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Executive coaching: A strategic tool for retaining talent and bridging the senior–middle leadership gap

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Orientation: This study explored how executive coaching can strengthen emotionally intelligent leadership behaviours and improve collaboration between senior and middle-level leaders in a South African engineering organisation navigating the disruptions of COVID-19 and the Fifth Industrial Revolution.

Research purpose: This study explored whether executive coaching could bridge the gap between senior and middle leadership while also supporting retention.

Motivation for the study: The organisation faced increasing difficulties in retaining leadership talent and ensuring effective knowledge transfer between generations. This research sought to contribute insights into how coaching can be leveraged to sustain leadership excellence amidst ongoing global disruptions.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative exploratory design was used, employing participatory action research (PAR) within a single case study. Data were generated through interviews, focus groups, and observations and analysed thematically using NVivo (Lumivero, Burlington, MA, US).

Main findings: Themes emerged: (1) Emotional Awareness and Awareness of Others, (2) Intergenerational Communication and (3) Impact of Coaching. These were derived inductively from participant data and validated through triangulation across interviews, focus groups and observations. The findings indicated that coaching improved emotional intelligence (EI) competencies, leadership relationships and succession readiness. The study enabled the development of a tailored coaching model specific to the organisation.

Practical/managerial implications: A structured coaching framework focused on EI, mentoring, and team coaching can strengthen leadership continuity and enhance talent retention in multigenerational environments.

Contribution: This study contributes empirical evidence demonstrating how EI coaching interventions can improve leadership cohesion and retention within a technical engineering environment.

Keywords: coaching models; emotional intelligence; leadership styles; multi-generational; retention.

Introduction

This study investigates the potential of leadership coaching to enhance emotional intelligence (EI) and bridge generational divides between senior- and middle-level leaders. By focusing on the dynamics of executive coaching within a multi-generational workforce, this study explores whether tailored coaching strategies can not only improve leadership capabilities but also act as a vital tool for bridging the senior–middle leadership gap, resulting in the retention of key personnel. Employing a qualitative exploratory approach, this study delved deeply into the intricacies of coaching outcomes through participatory action research (PAR), aiming to offer insights and recommendations that could transform leadership practices. The research's case study focused on a civil engineering firm based in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. For ease of accessibility, the firm was coded as ENG01 in this study. ENG01 experienced increasing challenges related to leadership continuity, generational differences and knowledge transfer. Senior leaders reported difficulty aligning with emerging middle-level leaders, while younger leaders expressed challenges with communication and support. These issues were intensified by disruptions caused by COVID-19 and the accelerated digital transformation associated with the Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR), which demanded more emotionally intelligent and adaptive leadership behaviours. Chong et al. (2020) and Gallup (2020) posit that the pandemic has catalysed profound

social and economic upheavals on a global scale, introducing a new era of uncertainty into established corporate and societal structures. These transformations, as observed by Renjin (2020), demanded resilient leadership capable of navigating virtual work environments, remote engagement and the continuous evolution of corporate foundations. Further research by Chen and Sriphon (2021) highlighted the necessity for leaders to possess advanced communication skills, situational mindfulness and the ability to manage change ethically under uncertain conditions. In this evolving context, the executive leadership team at the company recognised the urgent need to develop a robust pipeline of future leaders from its mid-level leadership to sustain competitiveness. This requires coaching to effectively nurture talent for future leadership roles. This case was particularly important because the organisation had not previously implemented a formal coaching strategy, despite clear indicators of leadership misalignment and retention risk. The study therefore investigated how executive coaching could enhance EI and strengthen leadership collaboration across generations. The case study revealed that key aspects of EI, such as the expression, evaluation and use of emotions in decision-making and managing moods, were pivotal in enhancing cognitive processes within the organisation. These competencies are essential for leaders who must make critical decisions with limited information and provide clear direction to their teams during and beyond the pandemic. This article entails a section reviewing the extant literature and theoretical and conceptual frameworks, followed by a section on the research methodology. This is followed by a section presenting and analysing the findings. The discussion is followed by a section outlining the conclusions and recommendations of this study.

Research aim and objective

The aim was to explore whether executive coaching could bridge the senior–middle leadership gap at ENG01 while functioning as a strategic retention mechanism. The objective aligned with qualitative inquiry and avoided hypothesis-testing language.

Literature review

Below is a review of the literature that engages in critiques of various studies.

Landscape of leadership in the current context

Leadership is in a state of continuous transformation. Leaders are required to execute high-impact decisions within environments characterised by scarce information while also providing strategic guidance to their teams. The pandemic exerted a negative influence on the workforce, leaving no leader untouched by its effects (Finstad et al., 2021). Worldwide, organisations have encountered challenges stemming from economic downturns to social and geopolitical upheavals. Ashford and DeRue (2012) noted that there is an immediate need for exceptional leadership across all organisational levels. Ahn et al. (2014) explored the necessary leadership competencies for young engineering graduates, emphasising their capability to manage change while integrating business goals, engineering principles and social viewpoints. Leadership continues to evolve in response to global disruptions, demanding greater adaptability, emotional regulation and strategic decision-making. The pandemic exacerbated volatility and placed pressure on leaders to guide teams through uncertain and rapidly shifting conditions. For ENG01, these pressures highlighted gaps in communication, emotional awareness and cross-generational collaboration.

Factors impacting leadership in engineering and globally

Ramphele (2023) postulates that 'leadership is dynamic and ever-changing in the global context', as cited in Strickland and Martins (2024). The response to changes in engineering education, which saw engineers as leaders in the technological area rather than as facilitators of technical solutions, has been covered by Yousefdehi et al. (2017). According to Yousefdehi et al. (2017), it is imperative for industries to have engineers with a wide range of skills in an increasingly competitive market. Furthermore, the need for more professionally registered engineers and technicians is driving the growth of the engineering business, necessitating industry-specific professional registration of personnel (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2022).

As posited by Pillay (2015), each generation has different behavioural traits, wants and needs regarding work ethos, communication and values. The civil engineering industry in South Africa comprises employees from various age groups, requiring management to understand the drivers of these different generations to retain talent. Leadership in the organisation in question will need to ensure that it develops talent for its future pipeline. James and Mathew (2012) noted that talent management is a critical element of leadership requirements. Accordingly, Iles et al. (2010) postulate that leadership talent is the capacity of employees to influence better decision-making and organisational performance in order to contribute to the organisation both immediately and over time. Although different writers define leadership talent differently, Thunnissen and Buttiens (2017) contend that for employees to provide value, they must be given opportunities for professional growth.

Leadership skills impacting leadership at ENG01

Strickland and Martins (2024) cite Al Saidi et al. (2020), who posit that 'strong leadership skills are imperative during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic'. Strong leadership skills include effective communication, making sound decisions under pressure, demonstrating empathy and compassion, building trust and collaboration and adapting to rapidly changing circumstances (Avolio & Yammarino, 2020). Boin and Hart (2019) postulated that effective leaders may also possess qualities such as resilience, creativity and willingness to take calculated risks. These skills are essential

for leaders to provide direction, stability and support to their teams and communities during challenging times, helping them overcome the uncertainties and complexities of a crisis (Liu et al., 2020). Leadership values also come under scrutiny during times of crisis and other significant disruptions (Roberts, 2020).

Leadership is facing 'the growing use of digital technologies, tools and platforms to perform work-related tasks and activities (Strickland & Martins, 2024). The 5IR is rapidly dictating the need for individuals and organisations to acquire new skills and capabilities that enable adaptability to the changing nature of work and fully realise the benefits of the digital economy (Lowe & Barry, 2020; Pillay, 2015). ENG01 operates in a volatile environment with a diverse, multi-generational workforce, necessitating a varied approach to leadership that respects different values. Leaders must be robust, agile and ready to face adversity without feeling threatened by it, as suggested by Rimita (2019). Additionally, Bleich et al. (2021) emphasised that effective leadership requires self-awareness, the ability to build relationships and the skill to process information from diverse perspectives.

There is also a significant need for knowledge exchange between older and younger generations. Ringberg and Reihlen (2008) discuss the complexities involved in knowledge transfer, which demands mutual agreement between the giver and the receiver. In the studied organisation, younger employees are expected to manage multifaceted roles, including self-management, project oversight, team leadership, business development and financial management. In today's Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment, leaders must be resilient, adaptable and capable of navigating challenges, as also noted by Schad and Bansal (2018) and Rimita (2019).

Bleich et al. (2021) posited that leadership skills require self-awareness, relationship capacity and the ability to manage information through the lens of others. Hargrove (2015) suggested that good communication is an important leadership skill. Farr and Brazil (2009) further argue that critical thinking, as well as good people and leadership skills, is essential for advancing one's career. Many of these abilities and principles are closely related to leaders' EI. Additionally, Carmeli and Josman (2006) postulate that EI is the ability to recognise and manage one's own emotions and those of others and is an important factor in facilitating knowledge-sharing in diverse work groups. Leaders with high EI are more adept at cultivating positive relationships among team members, thereby enhancing trust and open communication, which are essential for effective knowledge-sharing (Jordan & Troth, 2019). Through this study, the link between EI and leadership has been strengthened, showing how EI competencies influence communication, collaboration, knowledge transfer and decision-making, all of which were identified as challenges at ENG01.

The intersection of emotional intelligence and leadership

Emotional intelligence is a collection of abilities necessary for identifying and considering one's own emotions, as well as those of others. Salovey and Mayer (1990) presented a fundamental notion of EI in the early 1990s. The American psychologist Daniel Goleman made a substantial contribution to the general understanding of EI by defining five fundamental components: motivation, self-regulation, empathy, self-awareness and social skills. In his 1995 work, Goleman postulated that brain plasticity could affect the activation or deactivation of EI (Goleman, 1995). He maintained that intentional learning, constant practice and inputs can change the structure of the brain and create new neural connections. Leaders with EI are better able to control their emotions, which improves their capacity for problem-solving and navigating challenges.

The various EI assessment models explored in this study are shown in Table 1.

The researcher employed the GENOS EI assessment. This evaluation instrument compares participants' performance with that of others in demonstrating emotionally intelligent leadership abilities. According to the GENOS Model, it is possible to 'adjust' ideas, attitudes and behaviours by changing them into constructive and good traits. According to Gignac (2010) and Palmer and Gignac (2012), six abilities are mentioned: self-awareness, awareness of others, authenticity, emotional reasoning, self-management and positive influence. Therefore, the GENOS EI instrument was justified as the preferred assessment tool because it measures behavioural EI in workplace contexts and aligns directly with coaching-based development processes. Unlike trait-based or ability-based EI tests, GENOS evaluates emotionally intelligent leadership behaviours, making it more suitable for workplace development initiatives and the action research design employed in this study.

Executive coaching and retention

Executive coaching is the key to advancing leaders in engineering, as alluded to by MacIntyre (2016).

TABLE 1: Emotional intelligence assessment models.

Acronym	Full name	Developers
EQI	Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-I)	Reuven Bar-On (2000)
MSCEIT	Mayer-Salovey-Caruso EI Test (MSCEIT)	Mayer et al. (2000)
SEI	The Six Second Emotional Intelligence Assessment (SEI)	Six Seconds a California-based 501©3 1997
GENOS	GENOS Emotional Intelligence Inventory	Palmer et al. (2009)

Source: Strickland, M.E., & Martins, A. (2024). Emotional intelligence coaching as the anchor for connecting a multigenerational workplace. In *TAKE 2024 Conference, November*, EasyChair Preprint No. 15406, EasyChair

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Executive coaching has been found to positively affect behaviours linked to managing, leading and finding solutions within a challenging area (Ballesteros-Sanchez et al., 2019). Doyle and Bradley (2023) suggested coaching as a way to boost self-advocacy. Overall, coaching is recognised as a beneficial process that advances growth, as evidenced by PAR and qualitative interviews within ENG01. Coaching is defined as a targeted, short-term intervention aimed at enhancing leadership effectiveness through the adoption of new behaviours and increased self-awareness, as described by Kombarakaran et al. (2008). Paulo-Pons (2022) postulated that coaching improves performance aspects such as time management, goal setting, communication and workplace management.

The International Coaching Federation (International Coaching Federation, 2022) views coaching as a dynamic partnership that nurtures personal and professional growth. Similarly, the Coaches and Mentors of South Africa (COMENSA, 2022) define coaching as a professional, collaborative and result-oriented method that enhances self-awareness and performance. Paulo-Pons (2022) also references the International Association of Coaching (IAC), which sees coaching as a progressive form of communication aimed at facilitating desired outcomes through collaborative problem-solving and increased awareness. A coach's responsibility is to provide an environment in which coachees can investigate novel distinctions that broaden their perspectives and help them grow in strength and effectiveness. The goal of coaches is to enable two particular results for the individuals with whom they collaborate: self-generation and self-correction (O'Flaherty & Everson, 2005).

The research study suggested that coaching enables the transfer of knowledge and enhances retention through employee engagement and learning and development, enabling employees to attain their goals of working towards professional registration. According to MacIntyre (2016), executive coaching is essential for developing leaders in engineering.

Haid (2012) emphasises the importance of nurturing employees within an organisation to fill future positions organically rather than replacing them externally. Similarly, James and Mathew (2012) highlight that retention strategies are critical in preventing valuable talent from leaving an organisation. Terera and Ngirande (2014) identify several retention challenges, such as employee relocation or defection to competitors, compounded by some organisations' lack of effective succession or career pathing programmes. Senior leadership needs to build a robust pipeline for future leadership from middle leadership in the ENG01.

According to Ballesteros-Sanchez et al. (2019), executive coaching has been shown to have a significant impact on behaviours related to managing, leading and coming up with solutions in difficult situations. Talent retention can be achieved by improving soft skills, EI, psychological aspects and coaching, as well as by understanding generational disparities in the workforce to bridge the senior–middle leadership gap. Cloutier et al. (2015) proposed that strong relationships with senior staff, opportunities for leadership and a sense of community contribute to positive working conditions and employee retention. Ilham (2017) posited that supportive environments that value leadership growth and offer opportunities for advancement are likely to cultivate future leaders. Conversely, Maamari and Saheb (2018) argue that a negative or inflexible organisational culture can discourage individuals from seeking leadership roles and hinder progress in leadership development.

Mancuso (2018) suggests that organisations can create a synergistic approach to producing strong leaders and high-performing, engaged teams by integrating leadership coaching into team-building initiatives. Having entered 5IR with artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT), and with five generations working together for the first time at ENG01, executive coaching for leaders needs to facilitate a new way of thinking. A more people-centred form of leadership is required in the digital revolution (Artley, 2018). Executive coaching needs to consider the intersection of the technological, biological and physical worlds. Lappalainen (2015) stated:

> It is evident that traditional intelligence does not predict leader success, nor high leadership, competition, or focused achievement motives. On the other hand, the differences in subordinate perceptions can be explained by a manager's assertiveness, sociability, emotional availability and inspiration – qualities that all show up and are used as emotive communication in interpersonal interactions. (p. 12)

As referenced by Farr and Brazil (2009), Russell and Yao (1996) observed that engineers are typically hired for their technical skills, dismissed for their lack of interpersonal skills and promoted based on their leadership and management capabilities. Farr and Brazil (2009) also highlight critical thinking as a crucial attribute for career advancement alongside interpersonal and leadership skills. Lappalainen (2015) examined workplace trends in engineering and noted the increasing complexity and emotional challenges within work environments that lead to disengagement and emotional strain among engineers. These trends emphasise the need for modern leaders in engineering to adapt to roles markedly different from those of their predecessors. In this context, coaching can play a critical role in developing the requisite leadership, interpersonal and critical thinking skills necessary to navigate evolving challenges and responsibilities in the engineering sector.

Conceptual and theoretical frameworks

The conceptual frameworks examined in this study are depicted in Figure 1. The four domains of the conceptual framework were coaching models, EI, the multi-generational workforce and the VUCA context. The theoretical foundations

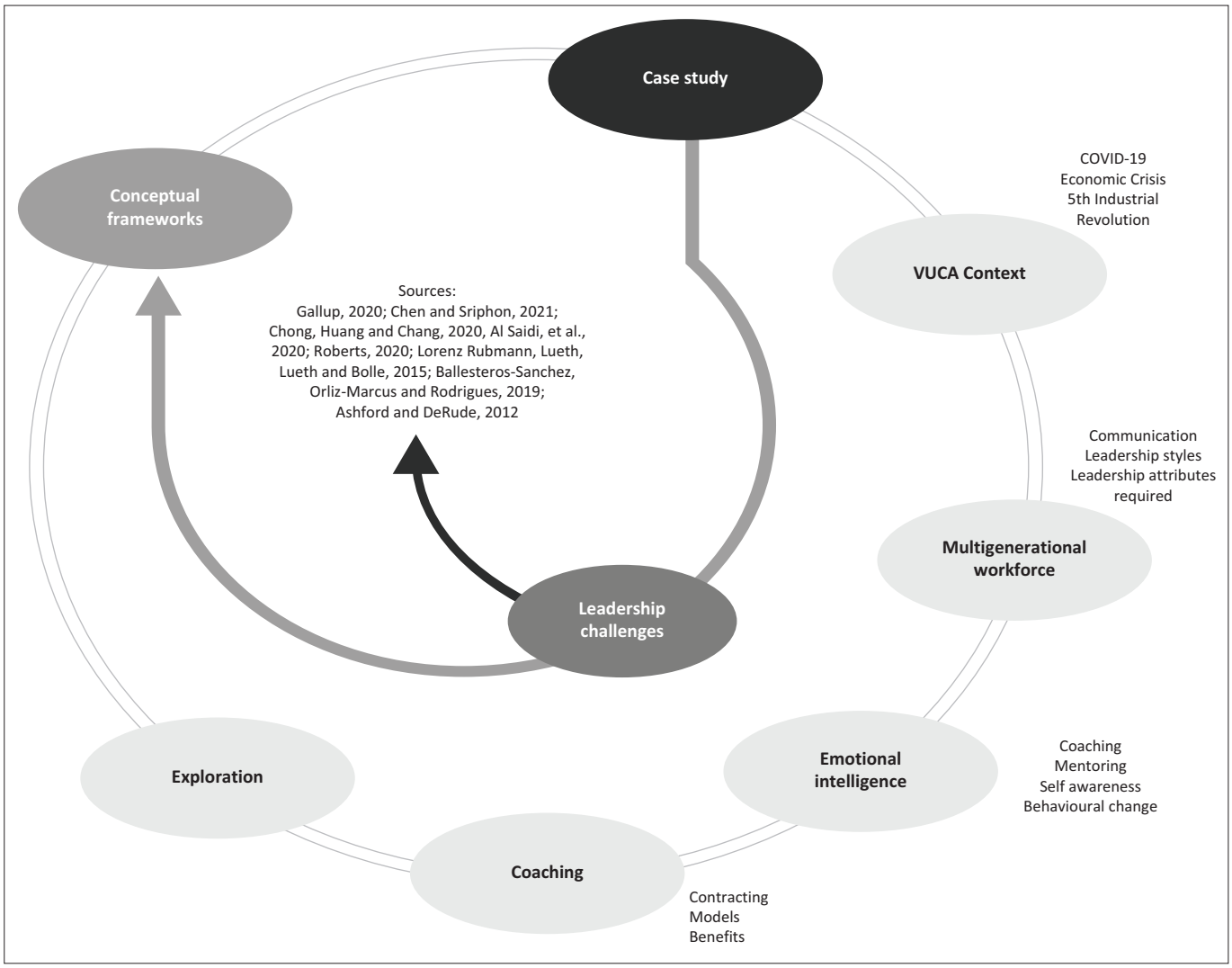

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FIGURE 1: A diagrammatic overview of the conceptual frameworks explored in the study.

of coaching, action research and leadership development were explored for clarity and alignment with the qualitative purpose of the study.

The theoretical framework (Figure 2) examined and evaluated the applicability of the study by critically analysing a number of distinct theories that served as the blueprint for the study. Action research, coaching models, theories and styles of leadership provide the theoretical foundation for this investigation. This enabled the researcher to examine established hypotheses related to the goal of the study.

A critical examination of particular coaching- and mentoring-related notions was part of the framework for coaching and mentoring (Figure 3). The framework theories for coaching and mentoring have roots in developmental psychology, psychotherapy, sociology and sports coaching. This made it possible for the researcher to investigate and review these hypotheses in more detail to improve coaching interventions.

Research methodology

Qualitative research

This study utilised a qualitative phenomenological ontology and case study methodology to explore participants' experiences and insights gained. Cohen et al. (2018) defined ontology as a framework for understanding reality, which is crucial for gathering profound knowledge of complex social phenomena, as supported by Braun and Clarke (2021). Participatory action research within a company was employed to develop a coaching model and collect primary data. McNiff and Whitehead (2018) highlighted the utility of PAR for practitioners and interested parties such as clients and coaches to address real-world issues and enhance their outcomes while empowering them in the research process. Johnson (2008) posits that action research can vary in scope and complexity and proposed a systematic five-step method for conducting such research: selecting data collection methods, data gathering and analysis, application of results, results communication and action planning with stakeholders. Ethical protocols were adhered to, with organisational approval, participant consent, ethical

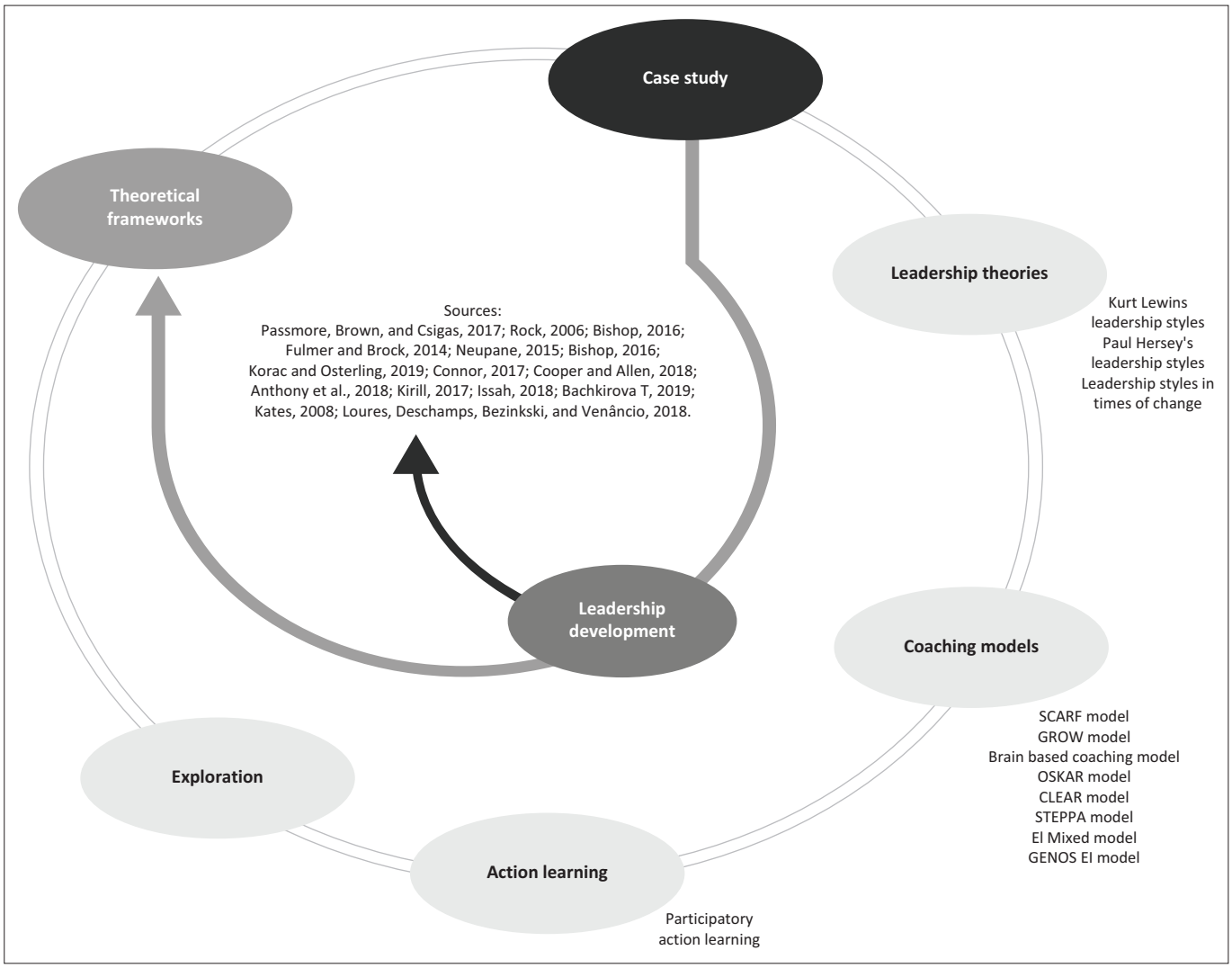

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FIGURE 2: Theoretical frameworks explored in the study.

clearance from a university and anonymity ensured through the assignment of participant numbers.

Case study design

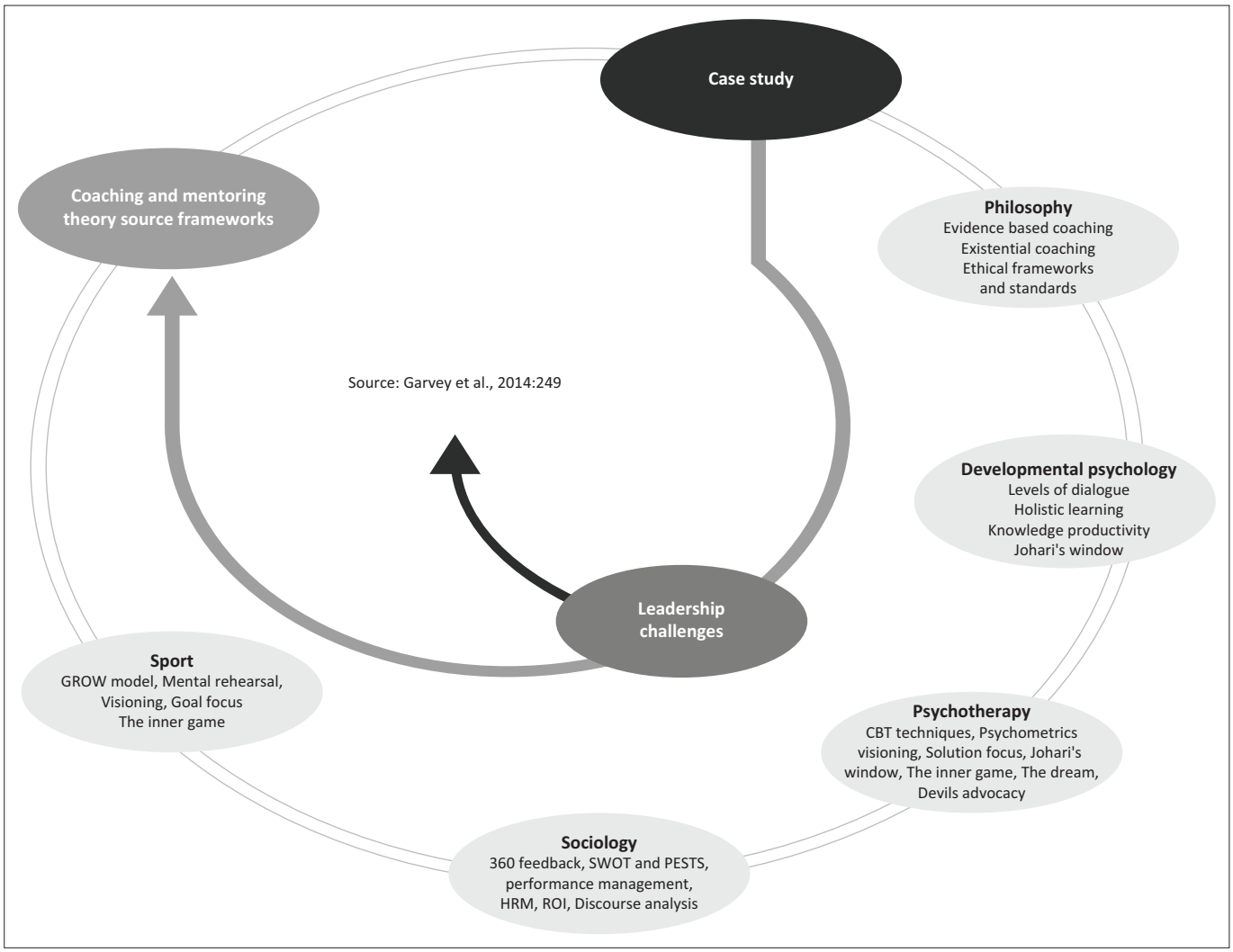
This study utilised a case study design to conduct an in-depth analysis of ENG01. Since 2014, ENG01 has experienced significant growth and employed 177 employees with a streamlined management structure at the time of the study. A case study design aligns with PAR within a qualitative study. The industry demands professional registration from employees, particularly with the Engineering Council of South Africa, prompting senior leaders to mentor emerging middle leadership positions for professional advancement. Market dynamics have shifted with increased competition from Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) and a more complex tendering process, moving the competitive edge from unique technical skills to skilled human capital development, efficiency, quality and retention.

The study incorporated PAR and coaching using Personal Development Analysis (PDA, 2014) and GENOS EI assessments to enhance self-awareness among coachees. These tools helped participants recognise and adapt their communication and leadership styles to better connect with a diverse workforce and bridge the senior–middle leadership gap. Additionally, AI from the GENOS application site was employed in post-one-on-one sessions to reinforce EI competencies. This was agreed upon by the participants before taking part. Coaching sessions were conducted biweekly for 8 months.

Emotional intelligence workshops were integral to the coaching model and were supplemented by individual interviews and focus groups across the multi-generational workforce. Observations during these interventions aimed to develop a unique coaching model tailored to the organisation, considering the use and preference for AI coaching tools and the application of EI post-workshop.

Ethical considerations

Permission was granted by ENG01 before commencing the study together with the participants, and all consent was written. Furthermore, the university granted the researcher



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SWOT, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats; PEST, political, economic, social, technological; HRM, human resource management; ROI, return-on-investment; CBT, cognitive, behavioural therapy.

FIGURE 3: Coaching and mentoring theoretical frameworks explored in this study.

ethical clearance (Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00003704/2021). Anonymity was maintained through the removal of personal identifiers from the data that were collected in the PAR, interviews and focus groups and observations. Use of coded respondent names were given. In addition, the researcher who formed part of the PAR and is a credentialled coach went through a supervision session with a COMENSA- and ICF-credentialled supervisor to ensure there was no element of bias in the observations.

Results

Participants in the study reported that coaching enhanced their emotional awareness, self-awareness and ability to empathise and reason emotionally in various situations, which also emerged from the themes. Solomon and Coller-Peter (2019) asserted that coaching can significantly boost an individual's self-awareness. The key skills identified from semi-structured interviews included 'emotional reasoning, empathy, self-regulation, efficiency, teamwork and communication', all of which improved interactions between leaders, as alluded to by Strickland and Martins (2024).

According to the World Economic Forum (2020), leadership and social influence are among the top skills needed by 2025 to incorporate elements of EI. Rose and Gordon (2015) highlighted the necessity for millennials to develop communication skills, noting that poor intergenerational communication can often overlook this need. Hendon et al. (2017) found a clear link between EI and communication skills, which advance effective cross-generational relationship building, which in this study would bridge the senior–middle leadership gap.

Baran (2017) found that coaching was directly correlated with increased employee motivation, engagement and satisfaction. Gyllensten and Palmer (2014) suggested that coaching enhances leaders' ability to manage stress and encourages continuous learning. Feedback from participants confirmed that coaching advances organisational synchronisation and maturity development in both senior- and middle-level leaders. This coaching and development not only benefit individual growth but also support the organisation's strategy to retain and professionally develop employees.

The PDA tool, the Broad Range of Results of Leadership Competencies created by Charan et al. (2011), the GENOS Emotional Intelligence Tool and one-on-one coaching with a credentialled coach using results coaching and delivering EI workshops were combined to create a coaching model for ENG01, which enabled improved interactions between senior and middle leadership.

Conclusion

Recommendations

As the research objective was achieved, the study suggests that coaching can help leaders navigate a complex, ambiguous and uncertain landscape in which ENG01 still sees itself. All participants who took part in the coaching intervention reported that coaching was a positive experience that supported them in the current landscape.

Companies should continue coaching, specifically at middle and senior management levels. As alluded to by Jyoti and Sharma (2015), coaching has valuable input in dealing with complex situations and significant organisational changes. Furthermore, this study validated an important claim about EI regarding its establishment of positive associations within relationships and its contribution to the workplace, thereby contributing to the body of knowledge. The list of recommendations derived from this study shows that ENG01 should draw on the suggested coaching model to continue improving relationships, with a firm emphasis on EI programmes. Additionally, team coaching interventions should be added; this would allow everyone to develop their relationships and comprehend and learn aspects to guarantee that knowledge and skills are transferred, allowing middle-level leaders to strive towards professional registration while further boosting employee engagement, which leads to retention. Including mentoring programmes in the coaching model could further bridge the gap between senior- and middle-level leadership.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Michelle E. Strickland: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. Ana Martins: Supervision. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Michelle E. Strickland, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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