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Effectiveness of coaching in enhancing entrepreneurs' leadership skills for sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship is a critical driver of economic growth, particularly in developing regions like Gauteng, South Africa. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) contribute significantly to job creation, innovation, and economic sustainability, yet many faces persistent challenges such as strategic mismanagement, limited leadership skills, and resource constraints. This study investigates the role of coaching as a strategic intervention to enhance entrepreneurial development and foster sustainable business practices among SME owners in Gauteng. Guided by a qualitative, phenomenological approach, the study draws on the interpretive paradigm to explore the lived experiences and views of 15 SME entrepreneurs on coaching programs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The key finding highlighted that coaching is most effective when it is well unified into broader SME support programs and designed to the specific needs of entrepreneurs. There is need for government and private-sector initiatives that provide financial support in the form of subsidized coaching packages to enhance entrepreneurs' participation. The study underscores the need for targeted coaching programs tailored to the unique challenges of SME entrepreneurs in Gauteng.

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Introduction

Gauteng, the economic hub of South Africa, accounts for a significant portion of the country's GDP. SMEs in this region are pivotal in driving economic growth and creating employment opportunities. However, many SMEs face significant challenges, such as high failure rates, limited access to finance, and a lack of managerial and entrepreneurial competencies. These challenges are further exacerbated by the absence of personalized and adaptive support systems tailored to the unique needs of SMEs (Urban & Ndou, 2019). Coaching has emerged as a viable solution to address these issues by providing entrepreneurs with tailored guidance and skills development. Unlike traditional training methods, coaching offers a customized approach that focuses on the entrepreneur's specific challenges and growth trajectory. Research shows that businesses that incorporate coaching into their strategic development processes experience higher growth rates and improved sustainability (Shah, 2022). Coaching enhances strategic thinking, leadership, and resilience, which are critical for navigating the volatile economic landscape of South Africa. This study is particularly timely as it addresses the growing need for innovative support mechanisms to bolster SME development in Gauteng. By examining the role of coaching, the research sheds light on its potential to foster sustainable economic growth and address pressing issues such as unemployment and inequality.

Transformational coaching emphasizes profound personal and professional growth by addressing both external challenges and internal barriers. This theory focuses on enhancing entrepreneurs' leadership capabilities, emotional intelligence, and strategic thinking, enabling them to navigate complex business environments effectively. Azizi Mohammad et al. (2020) emphasize that transformational coaching fosters creativity and innovation by guiding entrepreneurs to reflect on their goals, values, and challenges.

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This reflective process enables entrepreneurs to identify opportunities for growth and develop actionable strategies for achieving their objectives. In Gauteng, where SMEs face diverse challenges such as resource constraints and market volatility, transformational coaching equips entrepreneurs with the resilience and adaptability needed to thrive. A critical element of transformational coaching is its emphasis on mindset change. As McFall (2022) argues, coaching prompts entrepreneurs to critically evaluate their beliefs and assumptions, fostering a growth-oriented mindset. This shift is essential for addressing the uncertainties and pressures of entrepreneurship, particularly in dynamic and competitive environments like Gauteng.

Literature Review

Enhancing Entrepreneurial Competencies

Entrepreneurial competencies encompass the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for identifying opportunities, managing resources, and sustaining business operations. These competencies are vital for SME entrepreneurs, particularly in competitive and resource-constrained environments such as Gauteng. Coaching provides a platform for tailored skill development, equipping entrepreneurs with the capabilities needed to address the multifaceted challenges of running a business (Suardi, Telaumbanua, & Isma, 2024). Azizi et al. (2023) highlight that coaching interventions enable entrepreneurs to develop critical business skills, such as financial management, marketing strategy formulation, and operational efficiency. These skills are not innate but can be cultivated through structured and context-specific coaching processes. Additionally, Idris and Bakar (2020) emphasize the importance of entrepreneurial adaptability, a competency that coaching fosters by helping entrepreneurs respond to dynamic market conditions.

Coaching also builds confidence and resilience, enabling entrepreneurs to persevere in the face of adversity. Marras, Opizzi, & Loi, (2024) argue that the relational aspect of coaching characterized by trust, empathy, and personalized guidance is instrumental in fostering these competencies. In Gauteng, where many SMEs struggle due to a lack of formal training and mentorship, coaching offers a practical and individualized solution to skill development. This address gaps in traditional entrepreneurial support mechanisms. Furthermore, coaching extends beyond technical skills to include soft skills such as communication, leadership, and team building. Lee and Kim (2019) assert that these skills are critical for fostering collaboration, motivating employees, and enhancing organizational culture, all of which contribute to long-term business success. By focusing on both hard and soft skills, coaching ensures a holistic approach to entrepreneurial development, preparing SMEs for sustained growth

Improving Strategic Decision-Making

Strategic decision-making is integral to the success and sustainability of SMEs. It involves evaluating opportunities, managing risks, and aligning actions with long-term goals. Entrepreneurs often face high-stakes decisions that can determine the trajectory of their businesses. Coaching enhances their ability to navigate these complexities by providing frameworks and tools for strategic thinking and problem-solving (Zhiyi, Rahim, & Abdul Aziz, 2024). Kotte et al. (2020) suggest that coaching encourages entrepreneurs to reflect on their decision-making processes, fostering a proactive rather than reactive approach to business challenges. This reflection is critical in Gauteng's dynamic economic environment, where SMEs must continuously adapt to shifts in market demand, competition, and regulatory changes. Through coaching, entrepreneurs develop the capacity to anticipate challenges, evaluate options, and implement effective solutions.

McFall (2022) highlights the role of coaching in prompting entrepreneurs to critically evaluate their strategies, uncovering blind spots and biases that may hinder decision-making. This self-awareness is a key outcome of coaching, as it enables entrepreneurs to make more informed and balanced decisions. Additionally, coaching fosters accountability by setting clear goals and tracking progress, ensuring that entrepreneurs remain focused on their strategic objectives (Zhiyi, Rahim, & Abdul Aziz, 2024). Research by Dhahri et al. (2021) underscores the importance of behavioral entrepreneurship, which emphasizes the role of mindset and habits in decision-making. Coaching aligns with this perspective by instilling discipline, resilience, and a growth-oriented mindset in entrepreneurs. These attributes are essential for navigating the uncertainties and pressures of running an SME, particularly in the context of Gauteng's economic challenges (Suardi, Telaumbanua, & Isma, 2024).

Promoting Sustainability

Research by Gu and Wang (2022) highlights that coaching fosters an innovative and adaptive mindset, encouraging entrepreneurs to incorporate sustainability into their business models. This includes embracing technology as Muzanenhano and Rankhumise (2022) highlighted that lack of technological knowledge suppresses growth in entrepreneurship. In Gauteng, where SMEs are key drivers of economic activity, sustainable practices can address pressing challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and environmental degradation. Through coaching, entrepreneurs are guided to adopt practices that minimize waste, optimize resource utilization, and contribute to social welfare, thereby enhancing businesses' resilience and societal impact (Molema, Hlatshwayo, & Ebewo, 2024). Behavioral entrepreneurship, as discussed by Dhahri et al. (2021), underscores the role of coaching in shaping entrepreneurial behaviors that align with sustainability. Coaching interventions provide entrepreneurs with the skills to identify opportunities for sustainable innovation, viz developing eco-friendly products or adopting energy-efficient technologies. Additionally, coaching fosters ethical decision-making, ensuring that entrepreneurs consider the broader implications of their actions on the environment and community (Molema, Hlatshwayo, & Ebewo, 2024).

In the context of SMEs, coaching emphasizes the triple bottom line approach—people, planet, and profit. Coaches work with entrepreneurs to develop strategies that balance financial performance with social and environmental goals. This holistic approach not only enhances the business's reputation but also attracts socially conscious investors and customers, creating a competitive advantage in the marketplace (Al-Qudah et al., 2021). Moreover, coaching encourages a long-term perspective, guiding entrepreneurs to prioritize sustainability over short-term gains. This mindset shift is particularly important in Gauteng, where economic pressures often lead SMEs to prioritize immediate profitability at the expense of sustainable practices. By instilling a focus on sustainability, coaching helps SMEs contribute to broader societal goals, such as poverty alleviation and environmental conservation, while ensuring their viability in an increasingly sustainability-driven global economy (Marras, Opizzi, & Loi, 2024).

Research and Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research approach, which is ideal for exploring the nuanced role of coaching in entrepreneurial development within SMEs in Gauteng. This approach enables the study to gain insights into how coaching influences entrepreneurial decision-making, leadership development, and sustainable business practices (Białowas et al., 2021). Semi-structured interviews serve as the primary data collection method, providing flexibility for participants to share detailed narratives while allowing the researcher to probe further into emerging themes. This method is particularly effective for understanding the complexities of coaching relationships, as it facilitates rich, contextual data that highlights both individual and shared experiences (Van De Kerkhof & Fredholm, 2020). The study focuses on SME entrepreneurs operating in Gauteng, South Africa's economic hub. Gauteng provides a diverse entrepreneurial landscape, encompassing a range of industries such as manufacturing, retail, services, and technology. This diversity makes it an ideal setting for exploring the role of coaching in entrepreneurial development (Avancini et al., 2020). Purposive sampling technique was applied. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to intentionally select individuals based on specific criteria aligned with the study objectives (Białowas et al., 2021). The study targeted 15 SME entrepreneurs from Gauteng and thematic analysis was used to analyse data.

Findings and Discussions

The findings of the study provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of coaching in enhancing SME development in Gauteng. The key themes identified are critical aspect of coaching's influence on entrepreneurship.

Impact of Coaching on Strategic Decision-Making

The role of coaching in refining decision-making processes became apparent when another entrepreneur reflected on their experience with industry mentorship, noting, "I've seen how structured guidance can help. A mentor once advised me to approach expansion differently, and it completely changed my perspective.". This suggests that external guidance whether formal coaching or informal mentorship can introduce new strategic insights that entrepreneurs may not have considered independently. Studies such as Azizi et al. (2023) and Gu and Wang (2022) noted that coaching provides frameworks that enable entrepreneurs to make informed, data-driven decisions. However, the findings indicate that while some SME entrepreneurs acknowledge the potential of coaching in refining decision-making skills, others believe that business intuition and hands-on experience are more critical. The is supported by the following, "Honestly, I just decide based on what seems most urgent at the time. There's no set structure I go with what feels right..".

However, scepticism remains. One participant questioned whether coaching would significantly improve their decision-making, stating, "At the end of the day, only I truly understand my business. An outsider might not see things the way I do." This response underscores a potential barrier to coaching adoption: the belief that external advisors lack the nuanced understanding necessary to provide relevant, actionable guidance. These perspectives present a compelling argument for coaching as both an opportunity and a challenge. While structured decision-making can enhance business sustainability, some entrepreneurs remain unconvinced about the necessity of external input. The key, therefore, lies in positioning coaching not as a prescriptive intervention, but as a collaborative process that refines rather than overrides entrepreneurial instincts.

Moreover, research by Van De Kerkhof and Fredholm (2020) emphasized that entrepreneurs benefit most from decision-making coaching when it is integrated with other business support mechanisms, such as funding and training. This aligns with the empirical findings, which suggest that coaching is most effective when supplemented with other forms of business support. Some participants indicated that they would be more inclined to engage with coaching if it were part of a broader ecosystem that included financial support and mentorship. The findings indicate that while coaching has the potential to enhance strategic decision-making among SME entrepreneurs, its effectiveness is limited by scepticism and contextual misalignment. To improve adoption rates, coaching programs should be designed to integrate real-world business challenges, offering scenario-based learning and hands-on decision-making exercises. Additionally, coaching initiatives should be embedded within broader SME support frameworks to enhance their perceived value and applicability.

The Role of Coaching in Leadership Development

Despite recognizing the need for effective leadership, some participants admitted to struggling with management challenges. One business owner stated, "Sometimes it's difficult to lead because employees have different attitudes. You can't always control how

they work.” This highlights a common challenge in SMEs, where small teams often require a hands-on leadership style that may not always be effective. Another entrepreneur expressed similar concerns, explaining, “I train my staff, but I still feel like I lack formal leadership skills. I just do what seems right.” This sentiment suggests that many SME owners lead based on instinct rather than structured managerial strategies. Van Coller-Peter and Cronjé (2020) highlighted that coaching improves leadership by enhancing decision-making, problem-solving, and adaptability. Research by Suardi et al. (2024) emphasized that coaching enhances leadership by fostering resilience and adaptability in uncertain business conditions. This is particularly relevant in the South African SME landscape, where economic instability and market fluctuations often challenge business leaders. The findings indicate that SME owners who had received coaching were more likely to adopt proactive leadership strategies, such as contingency planning and risk assessment. However, the overall impact of coaching on leadership development remains limited due to accessibility challenges and a lack of structured leadership training programs within coaching initiatives.

The potential for coaching to bridge this gap was met with mixed reactions. One participant expressed interest in structured leadership guidance, stating, “I think coaching could help me manage people better. Sometimes I feel like I’m guessing my way through it.”. However, another participant questioned whether coaching could meaningfully improve leadership in a small business setting, arguing, “Leadership is something you develop over time. I’m not sure an external person can teach me how to run my own team.”. This scepticism reflects the belief that leadership is best cultivated through experience rather than formal instruction. Taken together, these responses suggest that while coaching could offer valuable leadership strategies, SME owners may need convincing that external guidance can be applied effectively within their unique business contexts. Future coaching initiatives should, therefore, emphasize practical, real-world leadership techniques that align with the realities of managing small teams.

Barriers to Coaching Access

Despite the potential benefits of coaching, many SME entrepreneurs face significant obstacles in accessing these services. These barriers range from financial constraints and lack of awareness to scepticism about coaching’s relevance to their business realities.

One of the most prominent barriers identified was financial inaccessibility. One participant expressed this concern directly, stating, “I know coaching could help, but when you’re running a small business, every cent counts. Paying for a coach feels like a luxury.”. This sentiment was echoed by another entrepreneur, who remarked, “We already struggle with operational costs where would we get extra money to pay a coach?”. These responses illustrate the economic realities of many SMEs, where resources are often stretched thin, making coaching a secondary priority. A study by Mohd et al. (2021) indicated that many small business owners view coaching as a luxury rather than a necessity, particularly in resource-constrained environments. This is because many SME entrepreneurs cited cost as a primary reason for not engaging in coaching programs.

Beyond financial constraints, a lack of awareness about coaching opportunities emerged as another key barrier. One participant admitted, “Honestly, I don’t even know where to find a business coach. It’s not like there’s a directory for this stuff.”. This highlights a critical gap in information dissemination, suggesting that coaching services are not widely advertised or easily accessible to small business owners. Scepticism about coaching’s practical value was another commonly cited challenge. One business owner questioned its effectiveness, stating, “At the end of the day, no one knows my business better than I do. I’m not sure how an outsider could really help.”. Another participant reinforced this viewpoint, arguing, “A coach can give advice, but they’re not the ones dealing with my daily challenges. I need practical solutions, not theories.”. Thus, Zhiyi et al. (2024) highlighted that SME owners often perceive coaching as theoretical rather than practical. These responses indicate a broader hesitation among entrepreneurs who view coaching as too abstract or disconnected from their immediate business realities.

Another notable barrier was the perception that coaching is primarily designed for large corporations rather than small businesses. One entrepreneur remarked, “When I think of coaching, I think of big executives sitting in boardrooms, not people like me running a small shop.”. This perception suggests that coaching services need to be reframed to align with the specific needs of SME owners, emphasizing practical, hands-on support rather than corporate-style interventions. Van De Kerkhof and Fredholm (2020) emphasized that time constraints also play a significant role in coaching adoption. This aligns with the findings where some participants expressed difficulty balancing coaching sessions with daily business operations. Entrepreneurs often prioritize immediate business concerns over long-term professional development, making it challenging for coaching programs to attract sustained participation.

Conclusion

The discussion highlights that while coaching has the potential to enhance entrepreneurial competencies, strategic decision-making, leadership development, and business sustainability, its impact is currently limited by accessibility challenges, scepticism, and a lack of contextual adaptation. Key findings indicate that coaching is most effective when it is integrated into broader SME support initiatives and tailored to the specific needs of entrepreneurs. Theoretical frameworks such as Transformational Coaching Theory support the argument that coaching fosters entrepreneurial growth, but practical implementation remains a challenge due to financial, structural, and perceptual barriers.

The study therefore recommends the following:

Improve Coaching Awareness and Accessibility: SME support organizations and policymakers should conduct targeted awareness campaigns highlighting the benefits of coaching. Many SMEs remain unaware of how coaching can improve business sustainability, limiting adoption rates.

Subsidized Coaching Programs: To make coaching more accessible, government and private-sector initiatives should provide financial support for SME coaching programs. Offering subsidized or low-cost coaching packages can encourage entrepreneurs to engage in structured coaching.

Industry-Specific Coaching Models: Coaching programs should be tailored to different industries, ensuring that content is relevant to entrepreneurs' specific business environments. A one-size-fits-all coaching approach is ineffective, as SMEs operate in diverse sectors with unique challenges.

Integration of Coaching with Other SME Support Mechanisms: Coaching should be embedded within broader entrepreneurial support initiatives, such as funding programs, mentorship networks, and business incubators. This integrated approach enhances the perceived value and practical impact of coaching.

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