

AVION CONSULTING

EXECUTIVE PERSPECTIVE

Why Chemistry Between Coach and Client Is Not a Soft Consideration

Every coach I respect will tell you the same thing off the record: the framework matters less than whether the client trusts the person across from them. I have never seen the research disagree.

30%

Of coaching success variance is explained by relationship factors between coach and client

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The Finding That Keeps Replicating

Coaching engagements are usually sold on framework: a methodology, a certification, a proprietary model. In my own practice, I have never believed the framework was doing the real work, and the research on what actually predicts whether coaching succeeds backs that up. McKenna and Davis found that relationship factors between coach and client account for roughly 30 percent of the variance in whether a client actually changes, a figure that has proven durable rather than a one-off finding. A 2019 meta-analysis spanning 27 separate studies and 3,563 coaching relationships found that the quality of the working alliance between coach and client has a significant, consistent relationship with outcomes, across affective, cognitive, and results-based measures alike.



Source: McKenna and Davis, 2009, cited in coaching working alliance research

Relationship quality accounts for a substantial share of whether coaching actually produces change.

What Clients Say, Compared to What Coaches Assume

A 2026 study comparing the perspectives of 76 coaches and 1,217 of their clients found that working alliance and trust were the strongest predictors of both goal attainment and client satisfaction, a finding consistent across both groups. The more interesting result sat underneath that agreement: coaches systematically underestimated how much their empathy mattered to the

client's actual sense of progress. Coaches tend to credit their framework. Clients credit whether they felt understood, and I would trust the client's read on that every time.

The Numbers at a Glance

Metric	Figure	Source
Coaching success variance explained by relationship factors	~30%	McKenna and Davis, 2009
Coaching relationships studied confirming the alliance-outcome link	3,563 across 27 studies	Graßmann et al. meta-analysis, 2019
Coaches and clients studied on working alliance as a success predictor	76 coaches, 1,217 clients	Working alliance perspective study, 2026
Strongest predictors of goal attainment and satisfaction, per that study	Working alliance and trust	Working alliance perspective study, 2026

The Honest Complication in This Research

The relationship between alliance and outcome is not as simple as more trust always producing more change. A closer look at studies measuring working alliance session by session found little evidence that alliance quality in a given session predicts the amount of change in that specific session, only that overall alliance across an engagement correlates with overall outcome. One plausible explanation researchers have raised is that some of this effect may reflect a general disposition toward trust and optimism in the client, rather than the alliance itself being the mechanism doing the work. That complication does not undercut the core finding so much as sharpen it: chemistry looks less like a technique that produces the work and more like a precondition for the work to happen at all.

Why This Matters More as AI Coaching Tools Expand

This question has taken on new relevance now that AI-based coaching tools have entered the market at scale. A 2026 study on AI coaching found that while AI tools could match human coaches

on procedural efficiency, structuring goals and delivering information, participants consistently described an absence of what researchers termed coaching presence, the felt experience of being accompanied, and linked that absence directly to weaker trust and psychological safety in the coaching relationship. I am not surprised. Efficiency and relational depth are turning out to be different variables entirely, and so far the research suggests they do not automatically move together.

Two Jobs, Two Different Fixes

For the CEO

When evaluating a coaching engagement for a key leader, resist the instinct to select purely on credentials or methodology. Ask how coach-client fit is actually being assessed and whether the leader had a genuine say in it. The research suggests that decision matters roughly as much as anything else in the selection process.

For the CHRO

Build a real matching step into your coaching program design, not a rubber stamp after HR has already picked a coach from a preferred vendor list. A structured intro conversation where the leader can assess fit before committing is a small process addition against a factor that explains roughly a third of whether the engagement actually works.

The Reframe Worth Making

Chemistry between coach and client is not a soft, unmeasurable feeling that gets waved through on the way to the real work. It is one of the most consistently replicated predictors in the entire coaching research literature, more consistently supported than most of the specific methodologies coaches are certified in. I would rather select for it deliberately than assume it will sort itself out.

References

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4. de Haan, E., "The coaching relationship as 'best predictor'? How does the working alliance help to achieve outcomes?"
5. Nam, G.Y. and Choi, J., "Coaching presence as the foundation for the working alliance in AI coaching," PLOS One, 2026.