation of their companies.

The first team (formed by "S" the first coach and "L" the first entrepreneur) talked about how they collaborate to obtain new knowledge using the frequent purchase of books and journals related to their field, "S" told us:

*"I search around to acquire professional books, to explore new themes about web systems and new software applications to help "L" to develop new knowledge that can be valid for his field."*

During our interview teams, it appears clear that coaches and entrepreneurs share a similar perception of their internal collaborative style and techniques. Entrepreneurs are convinced that they are received valuable knowledge from their coaches. They believed that knowledge exchanged helps them to overcome barriers to create or develop their new business. The overall finding from participant coaches was that the quality of the coaching relationship based on knowledge exchange was, in their view, a key factor in enabling them to develop the new business.

Moreover, tacit knowledge is well developed between two partners. "H" the second coach and "T", the second entrepreneur explained that they are constantly working towards building the knowledge, especially with staff members. Nevertheless, "T" shows that there is no formalized method for acquiring new knowledge. "H" explains that his large

experience in areas of the business must be competently run to help entrepreneurs. That's, several kinds of practices such as continuous learning should be adopted. He adds: *"we cannot realize success without exchanging ideas, opinions, and points of view"*.

Unlike the other cases, the two last partners "J" and "M" explained that knowledge acquisition is attained over a combination of formal education and self-training. However, the entrepreneur "M" expresses that his coach demonstrates less ability and motivation to cooperate specifically by providing them with all the knowledge in the field of business creation. That's why he will be obliged to look for new knowledge from another source (regional administration, research centers, minister, etc.).

### **Theme 2: Building trust between coaches and entrepreneurs**

Another key theme relevant to the coach and entrepreneur relationship emerged from the literature. Trust is considered as "cornerstone for building the relationship". During our interviews with coaches and entrepreneurs, it appears clear that they share a similar perception about the need to build trust at both an individual and a collective level. "T" tries to show confidence in his coach to encourage him to be more creative and cooperative. He enthusiastically declared *"I trust him and I have confidence"*. In fact, during the first steps of business creation, several barriers are confronted, that's, an entrepreneur needs to generate a safe and supportive space in which they could exchange ideas and find solutions. Moreover, relationships between colleagues are good-natured with considerable mutual help.

Coaches are considered as part of building trust, they have to show their willingness to share information, to provide methods and technical tools to manage a new project. Thus, entrepreneurs search to be better monitored and supported by their coaches. "S" adds: *"I always provide them all necessary tools and working methods to facilitate the first steps of business creation"*.

The two first coaches explain that they are carrying out activities that facilitated information and knowledge exchange with entrepreneurs, usually by using e-mail, or by one-on-one meetings or through a telephone call. This is considered as a mainly important task in the formative stages of the relationship between two partners, especially, if coaches didn't have an existing business or coaching relationship from which to build. Indeed, many coaches find this meeting as a significant step to establish firstly confidence with entrepreneurs, then to facilitate building process of firm creation. They said they need to discuss usually all project steps: *"we need to discuss the steps of the project daily while preparing an effective action plan to validate our project"* (Coach "S").

Cooperation between entrepreneurs and their coaches is related to a form of individual-based interaction as a team-work system. We can find such

perception in coaching literature (Hawkins, 2014; Thornton, 2010). Considering importance of team-work system in building trust between partners, Thornton (2010) proposes that sharing information has a dual purpose; firstly, the coach is getting ready in terms of an insight into the dynamics operating within the entrepreneur and other partners, secondly, the coach can prepare entrepreneur and another team member for engaging with him and the coaching process.

All coaches held a similar appreciation of their level of trust with their partners. They are willing to share new ideas, knowledge and try to resolve problems together. They believed that this atmosphere supports collaborative style. At the beginning of the relationship, coaches like to be seen as trusted non-judgmental partners. Their role is only helping and supporting entrepreneurs during the business creation process. Fundamentally, the coaches must also provide a psychologically safe environment (Edmondson, 1999), in which entrepreneurs can feel they can manage their new firm and easily solve problems that may arise. Consequently, they realize team coaching goals. Providing support and confidence in the early stages of the relationship makes entrepreneurs more accepting of challenges from coaches later in the relationship and, potentially, more open to change. As one coach pointed out:

*"Providing them confidence and supporting in the early stage of their creation process ensure their ability to continue their path with success"*

During our interviews with entrepreneurs and their coaches, building trust in the coach and coaching process is the key starting point for establishing a strong relationship. It is considered as an important building block for coaches if they are to work productively with all partners. However, an entrepreneur can progress with other partners (customers, employees, public institution...) with a minimum of trust, nevertheless, this it may be re challenging for the coach and progress may be slower.

### **Theme 3: Commitment and cooperative style between coaches and entrepreneurs**

As well as, establishing individual trust-based relationships is not the only factor to maintain a strong relationship, participants talked about their willingness to assume their responsibility for the implementation of the action plan and the other process creation steps. "T" adds that he is "ready to make short-term sacrifices to achieve long-term goals,".

The two first coaches ensure that they usually take the role of advisers and coordinators, particularly when they are forced to make a decision, but the decision-making is shared amongst the team. The third coach shows a certain mistrust of taking some responsibility, specifically at the level of a financial decision. Moreover, there is a lack of comprehensive listening between Tunisian

entrepreneurs and their coaches. That's, this relationship lacks mutual listening which is essential for a better converge of ideas.

We observe that entrepreneurs who are satisfied in their coaching relationships have coaches who have changed their behavior after the official commitment. Entrepreneurs rather seek a secure situation with their coaches, the interaction between the latter and relationship success is not significant, pointing to the absence of mutual commitment.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

It appears that this exploratory study suggests that knowledge sharing process is well developed, but, content differs from one process to another, because of entrepreneur human capital is different between all entrepreneurs and coaches. Although these entrepreneurs develop their own business in the same sector, they do not have the same perception of sharing new knowledge and ideas with coaches. These latter are willing to help entrepreneurs and provide them more ideas and information throughout the business creation process. From the first steps, the coaches provide an informal platform for sharing and applying both the tacit and formal knowledge held by two partners. The interview results show also that coaches are concentrated in their first steps on generating new external knowledge, but, this process is primarily directed towards codified knowledge, with little opportunity to collect tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge seems to take place at the internal level and there is no evidence of tacit knowledge outflows.

Moreover, the case studies highlight the extent to which entrepreneurs and coaches reinforce their relationship through knowledge exchange. Sharing information and knowledge is considered to be crucial for the success of the business creation process. We note several methods used to facilitate this exchange, but typically the principle method used especially by coaches was the informal meetings.

Interview results show that all coaches are engaged in building trust. In turn, entrepreneurs show confidence in their coaches over a given period. All entrepreneurs try to create and deepen the relational connection and many attempted to combine individual and team coaching. Nevertheless, trust at an individual level raises certain challenges about timing and several perceptions of risk. Entrepreneurs are reluctant to give coaches complete confidence when starting the financing process for their projects. They think that coaches will be less responsible during this stage, then, they do not share the risk with them. On the other side, the coaches support and try to maintain a psychologically safe environment for entrepreneurs particularly when the funding process begins.

This study aimed to understand more about practices related to knowledge sharing, trust and commitment between entrepreneurs and coaches in the Tunisian context. In particular, results emphasize

the vital role played by trust, knowledge sharing and commitment in terms of coach's know-how and the give-and-take strategy. Indeed, the results show that the success of the relationship between the entrepreneur and his coach, marked by a respect of the business creation deadline, depends heavily on the quality of the coach, namely his skills and expertise, leading the entrepreneur to feel secure against any abuse or misconduct on the part of his coach. This result is consistent with that of Giddens (1994). Simultaneously, the relationship rests on interest exchange made possible by the give-and-take strategy. However, Tunisian entrepreneurs are willing to trust their coaches but in the early stages of the business creation process.

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