
Coaching as an Innovative Method in Rural Development Consulting

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of empirical research hereunder carried out in 2021 was to determine the effectiveness of the adopted strategy and working methods of SIR brokers from PODR (Pomeranian Agricultural Advisory Centre) in Lubań during the implementation of the project "E-networking - innovative solutions in agriculture".

Design/Approach/Methodology: The survey research was conducted based on the CAWI method. An original survey questionnaire was used, prepared on the Webankieta platform. The survey was addressed to 200 people who showed interest in the project because of encountering information on the Internet. Additionally, the NPS (Net Promoter Score) method was used to determine the level of participants' satisfaction of coaching sessions.

Findings: The subject of evaluation was the method of coaching implemented with the use of ICT tools. The research shows that both the information meetings, webinars and coaching sessions were evaluated positively by the participants, and a significant increase in satisfaction with participation in the entire project was observed, especially if a person participated in the coaching sessions. This is important information from the perspective of introducing new working methods in agricultural consultancy.

Practical Implications: Based on the experience of this project, it is to be concluded that the coaching method should meet with a positive reception among the potential recipients of advice.

Originality/Value: The use of the coaching method in the process of establishing operational groups for innovation is indeed innovative as it is one of the first initiatives carried out in this area.

Keywords: EPI operational group, coaching, webinar, networking.

JEL classification: R11, L3.

Paper Type: Research study.

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1. Introduction

People living in rural areas that mostly responds to any coaching or consulting activities is differentiated by variety of aspects e.g., in terms of their professionalism at their occupation or the specialisation in the production activities at their farm. It is essential to mention that there is for sure socio-professional differentiation in today's countryside. For many households using coaching services, or for those, who may be their potential customers, non-agricultural sources of income are more important. Non-agricultural entrepreneurship may be directly related to agriculture or not related to it (such as catering and agritourism services, retail trade in food products and others). Therefore, contemporary agricultural consulting services such as coaching activities (in Poland, carried out mainly by agricultural advisory centres) are rather addressed to all inhabitants of rural areas, and not only to farmers. As a consequence of that, it implies also the necessity to introduce new forms and methods of coaching.

One of the areas of consulting activities is to support the processes of generating and disseminating innovations. In contrast to the past, when science was considered the privileged (if not the only) source of innovative ideas and initiatives, it is now becoming clear that innovative ideas can emerge anywhere in the knowledge system through the interaction of subjects in many areas of social life. Coaching is therefore directed at seeking out potential innovators among rural residents. "Networking" provides greater opportunities to create innovations (Corsaro *et al.*, 2012) by involving a wide range of stakeholders drawn from the public sector, private sector (companies), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and farmer organisations (Knierim *et al.*, 2017; Moschitz *et al.*, 2015). Programs such as LEADER, EPI operational groups or specific Rural Development Programme measures to encourage bottom-up collective action and to mobilise entities to solve problems regarding development of rural areas, were accepted and used by residents of countryside.

Networking among heterogeneous subjects who engage in social learning processes has become a major strategy for innovation. EIP-AGRI aims to create a flexible and bottom-open system for the creation of multiple operational groups, catering to the needs and opportunities of agricultural practice. The EU does not set any specific conditions on the composition or minimum size of an operational group (other than the fact that at least two subjects must be involved). A larger number or diversity of partners in an operational group may not always be beneficial, what matters is a specific and targeted composition of operational groups, to the benefit of a specific project with the best cost-benefit ratio, making the best use of different types of knowledge (e.g., practical, scientific, technical, organisational, etc.), in an interactive way. It is important to combine different skills and partner types to produce well-founded results that are also sufficiently ready for practical use.

EIP-AGRI operational groups are groups of people who work together on an innovation project funded by the Rural Development Programmes (RDP). Operational Groups are EIP-AGRI's main tool for turning innovative ideas into real solutions in

this area. To set up and implement a successful Operational Group, a good innovative idea is needed, as well as, the right partners, a solid plan, and effective ways to disseminate the results (Brochures Operational Groups Update, 2016; Koutsouris and Zarokosta, 2020).

In 2020-2021, the staff of the Pomeranian Agricultural Advisory Centre in Lubań implemented the project "E-networking - innovative solutions in agriculture". The aim of this activity was to determine the effectiveness of coaching implemented with the use of ICT tools, in the process of creating operational groups for innovation (EPI) and in the creation of projects by these groups. The use of coaching methods in the process of establishing EPI operational groups is of innovative nature, as it is one of the first such activities.

Considering the lack or very limited scale of research interests focused on the use of the coaching method in agricultural consulting and considering its important role in the economic and social development of rural areas, it was adopted as an aim to assess the way of using this method during the implementation of the Project "E-networking - innovative solutions in agriculture".

2. Theoretical Background

Coaching, which was first used as a method to create EPI operational groups, is defined as an interactive process aimed at accelerating the pace of development and improving the performance of individuals or organisations. Thanks to that, the participant learns and understands their strengths, recognises areas for improvement, and is able to identify a goal related to their professional development and the way to achieve it (Makowska, 2013). Coaching is a collaborative process designed to change an individual's perceptions and patterns of behaviour in ways that increase their effectiveness and fulfilment. Within existing social science research, coaching is primarily viewed as an individual or organisational development tool (Hicks and McCracken, 2010; Theeboom *et al.*, 2014). It is used to refer to various forms of development, although this does not always correspond to the actual work that is consistent with the stream of coaching work. It belongs to a relatively new practice that serves individuals in a broad sense of self-improvement.

Despite many discussions, it spreads and successfully exists in such areas as education, consulting, sport, social assistance, management, or economics (Koszalka 2017). According to Kreyenberg (2010), coaching is some process-oriented, interactive, and confidential advice and assistance in professional situations concerning development, change, problem solving or decision making. On the other hand, Armstrong (2007) defines coaching as an educational method that supports the development of employees' competencies and intellectual potential, based on collaboration and knowledge sharing. According to the International Coach Federation (ICF), coaching is an interactive process that helps individuals or organisations accelerate growth and improve performance.

Coaches work with clients in areas related to business, career development, finance, health, and interpersonal relationships. Thanks to coaching, clients set more specific goals, optimise their actions, make better decisions, and make fuller use of their natural abilities (<https://kingawieckowska.pl>). A similar definition of coaching is given by the International Coaching Community, according to which coaching is a process that aims to empower the client and support them in making changes on their own based, on their own discoveries, conclusions, and resources (www.iccpoland.pl).

In turn, a holistic approach to coaching is presented by Podgórný and Drabik-Podgórna (2015) indicating that it is a dynamic process oriented towards the client's personal and/or professional goals, unlocking their potential by training them to reflect on themselves and their environment and by learning new skills. It takes place in an interpersonal dialogue, and it is built on partnership and trust, and considers the multifaceted positioning of the individual. According to Koszalka (2017) coaching is focused on future design, strategic planning and achieving goals. The core of coaching lies in releasing the client's potential both personally and professionally in a non-directive way and does not require the coach to have expertise in the areas discussed by the client during the process. The coach creates an opportunity to reflect and define the purpose of action in accordance with the client's preferences. The author also points out that often the range of influence of coaching is confused with such supporting activities, as: psychotherapy, consulting, consulting, or mentoring.

In the source literature multitude of definitions of coaching are to be identified, often wrong, incomplete, or distorted. According to Sidor-Rzȧdkowska (2015) the diversity of approaches to the essence of coaching in most cases is understandable and beneficial, it also has its dark side. Situations in which even the strangest practices are sometimes called coaching and offered in an attractive package to confused clients raise deep objections. A survey conducted by the International Coaching Federation found out that the biggest obstacles to the profession are "untrained coaches" and confusion in the marketplace regarding the coaching benefits offered to clients (ICF, 2012). An attempt to unify the term was made, among others, by Źukowska (2012). In her opinion, coaching is a process through which the coached person or team is strengthened and supported in their efforts to achieve change, thanks to the questions effectively asked by the coach, as well as through constant motivation and assistance to the person or team on their way to achieving the goal. What follows is the strengthening of the potential of the person or team being coached, as well as the elimination of limitations and barriers (Źukowska, 2012). Authors of the subject literature indicate many personal and professional benefits resulting from participation in coaching processes.

However, these are reports formulated based on practitioners' observations and interpretations. Coaching is a relatively young scientific field, therefore there is still a lack of reliable scientific research proving its effectiveness. The article refers to the results presented in two reports issued for the International Coach Federation regarding the effectiveness of coaching. In 2008 empirical research was conducted

among 2165 employees participating in coaching processes in 64 countries. The analysis shows that the respondents declared an improvement of functioning both in personal and professional life. They indicated, among others, increased self-confidence (80%), improved interpersonal relationships (73%), changed communication habits (72%), increased productivity at work (70%), and improved work-life balance (67%) (www.kadry.abc.com.pl). And according to the latest statistics from the ICF (International Coaching Federation) published in a 2016 report, coaching is shown to increase professional performance by up to 70%, business management by 61%, time management by 57% and team effectiveness by 51% (Alpern, 2021).

Despite high demand, the coaching industry continues to seek professional legitimacy and is seen as an evolving area with wide variation in coach backgrounds, coaching practices, and quality (Drake, 2008; Ennis *et al.*, 2008; ICF, 2014).

3. Materials and Methods

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the coaching method in the implementation of the discussed project, survey research was conducted using the CAWI method (Computer Assisted Web Interview). The authors used in their empirical studies a survey questionnaire, prepared solely on the Webankieta platform in September-October 2021. The survey was addressed to 200 individuals who showed their interest in the project because of encountering information online. A total of 85 correctly completed surveys (42.5%) were collected, including 25 from people who attended only the webinars, 34 from people who attended both the webinars and the coaching sessions, and 26 surveys from people who applied through the contact form on the landing page but ultimately decided not to participate in the project.

Among the respondents, 51 people (60%) were male and 34 people (40%) were female. The respondents were at the following age ranges: 13 people (15%) aged under 30 years, 59 people (70%) aged 31-50 years and 13 people (15%) aged over 51 years. There were 60 people (70%) with higher education, 21 people (25%) with secondary education and 4 to 4 people (5%) with basic vocational education. Agricultural (or horticultural/orcharding) activity was conducted by 35 people (41%), working on the farm with working outside the farm were combined by 23 people (27%), and 27 people (32%) declared no connection to working on the farm. Descriptive, tabular, and graphical methods were used to analyse and present the materials. Basic measures of descriptive statistics were used, i.e., mean average, median, dominant.

Additionally, the Net Promoter Score (NPS) method was used to determine the level of satisfaction of participants in coaching sessions. NPS indicator is obtained by calculating the difference: expressed in percentage (in relation to all respondents (buyers)) - of active brand advocates and active brand critics. NPS method is a method used more for direct measurement of customer loyalty level - its declaration, than

satisfaction. However, it is also used to measure satisfaction, indirectly, because loyalty in the behavioural sense may or may not be a consequence of satisfaction, the manifestation of loyalty in the sense of - recommendation of a service provider or product to a friend is certainly conditional, in the vast majority of cases, on satisfaction (Hall, 2013).

4. Results and Debates

4.1 Project: E-Networking - Innovative Solutions for Agriculture

The subject of the project "E-networking - innovative solutions in agriculture" was to organise and carry out e-meetings with farmers, entrepreneurs and other entities that may be part of EPI-AGRI groups. The meetings were of a cyclical nature and were conducted with the use of ICT tools in four stages:

1. At the first stage, an e-marketing campaign of this activity was carried out (e.g. through community forums, industry platforms), as well as a series of meetings with PODR brokers in Lubań in order to recruit participants for the second stage of the activity. At this stage, participants were divided into thematic groups. The subject matter of the groups was adjusted to the needs reported by the participants and to the specificity of the region. It focused on the following issues: short food supply chains, environmental protection, bioeconomy, climate change and water efficiency.
2. The second stage involved the organization and implementation of cyclical e-meetings at thematic groups with a coach. The result of the coaching activities was to create informal operational groups working on innovation.
3. The third stage consisted of the work of operational groups on innovation projects. Group participants were supported by a series of e-meetings carried out according to the methodology of coaching processes.
4. The aim of the fourth stage was to support the participants in the preparation of project applications and their submission in the fourth call of the activity "Cooperation within RDP 2014-2020".

It should be noted that participants of the project "E-networking - innovative solutions in agriculture" carried out by PODR in Lubań formed 6 groups and prepared 6 project applications, 5 of which were placed on the ranking list. In the initial assumptions of this project, it was assumed as the final objective that in the 4th call for proposals for the measure Cooperation, the participants of the e-Networking will submit 4 applications. It can be concluded that the effectiveness of implementation was very high, and the goal was more than fulfilled. The first stage of the project was to conduct a promotional campaign, which aimed to gather 200 participants for on-line meetings realised in the form of webinars. For this purpose, a website was prepared, which was interactive, simple, clear and above all intuitive. It was possible to obtain information on the project "E-networking - innovative solutions in agriculture", to whom it is

addressed, enabled contact with project coordinators, and redirected people interested in participating in on-line information meetings to the contact form.

The promotional campaign was conducted mainly on the Internet. The most effective forms of promotion were Google ADS and Facebook ADS, which together generated 90.63% of all traffic. Of the persons participating in the survey, 44.7% indicated the Internet as the first source of information about e-networking, of which Facebook and the website of PODR in Lubań were mentioned most frequently. However, the traditional sources of information are still important, as 43.0% of respondents indicated the person of the advisor from PODR in Lubań as the first source of information. Direct contact was more often indicated by persons aged 31-50 years (54% of this age group), while persons under 30 preferred the Internet (70% of indications).

In response to the information, needs are formed, which trigger the motive for action aimed at expressing willingness to participate in the offered activity by filling out the application form. What were the motives of the people participating in the study? The strongest motivators were the opportunity for professional development without leaving home (14.03%) and the opportunity to network with other farmers/entrepreneurs (14.03%). The opportunity to obtain subsidies for activity from the European funds (11.76%) and a convenient form of contact with experts and specialists from PODR (11.76%) were also important. The respondents reported very specific expectations regarding the proposed project. They were related primarily to their search for greater opportunities to operate either based on existing activities (21.4%), or in the development of new ventures (21.4%). It was also very important for the respondents, that they had the opportunity to establish business contacts(22.0%).

Out of 85 individuals who participated in the study, 59 individuals participated in the webinars during the second phase of the project, representing 69.41% of the study population. The vast majority, 93.22%, of those who participated in such informational meetings felt that the issues discussed were useful and interesting. Respondents were asked to rate on an 11-point scale (0-10) the benefits they derived from participation in the webinars. The average score was 6.6, with 5 being the most frequent. It is therefore to be concluded that the participants rated the commitment of the webinar facilitators highly and their expectations of them much higher.

In the next stage of the project "E-networking-innovative solutions in agriculture" a series of group and individual coaching sessions were conducted. They were attended by 41 people, of whom 34 participated in the analysed study (21 men and 13 women), which is 83% of all participants. 51 people from the surveyed population did not continue participation in the project. The most frequently indicated reason for withdrawal from participation in further stages was time constraints (lack of time or unsuitable dates) and lack of understanding of the concept and essence of coaching. These reasons were mentioned by 12 and 11 people respectively. Considering the

other reasons pointed out, it might be generally concluded that the primary barrier was a fear of participating in coaching sessions most likely due to a lack of similar previous experiences.

4.2 Evaluation of the Applied Coaching Method in the Implementation of the Project E-Networking - Innovative Solutions in Agriculture

Among the 34 people who decided to participate in the coaching sessions, the vast majority were driven by curiosity (70.6%), and for half of the respondents it was important to search for new business ideas (52.9%). In the opinion of 4/5 respondents, the number of coaching sessions was sufficient. Only 2 persons thought that there could have been more sessions and 4 persons believed that there were too many sessions (Table 1).

Table 1. Benefits of attending coaching sessions according to respondents [%]

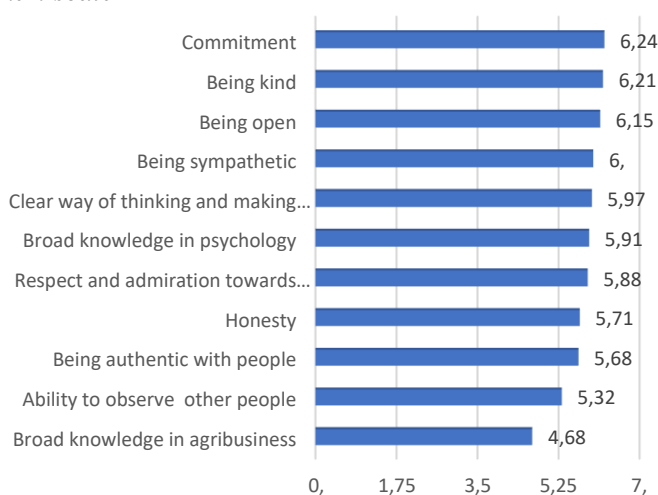
	Total N=34	Age		Education		
		31-50 N=27	51 years old and more N=7	higher N=20	secondar y N=10	vocational N=4
Increased independence and responsibility	20,6	18,5	28,6	35,0	0	0
More energy for action	50,0	48,1	57,1	45,0	50,0	75,0
Increased self-motivation	41,2	40,7	42,9	50,0	30,0	25,0
More of effective communication (changes in communication habits)	32,4	25,9	57,1	45,0	20,0	0
Increased self-confidence self-efficacy	55,9	16	42,9	70,0	40,0	25,0
Explosion of creativity	32,4	29,6	42,9	45,0	20,0	0
Ability to identify one's strengths and weaknesses	55,9	55,5	57,1	75,0	40,0	0
Flexibility and easier adaptation to change	29,4	25,9	42,9	30,0	40,0	0

Source: Own research.

As data presented in Table 1, the most frequently listed benefits of attending coaching sessions were, increased self-confidence and self-efficacy (55.9%), the ability to identify one's strengths and weaknesses (55.9%), and increased energy for action (50%).

While cooperating with a coach it is expected that he/she will be a person that one can trust, who has the competencies, traits and behaviours that prove his professional attitude. That is why the opinions (and expectations) of respondents about the personal features of a good coach are interesting. Respondents were asked to evaluate the proposed coach characteristics on a scale of 1-7, where 1 meant "not very important" and 7 meant "very important" (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Personal character features of a good coach respondents' opinion on the seven-point Likert scale



Source: Own research.

As shown in Figure 1, the highest rated feature was commitment - the average score was 6.24. Indeed, a good coach should take a genuine interest in his client, carefully observing the changes occurring in one's life and in oneself. He or she should be attentive to the words, gestures, and even the atmosphere during a particular meeting, which allows a specialist to ask the right questions and support the client in a way that will help him or her achieve their goals more effectively. For the participants of the coaching sessions, such features as being kind, open, patient with the customer and the ability to think clear and accurately make conclusions or assumptions were also important (average scores ranged from 5.97 to 6.21). The average score was 5.91 for having extensive knowledge of psychology, because a good coach should take care of his knowledge and skills, know very well both the theoretical foundations of coaching and the principles of applying coaching methods in practice. Completed courses and received certificates are a confirmation of the professionalism of such specialist.

The range of average ratings 5.32 - 5.88 included the features that are associated with integrity and the ability to build relationship based on mutual trust. Honesty - this is one of the basic characteristics of a coach. A good coach does not promise impossible things to the client, but honestly informs about the results that the client can achieve through coaching. An honest and responsible coach can refer the client to another

specialist (e.g., another coach, psychotherapist, doctor), if he is convinced that in each matter, he is more competent. Success in coaching depends on the ability to build a relationship with another person. A good coach can approach each client in an open way, respecting their views and values, is able to make the client feel comfortable and at ease in their contacts. Thanks to this, mutual trust grows between the participants of a coaching session.

It is worth to highlight that participant did not expect from the coach the knowledge of broadly understood agribusiness. Although the average score of 4.68 indicates that in their opinion a person with such background could also be a good coach. This information is important from the agricultural advisor's point of view of who could also use this coaching method in their work. For example, advisors or a coach acting as a broker of innovation, being a link, ensuring the flow of information and facilitating the establishment and consolidation of cooperation in the field of innovation between the entities of the agri-food sector, science and research and consulting.

To examine the level of satisfaction with participation in the project carried out using the coaching method, the NPS (Net Promoter Score) was calculated. Respondents were asked whether they would recommend participation in such or similar projects using the coaching method to their friends. They marked their answer on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 meant that they would not recommend it and 10 reflected the highest probability of recommendation. Based on respondents' answers, they were classified into 3 groups:

- 1/Promoters (41.18%) - people who marked 9-10 on the response scale, i.e. active advocates recommending similar initiatives to others),
- 2/Neutral (41.18%) - people who marked 7-8 on the response scale, i.e. passive consumers (satisfied, but disloyal and unlikely to recommend this type of experience),
- 3/Critics (17.64%) - people who marked 0-6 on the response scale, i.e. active critics (people who are dissatisfied with the service and spread negative opinions).

Index NPS = % Promoters - % Critics

The NPS index reached the level of 23.53%. It is assumed that a positive index indicates good standards, and with a score higher than 50 it might be indicated as a success. Considering that the coaching method was applied in case of agricultural consulting in Poland for the first time, the indicator of 23.53% can be assessed as a very good result.

The carried out empirical research shows that more than half of the people who showed interest in participating in the project and took part in the study (52.94%) would consider participating in a similar project using the coaching method, 17.65% would not be interested and 29.41% did not express a clear opinion giving the answer "difficult to say".

5. Summary and Conclusions

The "Cooperation"- an initiative within Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 concerns the creation and activity of operational groups for innovation in the agricultural sector (Trajer and Trajer, 2018). The purpose of their operation is to implement new solutions in terms of technologies, processes, organisational methods, and marketing (Wiatrak, 2016). Innovation brokers employed at agricultural advisory centres are involved in the process of establishing operational groups. Their task is to assist in the formation of EIPs, facilitate the exchange of expertise and good practices in innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry, and rural areas. An example of an activity aimed at creating operational groups of EIPs was the project "E-networking - innovative solutions in agriculture" carried out by brokers from the Pomeranian Agricultural Advisory Centre in Lubań. This project was innovative because it was the first time in Polish agricultural consultancy that a coaching method using ICT tools could have been applied. The aim of the project was to set up operational innovation groups (EIPs) and to prepare projects by these groups. To assess the effectiveness of this method, a CAWI survey was conducted using a questionnaire.

The most frequently indicated reasons for resignation from participation in the coaching sessions were time constraints (lack of time or mismatched dates) and lack of understanding of the concept and essence of coaching. Among people who decided to participate in coaching sessions, a vast majority (almost $\frac{3}{4}$) was motivated by curiosity, and more than half of the respondents indicated searching for new ideas for business. The research shows that the most frequently mentioned benefits of participation in coaching sessions were greater confidence in themselves and their skills, ability to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and greater energy for action. For $\frac{4}{5}$ of the respondents, the implementation of the project only in the online form was sufficient, while the rest felt that it should be complemented by on site meetings.

According to the respondents, the relationship between the coach and the client should be based on partnership, which means that a good coach does not give advice, but supports the client, helping him to develop his own solutions, appropriate for him. He/She should therefore show commitment, have personality traits that enable him/her to establish a relationship based on mutual trust, and demonstrate extensive knowledge, especially in the field of psychology.

Based on the obtained NPS indicator at the level of 23.53% it may be concluded that the satisfied participants of the coaching sessions, by sharing their own experiences, will successfully spread information on the benefits resulting from this type of activities. The fact that this method is worth using in consultancy work is also indicated by the fact that the participants of the project "E-networking - innovative solutions in agriculture" carried out by PODR in Lubań formed 6 groups and prepared 6 project proposals, 5 of which were put on the ranking list. In the initial assumptions of this project, it was assumed as the final goal that in the 4th call for proposals for the initiative "Cooperation" the participants of the e-Networking will submit 4

applications. It can be concluded that the effectiveness of the project with the use of the coaching method was very high, and the goal was more than achieved.

Individual and group coaching sessions met with great interest of project participants and were assessed very positively. Therefore, it can be assumed that the coaching method can be successfully applied in consulting work.

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