

**LIFE COACHING AND VISTA MEMBERS:  
WHAT IS THE NATURE OF IMPACT?**

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Title

Life Coaching and VISTA Members: What is the Nature of Impact?

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By

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**MASTER OF ARTS**

Speech Communication

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## ABSTRACT

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Research related specifically to coaching has increased gradually over the past few years. Most of the research has revolved around executive coaching, and there are limited research studies about certified coaches. To date, there are no studies that specifically focus on the nature of impact of life coaching on VISTA members. In this study of a pilot project pairing life coaches with VISTA members, five VISTA members participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews and five VISTA members participated in a focus group. It is clear from the research data that the nature of impact included many areas including time management, conflict resolution skills, objective perspectives, core values and career exploration. In addition, the experience of having a life coach as a part of the VISTA member experience made it more manageable and enjoyable.

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

The word “coach” has commonly been associated with sports teams. The image of a coach leading a team to victory or assisting athletes in their workouts is very familiar. However, a new “coach” has emerged over the last twenty years that has a different venue from the athletic arena. Life coaches have emerged from roots in counseling, religion, and wellness. As life coaching has grown in scope, few studies have explored its nature or impact. Recently, a pilot program for Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) was completed through the Initiative Foundation, Little Falls, Minnesota, where life coaches were provided to its VISTA members. This study explores the impact of these life coaches on the VISTA members they served.

### **Background on Life Coaching**

While the practice of life coaching may be a relatively new phenomenon, the process of helping clients to address their agendas and needs has its roots in psychology, religion, and wellness. What follows is a brief background highlighting the influence of these areas on the emergence of life coaching as a form of mentorship whereby the coach serves the client in managing all of the complexities of life.

#### ***Influence of Psychology***

Since the early 1900s, psychological theorists have influenced the evolution of business coaching (Williams, 2003, p. 21). Alfred Adler and Carl Jung were instrumental in the development of coaching as it is defined today (Williams, 2007, pp. 12-13). In addition, the influence of the book, *Client Centered Therapy*, published in 1951 by Carl Rogers, began a monumental shift in the approach to working with clients (pp. 14-15). Rather than viewing clients from a medical model perspective of needing a diagnosis for an



illness, clients were encouraged to use their talents and gifts as well as living life towards a purpose (pp. 14-15). Williams (2007) provided a table that includes examples of the differences between coaching and counseling/therapy (p. 60-61). Some of these differences were as follows: therapy makes an assumption that emotions are probably a symptom of something that is wrong while coaching takes the assumption that emotions are normal and attempts to normalize the emotion (p. 61). Another difference is that therapy has a doctor-patient relationship while in a coaching relationship, the coach will assist the client in discovering his/her response or solution (p. 61).

As the work by Carl Rogers continued, another important addition to the field emerged. In 1968, Abraham Maslow wrote *Toward a Psychology of Being* (1962) that, “set the framework for the field of Life Coaching to emerge in the 1990s” (Williams, 2007, p. 14-15). Maslow’s influence, as well as that of Alfred Adler and other psychiatrists and psychologists, including Seligman and the work with Positive Psychology began to move counseling towards a perspective of wellness, which laid groundwork for modern coaching practices (2003, p. 22).

The next step in the transition to life coaching was the influence of Milton Erickson, commonly known as the creator of American hypnosis (Williams, 2007). His core belief was the ability of an individual to succeed in wellness if barriers could be identified and dealt with according to that individual’s situation (p. 16). Building on this, two of Erickson’s students, Bandler and Grindler (1975), developed Neuro-Linguistic Programming, commonly known as NLP (Williams 2007, p. 16). Williams (2007) summarized that since linguistics and inquiry of fundamental components of life coaching, there is a natural tie-in based on the work of Erickson and his students (p. 16).

### *Influence of Religion*

While the psychological roads were being paved, a simultaneous phenomenon was occurring within the church, involving spiritual direction. In many cases, people would seek out a pastor or elder in the church looking for guidance or assistance with a particular problem. These problems, however, tended to be very specific and the majority of individuals seeking spiritual counsel did not have an on-going relationship with the hierarchy of the church (Hawkins 2005). Part of this may have been due to social norms as well as lack of time available by clergy and elders within a church.

As life coaching evolved, more questions are being posed about spiritual direction. Due to the success and desire for coaching, church leaders recognized the importance of having spiritual directors with some coaches training and/or found coaches who were interested in specializing in spiritual coaching (Hawkins, 2005, pp. 292-294). Hawkins (2005) identified the progression to using coaches for spiritual direction. He discussed the core competencies of coaching such as reframing, building rapport, establishing trust, empathizing, challenging assumptions, and asking powerful questions, in addition to setting goals and taking action (p. 299). As Hawkins looked at these competencies, he posed an important question: “how does one distinguish where coaching leaves off and pastoral counseling begins” (p. 299)? Hawkins (2005) cited life coaches and the International Coach Federation as making important and clear distinctions between counseling and coaching:

Coaching, they argue, is for people who are basically healthy but want to accomplish more in their lives. Therapists and counselors, on the other hand, have traditionally worked with people who bear a burden of emotional pain rooted in

past experiences. Thus, counseling emphasizes healing and the processing of emotion. The counselor's general goal is to heal emotional pain so clients are more able to cope with life and relationships. Coaching, on the other hand, is more oriented toward learning and performance, not emotional or cognitive disorders. (pp. 299-300)

In addition to those clear distinctions, there were other areas to note. Hawkins (2005) identified that counseling primarily occurred in an office or private setting and happened face to face (p. 300). Most life coaching takes place over the telephone and there is often e-mail contact between coaching sessions (p. 300). In addition, coaching is flexible. Session lengths and frequency may vary while counseling sessions tend to be more controlled and consistent (p. 300). The other major difference is the focus of the session. In a coaching session, the client holds the power because the coach follows the client's agenda (p. 300). Contrasting with this approach, the majority of counselors use a medical model where the therapist is clearly in control of the relationship (p. 300).

### ***Influence of Coaching***

The path towards coaching has been gradual, beginning with counseling and spiritual direction. As previously discussed, there were no clearly defined lines of when one moved to the other; nor was it an immediate change, as is the case with the different types of coaching available today. The public first began hearing about people who were executive coaches, individuals trained to work with corporate executives on their work place skills and what they bring to the work environment (Passmore & Gibbes, 2007, p. 117-118). At that time, it seemed that only top executives were privy to having a coach and it was not something available to the rest of the population. As success started taking place

in the executive and career areas, life coaching became more popular. Since that time, many different niches of coaching have emerged (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2007, p. xiii).

Whitworth, Kimsey-House, and Sandahl (2007) cited the International Coach Federation (ICF) definition of coaching as, “an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, businesses, or organizations” (p. 290). Grant and Zackon (2004) identified individuals who are becoming coaches as having backgrounds that include “business consultancy, management, teaching, workplace training, learning and development, clinical, organisational [sic], and sports psychology” (p.1). Some individuals are doing this as a first career while many others are coming to coaching after having been in the workplace in another career field. The bottom line is that coaching has emerged as a legitimate and engaging profession that is changing the way that counselors, spiritual directors, and other coaches are working with clients.

### ***Life Coaching and Theories of Communication***

The development of life coaching as we know it today includes components of several theories of communication, including organizational theory and development, interpersonal theory (Wood, 2004), and rhetorical theory (Foss, 2004). While this study is not testing or advancing the utility of a particular communication theory, many components of life coaching are grounded in communication theories. The themes included in this thesis parallel research done about organizational communication regarding identity and codes by shared members within a group or organization (Wood, 2004, p. 20). Wood (2004) defined interpersonal communication as “communication between people” (p. 16). Working with a life coach always involves interaction with another individual, and since

such communication often involves engagement at very deep levels, it supports Wood's (2004) contention: "the more personally we interact with another as a distinct individual (versus communication in a general social role), the more interpersonal the communication is" (p. 16). The identification of the "themes" that emerge from the in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups are often used in the process of rhetorical theory and criticism (Foss, 2004, pp. 118-149).

This study explores the relationship of life coaching as it pertains to organizational communication, as the themes that were discovered appeared to have an impact on the way individuals functioned in an organizational context. Interpersonal theory also informs life coaching, in that coaching involves "a form of conversation with unspoken ground rules regarding certain qualities that must be present: respect, openness, compassion, empathy, and a rigorous commitment to speaking the truth" (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2007, p. xx). Coaching naturally creates a space where interpersonal communication can develop.

### **Rationale for the Study**

One new program involving life coaching that emerged in 2009 was a pilot program with the Initiative Foundation based in Little Falls, Minnesota, and the VISTA members with whom the organization worked (G. Dietrich, personal communication, January 29, 2009). The Initiative Foundation was looking for a way to enhance the learning and training opportunities for their VISTA members, and began exploring the possibilities of life/leadership coaching. Over the past decade, the VISTA program has been seeking ways to make the program more viable and enjoyable. VISTA members receive wages at or below the poverty level and are often placed into positions where future employment

possibilities may be limited. The Initiative Foundation recognized that something needed to be done to affirm its VISTA members, provide additional training to bring more possibilities to the work environment, support the VISTA members in their personal and professional growth, bring values and life purpose into the VISTA experience, and create life-long skills that would serve communities and the world long after the VISTA experience was complete (Volunteers in Service of America, n.d.). After months of preparation, the unique project began in March 2009. The VISTA members who expressed a desire to have a life coach worked with a coach through July 2009.

This study of the communication between the life coaches and the VISTA members provides valuable insight for the Initiative Foundation executives. From this study, the nature of impact is identified, as well as the themes that emerged from the life coaching. Knowing the themes of impact should provide the Initiative Foundation information to assist them as they determine whether or not the pilot project should be continued and possibly expanded nationwide. The interest of the researcher in both life coaching and the VISTA member program offers a unique vantage point from which to study the nature of impact that life coaching has on a VISTA member experience. The researcher is a certified professional co-active coach (CPCC), International Coach Federation member with ACC credential, and a member of the Minnesota Coaches Association.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions are provided to give context to this thesis and its content.

**AmeriCorps VISTA.** AmeriCorps VISTA is “the national service program designed specifically to fight poverty” (AmeriCorps, n.d.). The program was originally founded in 1965 as Volunteers in Service to America and in 1993 it was incorporated into

what is now known as AmeriCorps. VISTA members “commit to serve full-time for a year at a nonprofit organization or local government agency, working to fight illiteracy, improve health services, create businesses, strengthen community groups” (n.d.). During the year, the VISTA member receives “a modest living allowance, health care, and other benefits” (n.d.).

John F. Kennedy proposed the idea of VISTA (AmeriCorps VISTA, n.d.). In fact, many VISTA participants have played a key role in Head Start, the credit union system, and Upward Bound, just to name a few. “VISTA has been on the front lines in the fight against poverty in America for more than 40 years” (AmeriCorps VISTA, n.d.). There are currently over 1,200 projects throughout the country, providing over 6,500 opportunities to working with poverty in many different facets.

**Coaching.** The International Coach Federation (ICF) defined coaching as, “an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, businesses, or organizations” (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2007, p. 290). Both members and credentialed coaches of ICF “recognize that results are a matter of the client’s intentions, choices, and actions, supported by the coach’s efforts and application of the coaching process” (p. 290). Most professional coaches and all members of the ICF subscribe to standards of ethical conduct. These standards of ethical conduct include professional conduct as a coach, professional conduct with coaching clients, confidentiality, privacy, and conflicts of interest (pp. 290-293).

**Counseling.** Volker and Ray (2006) identified counseling as, “a dynamic process between people, who are experts about their life, strengths, and problems and a counselor who has expertise in system processes and dynamics (e.g., self, family, school, or society),

human development, wellness, pathology, diversity, and therapeutic techniques” (p. 59).

Williams (2003) listed several characteristics of counseling therapy: It centers around fixing the past; makes an assumption that emotions are symptomatic of a problem; there is a doctor-patient context; the patient will most likely have difficulty functioning; and there are dysfunctions that have been identified in the patient (pp. 23-24). The American Counseling Association documented the licensure and certification requirements and processes for counselors on their website: “The purpose of these accreditation bodies is to ensure that the graduates of these programs meet the standards developed by these professions and by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) which oversees all academic accreditation bodies” (n.d.).

**Life coaching.** Williams (2007) defines life coaching as:

A powerful human relationship in which trained coaches help people design their future rather than get over their past. Through a typically long-term relationship, coaches aid clients in creating visions and goals for all aspects of their lives and multiple strategies to support the achievement of those goals. Coaches recognize their clients’ brilliance and their personal power to discover their own solutions when provided with support, accountability, and unconditional positive regard. (p. xiii)

Individuals wanting to become a life coach must be certified. The Coaches Training Institute requires the inclusion of the book entitled, *Co-Active Coaching: New Skills for Coaching People Toward Success in Work and Life* (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2007) as a part of the training curriculum (n.d.). This book includes exercises,



questionnaires, checklists, reproducible forms, and a basic foundational explanation of coaching and its place in the world, underscoring the context for this research study.

**Poverty.** Poverty is commonly defined by American researchers as, “the state of living in a family with income below the federally defined poverty line” (Poverty, n.d.).

**Spiritual Direction.** The most common and quoted definition of spiritual direction came from Barry and Connolly (1982):

We define Christian spiritual direction as help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship. The *focus* of this type of spiritual direction is on experience, not ideas, and specifically on religious experience, i.e. any experience of the mysterious Other whom we call God. (p.8)

Moon (2002) identified five roles of a Spiritual Director: mediator, intercessor, counselor, doctor, and sponsor (p.270).

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The present study only involved VISTA members working for organizations with which the Initiative Foundation had partnerships. Because only one organization was involved in the pilot project, the results are not generalizable. Since each coach brings his/her training and experience to the coaching relationship and since there were several coaches involved in the project, variations in the coaching style and technique may exist. The coaches were not the focus of research. In addition, this particular group was the only one piloting the joint approach of life coaching within the VISTA program.

## **Organization of Thesis**

Chapter I introduced the focus of the present study and provided background about the emergence of life coaching. Chapter II provides the literature review, including information on the evolution of life coaching which provides context with the influence of counseling, spiritual direction, and current life coaching. This is followed with review of coaches, coaching clients, Americorps VISTA program, and life coaching within the context of communication. The methodology section follows in Chapter III. Included in the methodology are the research participants, procedures, and preparation of data collection. The fourth chapter presents the findings, followed by the discussion of the results in Chapter V. Conclusions and directions for future research are reported in Chapter VI.

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The material used as a foundation for the literature review of this study is somewhat limited because life coaching is a fairly new field of study. Passmore and Gibbes (2007) documented research on executive coaching beginning with the research study by Foster and Lendl in 1996 (p. 117). The Institute of Coaching at McLean Hospital (2009) cited a comprehensive list of research studies done on coaching, and only a few of them involved life coaching. Williams (2007) reported: “documentation of the evolution of coaching, specifically life coaching, in the context of the helping professions is scant” (p. 11). There are no research studies that relate life coaching and the VISTA member program. Thus, to contribute a foundation for additional research in the area of life coaching, the present study is a pilot project. The areas utilized to build the literature review include the evolution of life coaching, which includes the influence of counseling and spiritual direction; co-active coaches training; research about coaches; research about the coaching client; the AmeriCorps VISTA program; and life coaching within the context of communication.

### **Evolution of Life Coaching**

Included in this section is the evolution of life coaching, which also provides a brief history on the influence of counseling and spiritual direction, as well as data on current life coaching. Life coaching emerged from roots in counseling and spiritual direction. Research studies and articles that have followed this progression are pertinent to understanding two of the core components of life coaching as well as current life coaching as we understand it today.

## *Influence of Counseling*

Volker and Ray (2006) identified counseling as “a dynamic process between people, who are experts about their life, strengths, and problems and a counselor who has expertise in system processes and dynamics (e.g., self, family, school, or society), human development, wellness, pathology, diversity, and therapeutic techniques” (p. 59). Williams (2003) listed several characteristics of counseling therapy: it centers around fixing the past, makes an assumption that emotions are symptomatic of a problem, there is a doctor-patient context, the patient will most likely have difficulty functioning, and there are dysfunctions that have been identified in the patient (pp. 23-24). Williams (2007) also used the term therapist to encompass “helping professionals whose academic preparation and training include areas such as family therapy, psychology, sociology, counseling, and even psychiatry” (p. xi).

Dr. Patrick Williams (2007) conducted extensive research on the evolution of coaching from different counseling venues to current coaching. The author or co-author of many books and articles on the subject, including *Therapist as Personal Life Coach: Reclaiming Your Passion* (2001) and *Therapist As Life Coach: Transforming Your Practice* (2002), Williams outlined the psychological roots of coaching, including the theories developed by Carl Jung and Alfred Adler (Williams, 2007, P.12). Williams (2007) wrote: “Adler saw each person as the creator and artist of his or her life and frequently involved his clients in goal setting, life planning, and inventing their future—all tenets and approaches in life coaching today” (p. 13). Williams also reported that, “Jung believed in the power of connectedness and relationships, as well as ‘future orientation’ or teleological belief that we create our future through visioning and purposeful living” (p. 13). At some

point, however, the medical model was developed and the approach by many became seeing patients needing diagnosis and dealing with illness (p. 17).

Williams (2007) believed that the work of Carl Rogers in 1951 represented major shift in terms of looking at modern day life coaching (p. 14). In addition, the work of Abraham Maslow was instrumental in setting a framework for life coaching as it continued to evolve in the 1990s (pp. 14-16). Maslow introduced *Toward a Psychology of Being* in 1968. From this seminal treatise, Maslow was “considered by many to be the father of humanistic psychology, was largely responsible for injecting credibility and energy into the human potential movement of the 1960s” (Williams, 2007, p.14).

The next step in the evolution was the influence of Milton Erickson, commonly known as the creator of American hypnosis (Williams, 2007). His core belief was the ability of an individual to succeed in wellness if barriers could be identified and dealt with according to that individual’s situation (p. 16). Building on this, two of Erickson’s students, Bandler and Grindler (1975), developed Neuro-Linguistic Programming, commonly known as NLP (Williams 2007, p.16). The use of NLP involves the use of powerful language and questions in order to facilitate change that transforms (p.16).

Williams (2007) summarized that since linguistics and inquiry fundamental components of life coaching, there was a natural tie-in based on the work of Erickson and his students (p. 16). Other versions of NLP were developed, and they all pointed to the path of coaching. The fundamental components involve an increased awareness of self as well as options to pursue future results based on a desired life or purpose (p. 16).

Williams (2007) acknowledged the development of “solution-focused counseling” (p. 16) and states that it “could just as easily be called coaching” (p. 16). He cites the work

of Steve de Shazer (1988) and Bill O’Hanlon (1999b) as having influenced approaches and techniques that are now used in coach training programs (p. 16).

### ***Influence of Spiritual Direction***

This section provides perspective on the background of spiritual direction, how it has been integrated with counseling, as well as the platform it has set for life coaching. There is very limited information on the connection between spiritual direction and life coaching. Moon (2002) established meaning and purpose with spiritual direction and mental health professionals. More recently, Hawkins (2005) began the exploration of coaches as spiritual directors and coaches supporting spiritual directors. This perspective was included within this thesis to provide context around the relationships of counseling, spiritual direction, and life coaching.

One definition of spiritual direction was developed by Barry and Connolly (1982): We define Christian spiritual direction as help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship. The *focus* of this type of spiritual direction is on experience, not ideas, and specifically on religious experience, i.e. any experience of the mysterious Other whom we call God. (p.8)

Merton (1960) defined the root meaning of spiritual direction as a:

Continuous process of formation and guidance, in which a Christian is led and encouraged in his special vocation, so that by faithful correspondence to the graces of the Holy Spirit he may attain to the particular end of his vocation and to union with God. (p. 13)

Moon (2002) cited the difficulty in describing one definition for a spiritual director or the training needed to become a spiritual director (p. 270). Spiritual Directors International (n.d.) provided information about different spiritual direction programs and opportunities as well as resources for those wanting to become or those seeking a spiritual director. There are universities and colleges that now offer spiritual direction programs in conjunction with undergraduate programs. There is not a licensure requirement for spiritual directors (Spiritual Directors International). Moon (2002) identified five roles of a Spiritual Director: mediator, intercessor, counselor, doctor, and sponsor (p.270).

Thomas Hawkins (2005), a professor in the Career and Organizational Studies Program at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, followed the churches' shift from calling ministry groups a committee to calling the chairperson a coach (p. 292). Hawkins (2005) spent a considerable amount of time discussing Robert E. Logan of CoachNet Ministries, who "has long been closely associated with the church planting and church multiplication movements" (pp. 292-293). Logan insisted that effective ministry must have coaching. In fact, he stated it was essential due to the nature of having a coach to work with them during the start up years, which are often in isolated areas (p. 293).

Hawkins (2005) identified three major reasons for why coaching has developed so strongly within the personal and spiritual sector: (1) "disillusionment with counseling and managed care" p. 294); (2) "organizational redesign to personal transformation" (p. 294); and (3) "downsizing and the elimination of informal coaches" (p. 295). In addition, Hawkins explored the benefits of having coaches in a pastoral setting. The first benefit is that a coach "offers the possibility of ongoing support and guided dialogue around important pastor issues" (2005, p. 297). The second benefit, which ties into the first benefit

is the opportunity to assist the pastor in “staying focused on the results they want to achieve” (p. 297). These benefits are especially helpful for pastors developing new plant churches as they can feel isolated and lonely (p. 297).

Hawkins (2005) cited a third benefit, which involved using the coaching techniques, strategies and tools as an empowerment tool in larger church settings. He then moved into a fourth benefit that has actually emerged due to few mentors being available. This gap has created an opening for the coach, who can now step in and take over some of the accountability and growth areas for church staff and key volunteers (p. 298).

Hawkins (2005) explored the difference between coaching and counseling, especially whether or not there was a clear enough distinction between the two for coaching to be used within a pastor setting for those with emotional pain. He cited the International Coach Federation and individual coaches as having “a vigorous distinction between coaching and counseling” (p. 299). He also stated that some counselors may be using coaching tools, and therefore the line can possibly be confusing to the individual coming for assistance (pp. 299-300). Hawkins documented the different settings that take place for coaching and counseling as well as the type of individual that may seek out each of these types of professions. In many ways, the coaching becomes more representative of spiritual direction in looking towards the future and the counseling deals more with healing past wounds and psychological history (pp. 300-301).

Hawkins (2005) included a theological perspective around coaching regarding a perspective that “often assert that clients already have the answers they need within themselves” (p. 301). He went to state, “the essential Christian assertion is that we do not have all the answers within ourselves, let alone the ability to invent and reinvent ourselves”



(p. 301). However, Hawkins concluded, “coaching also has elements that are deeply grounded in the Christian vision of life. Its emphasis on creating a safe and trusting place where people can dream, vision and take action in their lives immediately resonates with biblical images of hospitality” (p. 301).

Spiritual direction seeks to bring out the brilliance of the human being and works with an individual from a faith perspective. Hawkins (2005) reported that coaching can be a good resource for spiritual direction for both the pastors and the congregation members. He was careful to point out the elements of coaching that would be grounded in Christianity, such as a safe place, resonating action related to the Bible, and a place to dream (p. 301).

### ***Current Life Coaching***

The previous two sections have followed the influence of counseling and spiritual direction on life coaching. In this section, we will look at current life coaching: “Life coaching as a phenomenon that originated in the United States and has spread worldwide” (Williams, 2007, p. 2). Williams (2007) defined life coaching as:

A powerful human relationship in which trained coaches help people design their future rather than get over their past. Through a typically long-term relationship, coaches aid clients in creating visions and goals for all aspects of their lives and multiple strategies to support the achievement of those goals. Coaches recognize their clients’ brilliance and their personal power to discover their own solutions when provided with support, accountability, and unconditional positive regard. (p. xiii)

Williams (2007) drew this definition from the following list: focus on client's future, long-term relationship, action is driven by visions, goals and dreams, there may be several paths to achieved desired goal and the client knows the direction of where he/she wants to go (pp. xii-xiii).

Ellis (1998) explored people looking at their own brilliance by generating answers within and using life coaching to empower people in creating something new—explore something they may have never said or thought (1, 3). Grant (2003) wrote a paper on the direct correlation between life coaching and goal attainment, comparing cognitive with behavioral coaching. The study revealed that those participants in the cognitive group had much deeper levels of learning as well as higher achieving approaches in learning. There were also impacts on lower levels of depression as well as reduced anxiety. In the control group, academic performance was reduced in comparison to those in the behavioral group. Those who were in the combined group did see some increase in deep learning and achievement as well as some impact on depression and anxiety.

Griffiths (2005) researched coaching and its impact on effective learning. She found evidence about how learning appeared at the heart of coaching, including the areas of transformation, activity, interactivity, intrinsic motivation, and part of a life long learning process. A life coach can be central to a client's life as the life coach assists the client in staying accountable, purposeful, motivated and focused (Williams, 2007, p. 4). A life coach can also refer clients to other niches in coaching as well as referrals to mental health professionals if the client is in need of something beyond the scope and nature of coaching (p. 4). Williams (2007) stated: "life coaching has evolved because it makes sense to people

today to have a partner who elicits their unique greatness and who helps them move from mediocrity to excellent in living” (p. 9).

### **Research about Coaches**

This section is provided to highlight some of the research data on professional training and background of coaches. It is beneficial for this study as it provides context around the life coach. While it is not the life coach being researched in this study, the coach does play a significant role in the coaching relationship.

The International Coach Federation (ICF) was founded in 1995 and is “the leading global organization dedicated to advancing the coaching profession by setting high standards, providing independent certification, and building a worldwide network of credentialed coaches” (n.d.). The development of the ICF works to build credibility and recognition of the coaching profession (n.d.):

Grant and Zackon (2004) completed a research study with 2,529 coaches who were members of the International Coach Federation (ICF) to explore the backgrounds of coaches, both previous professional background and training to become a coach. The researchers found that almost all coaches in this study came from a professional background (p. 6). The professions included consultants (40.8%), managers (30.8%), executives (30.2%), teachers (15.7%), and people in sales (13.8%) (p. 6). The helping professions made up 18.8% of the sample, with 12.7% from the counseling field, 4.8% from psychology backgrounds and 4.1% from the social work profession. (p. 6)

Grant and Zackon (2004) found that 85.9% of the coaches were college-educated (p, 11). In addition, 55.3% of those coaches surveyed held a post-graduate degree (p. 11).

The researchers also reported: “the majority of coaches consider themselves to be self-employed and sole practitioners (p. 8).

Grant (2006) provided background on the credibility of coaching: “coaching is an industry and not a profession, there are no barriers to entry, no regulation, no government-sanctioned accreditation or qualification process and no clear authority to be called a coach” (p. 14). Grant (2006) reported on the demand for higher standards of qualification as well as the increase in the number of universities that are now offering degrees in coaching, both undergraduate and graduate (p. 15). In their study, Grant and Zackon (2004) cited the most common ICF accredited coach training programs as the “‘Coaches Training Institute’ (25.8%), ‘Coach U Certified Graduate Program’ (21.6%), and ‘Corporate Coach U International’” (p. 5). Grant and Zackon (2004) also cited the Coachville School of coaching as representing 16.3% of their research participants who did not attend an International Coach Federation training program (p. 5).

Grant and Zackon (2004) report on the three levels of ICF certification:

An Associate Certified Coach (ACC) credential requires the completion of 60 hours of coach-specific training hours and 750 hours of client coaching. A Professional Certified Coach (PCC) credential includes completion of 125 hours of coach specific training and 750 hours of client coaching. A Master Certified Coach (MCC) includes completion of 200 hours of coach specific training and 2500 hours of client coaching. (p. 4)

### **Research about the Coaching Client**

This section is provided to summarize research data on coaching clients. While this research study will involve a pilot program, understanding other research on coaching

clients helps to identify what may be of additional interest and where there are opportunities for future research.

Green, Oades and Grant (2006) conducted research on “the effects of a 10-week cognitive-behavioral, solution-focused life coaching group programme” (p. 142). The overall aim of the study was “to broaden a limited empirical base on the psychology of life coaching” (p. 142). There were two hypothesis for the study, with the first being that “evidence based life coaching group programme would lead to greater goal striving, well-being, and hope” (p. 145). Utilizing both coaching and control groups, there was a marked difference in greater goal striving progression. The second hypothesis was that “any gains attained as a result of the intervention would be maintained over time” (p. 146). This was measured 30 weeks post coaching intervention and results indicated maintenance of the goal attainment. In addition, this research showed an increase in total hope and well-being. Future research possibilities suggested by the researchers included the utilization of more analysis to determine the most useful components of the coaching program (p.149).

In another study, Stelter (2007) discussed coaching by focusing specifically on the protege:

With the aim to give the focus person a developmental space and thereby the possibility for reflection and renewed understanding (1) about his/her own experience in relation to a specific context; and (2) about specific relationships, coordinated actions with others and about the processes of negotiation in a specific social situation. (p. 191)

The study explored two major areas, including aesthetic learning and negotiation in practice. Through the exploration of these areas, the author noted: “meaning and meaning

making have been presented as central dimensions in the coaching process” (Stelter, 2007, p. 200). The author further suggested that, “in order to gain depth in the coaching conversation it seems to be essential to include both the focus person’s perspective in the experience and to highlight the joining practice and the relations which the focus person is a part of”(p. 200).

One key point of his study informing the present research study is the observation that, “the coaching conversation can help develop the focus person’s understanding of his or her patterns of actions and interactions with other people” (Stelter, 2007, p. 199). Given the nature of the VISTA member experience, actions and interactions are with many individuals, especially individuals who work with people in poverty. Clarity around the impact of having a coach to assist in understanding of actions and interactions would help individuals better understand what to expect as part of the VISTA experience. Another key point identified by Stelter (2007) suggested: “if the coach does not support the focus person in the process of meaning making, coaching becomes a superficial conversation which does not seriously affect the focus person’s understanding of reality’s life practice” (p. 192). The present study explored the impact that such coaching had on a VISTA member experience.

### **Life Coaching within the Context of Communication**

The development of life coaching as we know it today includes components of several theories of communication. Research studies (Passmore and Gibbes, 2007; Spence, 2007) have explored the effects of executive coaching on leadership skills in organizations: “Many top managers and CEOs utilized mentoring and executive coaching” (p. 1). Williams (2007) wrote: “one of the most important changes has been the emergence of

researched-based published articles and books, which has increased the acceptance of coaching worldwide in both corporate and academic communities” (p. 2) The research articles that tie directly to organizational communications are found primarily within the field of executive or leadership coaching (e.g. Feldman and Lankau, 2005; Mackie, 2007).

There is also a direct relationship to interpersonal communication as coaching involves “a form of conversation with unspoken ground rules regarding certain qualities that must be present: respect, openness, compassion, empathy, and a rigorous commitment to speaking the truth” (Whitworth, Kimsey-House & Sandahl, 2007, p. xx). The research of Grant (2001) and Griffiths (2005), also ties directly to interpersonal communications. Coaching naturally creates a space where interpersonal communication can develop.

### **Focus of Present Study**

This literature review began with the evolution of life coaching, which included the influence of counseling and influence of spiritual direction. These two core areas are the foundation of life coaching as we know it today. The next step in the literature review was current life coaching. Understanding the emergence of life coaching is critical in understanding its relevance for this study. Following this came selected research on coaches, along with the coaching client. The literature review concluded with life coaching within the context of communication. It is through an understanding of these areas that context was created to frame the relevance of the project and to expand what is known about how life coaching influences the VISTA members’ experiences.

It is clear in the literature review that there are open areas for exploration. As it relates to coaching clients, one of the areas of interest to this researcher was identifying the useful components of a coaching program. The ability to research the components of the

VISTA member program tied in perfectly with this. In addition, the area of exploration around impact of coaching was expansive. This researcher saw a unique opportunity to explore the impact of coaching by focusing on a pilot study and thus have the ability to look at the nature of coaching within this group and the specific themes of impact. Thus, my research questions for the present study follow:

RQ1: What is the nature of impact of life coaching for VISTA members?

RQ2: What are the themes of impact that emerge from life coaching in the VISTA member experience?

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a review of the literature by providing an overview of the evolution, which included the influence of counseling, spiritual direction, and current life coaching. This was followed by co-active coaching, coaching, coaching the client, and life coaching within the context of communication. These studies and training materials established a conceptual framework for the research questions guiding the present work. In Chapter III, the methodology to gather data to answer these questions is presented.



### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

In order to complete a study that explores the nature of impact with life coaching and VISTA members as well as identify the common themes of impact, a qualitative design was developed. Creswell (2003) wrote: “if a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because little research has been done on it, then it merits a qualitative approach” (p. 22). This chapter provides a description of the methodology used by the researcher beginning with a description of the research participants, followed by procedures, and methods for data collection. The data used for this study included both in-depth, semi-structured interviews and the focus group comments.

#### **Research Participants**

The research participants in this study were individuals from the VISTA member program in Central Minnesota who chose to have a life coach as a part of their VISTA member experience. Twelve individuals participated in the VISTA member program experience. Included in the twelve were the program director and assistant. They were not invited to participate in the study due to potential conflict of interest (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, pp. 95-96). In addition, there were two individuals with whom this researcher had prior contact, so they were also removed from the invitation list. This brought the potential number to eight. Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2006) reasoned: “the logic of qualitative research is concerned with in-depth understanding, usually working with small samples” (p. 70). The authors also write: “qualitative researchers are often interested in selecting purposive or judgment samples” (p. 70). In this study, the researcher intended to research the VISTA members. Each individual was coached by one of nine coaches assigned to this

project. All coaches were selected based on an interview and sample coaching session that was evaluated by project organizers. The focus of this study was not on the coaches but rather the VISTA members who were the recipients of the coaching.

### **Procedures**

Creswell (2003) suggested open-ended questions and interview data as methods for completing qualitative research (p. 17). Eight VISTA members were invited via email by this researcher and Chris Fastner, VISTA program manager, to jointly participate in the in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group. Each individual was invited to participate in an in-depth semi-structured interview as well as the focus group. From this group sample, five VISTA members responded that they were willing to participate in the in-depth semi-structured interviews and five VISTA members indicated that they were willing to participate in the focus group. Four of the individuals participated in both the in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group. One individual participated in the in-depth semi-structured interview who did not participate in the focus group, and one individual who participated in the focus group that did not participate in the in-depth semi-structured interviews. Two individuals did not participate in either the in-depth semi-structured interviews or focus group.

### **Preparation and Analysis of Data**

In-depth, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group were the primary methods for data collection used in this qualitative study. Qualitative methods of data collection were selected because the researcher wanted to gather interpretive information that had depth and embraced context. The qualitative “research process is flexible, and it enables the discovery of novel and uncommon themes and new insights into the topic under

investigation” (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007), p. 169). These researchers also reported: “qualitative approaches can be valuable in the evaluation of the complex human process of coaching” (p. 169). Hesse-Biber (2006) cited the frequent use of one or more methods of qualitative methods including in-depth interviewing and focus group interviewing (p. 19).

In-depth interviews are commonly used as a method for data collection in qualitative research and are a way of gathering understanding and information from participants on a specific topic of focus (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, pp. 120-123). The goal of the in-depth interviews is to gather data from participants on a specific topic that has richness (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 120).

The focus groups were added in addition to the in-depth semi-structured interviews because they are fundamentally different as the data collected for the focus group is generated as a group that includes respondents and the researcher (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, p. 198). Hesse-Biber & Leavy summarized: “focus groups are an effective method of data collection in market research because they are good for exploring people’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviors” (p. 196). In addition, the researchers state: “focus groups are an economical way to gather a relatively large amount of qualitative data from multiple human subjects” (p. 196).

### ***Data Collection I: In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews***

The following interview questions were utilized in the study:

- (1) What exposure did you have to life/leadership coaching prior to this experience?
- (2) Tell me about your experience of having a life coach.
- (3) In what ways did having a life coach impact your experience as a VISTA member?
- (4) In what ways do you see yourself taking this experience of having a life coach as a

VISTA member into your future professional career or life?

(5) You had two-thirds of the year without a coach and one-third with a coach. Did you notice any differences between the two? Please elaborate.

(6) Your experience included work with the agency, training as a part of your program and coaching. Tell me about your experience with each.

A time was scheduled with each research participant on a conference line through freeconference.com so the call could be recorded. An informed consent form was signed by each interview research participant, per IRB requirements. Interviewees were assigned a letter and number code so confidentiality could be upheld (Creswell, 2003, pp. 192-193). Each participant was asked a question and then provided as much time as need to respond to the question. As themes emerged, notes were made by the researcher. To increase validity, this researcher used member-checking to confirm a theme of pattern (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). A transcript of each in-depth semi-structured interview was prepared. Prior to reading the transcripts, the researcher listened to the in-depth interviews and took notes from the perspective of listening to what was being said, and put context around that. Once this was done, the researcher reviewed the transcripts and conducted thematic analysis and considered narrative analysis based on the outcome of the interviews. Creswell (2003) identifies the use of categories or themes as a part of the qualitative research process (p. 193). He also cites the use of “coding to generate a small number of themes or categories” (p. 193). Due to the nature of in-depth interviews utilizing semi-structured questions, this researcher wanted to leave the possibility open for what emerged as the data were revealed. To increase validity of the themes, this researcher also used peer debriefing (Creswell,

2003, p. 196). Validity was also increased by naming the background of the researcher who is a certified professional co-active coach (p. 196).

### ***Data Collection II: Focus Group***

The focus group for this research study was completed in July of 2009 by this researcher. IRB procedures were followed. An informed consent form was obtained from each research participant.

Confidentiality was stressed, especially given the nature of focus group interaction. The focus group provided an opportunity for dynamic interaction and energy. The focus group also complemented the semi-structured in-depth interviews.

The Focus Group questions were as follows:

- (1) Please introduce yourself and name the VISTA site with which you work.
- (2) In what ways did having a life coach impact your experience as a VISTA worker?—  
What were the biggest areas of impact?
- (3) In what ways will you take your coaching experience as a VISTA member into the next phases of your professional career? How in general has this changed you as a leader?
- (4) Have you experienced any changes in your life as a result of having a coach and the experience of learning coaching skills as a part of the workshops you have attended?
- (5) If you could summarize the benefit of having a life coach as a VISTA member into one word, what would it be?

The focus group data was analyzed following the methods described by Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2006) and Creswell (2003). Following the focus group, this researcher reviewed the notes and information gathered. From the personal observations and comments, this researcher created a chart. Each time a theme emerged, it was noted. After

all observations and notes were made, the themes were then compared with the data from the in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Again, a chart was utilized. Each time there was a theme from both the focus group and interview, a mark was made and comments were recorded. Through this merging of the data, it was clear that common themes were present and a clear nature of impact was seen for life coaching and the VISTA members.

### **Summary**

The methodology included the research participants and procedures for both the in-depth, semi structured interviews, and focus group. Personal observation, thematic analysis and narrative analysis were selected as the means by which the data were analyzed. In the following chapter, the results of this analysis will be discussed in detail.

## **CHAPTER IV: RESULTS**

The results section reports the data from the in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group. Six questions were asked in the interviews and will be put in this section with the question coming first and responses to follow. Within the in-depth semi-structured interviews, each question will be stated and comments from participants will be given that are applicable to the research question being studied. In the focus group section, questions will be listed and comments will be captured for analysis. Throughout the reporting of results, a letter and number will identify participants' comments, which is the system this researcher utilized to hold confidentiality for research participants.

### **In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews**

The first question asked about the exposure of the participants to life/leadership coaching prior to this experience. This question sought information from which a baseline could be identified for each participant in the study.

Of the five respondents, three had never heard of life coaching. The other two respondents had been exposed to it through the media or social networks. Participant 5E reported having seen a coach "depicted in the media," but had never spoken to an actual coach. Participant 2B had the most extensive knowledge of coaching and that came primarily through exposure to a Rotary Club. The president of a club had told this participant that "life coaching was kind of professional development coaching, a professional development coaching option for people."

The second question asked the participants to talk about their experience of having a life coach. This topic was raised to determine if there were common experiences of VISTA participants, exclusive of the life coaches.

The experience of having a life coach included a broad range of responses. Two respondents clearly identified work on career goals as a plus of having a life coach. Other areas that were identified included having someone who was objective, identifying core values, improving work relationships, improving personal relationships, developing better communication skills, and exploring different levels of opportunity.

Respondent 4D stated that the experience “changed the world for me, and it changed my entire Vista experience.” This respondent proceeded to state that “it took that Vista experience and just brought it to a level of opportunity, and it brought it to a level that I could see the strength that I held within my service experience.” In addition, 4D added that “I could just make the world a better place just by being me.”

Participant 5E articulated that the experience took on many forms. This participant stated, “my career goals are related to my VISTA project, my desire to return to school and my desire to improve my time management skills.” 5E also went on to say, “I developed new time management techniques, a clearer understanding of my goals and detailed plans for applying to schools.”

Participant 3C also responded positively about the impact having a life coach had on the VISTA experience. This participant stated, “I, at the time, was dealing with some difficult issues within the office. And having—my life coach really helped me to take a step back, look at the situation, and find out the best way to deal with it.” This participant also stated that “it had a positive impact on my VISTA experience simply because it helped me to work through those problems and those issues in a positive way.”

Participant 2B brought in an interesting comment: “I’d say it was helpful. I don’t think it was something that I’d necessarily pay for on my own. I’m glad that I had it as an



option through AmeriCorps VISTA.” This participant also noted that the life coach made her take time “to stop and process and think about different things going on in my work and, you know, how to maybe, you know, be a little more organized or how to communicate with a supervisor or things of that nature, whereas normally, I might not be so active in taking the time to focus on those things.”

In question three, participants were asked about the ways having a life coach impacted their experience as a VISTA member. This question sought information that could be used to determine the effect of having a life coach.

All respondents identified having a life coach as a positive experience. The specific ways that were identified included developing time management skills, having a support system in place, focusing on tasks, developing problem solving skills, learning about leadership as a means of serving others, and becoming a continuation of a career path.

Participant 1A articulated that “my life coach helped me deal with a lot of the, I guess you might call it background noise that was in my life, and dealing with that stuff and having some of the situations get resolved or having them not be quite so troubling made it easier to focus on my VISTA program.” This participant also noted that the life coach helped in “figuring out the best way to approach situations or in, you know, like an issue I was having with my supervisor.”

Participant 3C had some challenges at the office, and stated: “having my life coach really helped me to take a step back, look at the situation and find out the best way to deal with it in the best situation.” This participant went on to say that “(having a life coach) helped me to work through those problems and those issues in a positive way.”

Participant 5E noted, “coaching served as a continuation of my effort to begin my career, a key part of my VISTA experience.” This participant had the ability to look at different job experiences and various roles and stated, “coaching has helped me to evaluate and act upon those experiences.” This participant also emphasized, “coaching has also helped me get more out of my VISTA experience that I otherwise would.”

Participant 2B not only spoke of the life coaching and its impact but also the challenges of being a VISTA. “As a VISTA, it seems like we tend to not have a lot of support and go through a lot of struggles and we kind of have to figure it out on our own. But, with a life coach, we have a little help and guidance with those struggles that we wouldn’t normally have.” This participant elaborated with “if you’re looking at work issues, you’re kind of forced to take that time, an hour, and preparation time, as well, to look at those things happening at your work.”

Participant 4D spoke with deep insight about this experience: “That a special person of one can provide hope for another, and that’s what my life coach did for me. And through hope a person may realize the strengths that they hold within themselves, which connects and inspires others to be leaders.” This participant went on to say, “and they will learn that leadership is not about power. Leadership is about serving, serving so that others may feel hope and realize the strengths they hold within themselves.”

Question four asked the participants to reflect on how they saw themselves taking the experience of having a life coach as a VISTA member into your future professional career or life. The comments from this question provided further information about the potential long term impact of the pairing of life coaches and VISTA members.

Two respondents identified gaining different perspectives as a key component they would move forward in their professional career or life. In addition, respondents identified time management skills, development of goals, identifying powerful support groups/individuals, honoring core values, taking regular time out to step back and look at things and developing areas of strength as well as finding others whose area of strength complement the VISTA's strength.

Participant 4D immediately pointed to the use of Strengths Finder as something that would be taken forward into life: "Part of this life coach was utilizing the strength finder." The participant went on to say, "it allowed me to become aware and develop my five areas of strength . . . I now come to the table knowing that I have at least five strengths that I'm bringing to the table." This participant then articulated the bigger picture, "the person on my right has five too, and the person on my left has five, and the person sitting across from me has five, and so on and so on. So, coming to that table, everyone is bringing something."

Participant 5E focused on the concrete outcomes from the coaching. This participant stated, "I have developed goals and narratives that will be expressed in resumes and application letters for schools and jobs." I also found it interesting that this participant stated "I have decided to seek out people that ask me powerful questions in my life." Asking powerful questions is one of the key tools used by life coaches and I found the link between taking this experience out into the world and intentionally seeking it out to be of importance.

Participant 3C talked about, "stepping back and seeing situations from other people's perspectives." This participant thought it would definitely be a tool that would be

carried forward. It was interesting to note that participant 1A also talked about perspectives. This participant said “it helped me see another way to think about things a little bit differently and helped me see the value in being able to remove myself from a situation perspective-wise.” The participant went on to say, “that’s an approach that will definitely be useful in the future.”

One different response on this question came from participant 2B. This participant did not see the involvement of a life coach at a future point and yet what was captured in the interview as that “(life coaching) also made me realize and understand the importance of really just taking—even if it’s two hours every month, one hour periods two times a month to think about things going on in the workplace.” This participant went on to say: “I really understood the importance of taking time out specifically to think about those kind of larger picture things in my work separate from my work.” This participant reemphasizes that she would not retain a life coach and yet that wasn’t the intent of a question.

The fifth question asked the participants to elaborate on the differences they noticed between the months when they had a life coach and the months when they were without a life coach. Information about dealing with life issues with the presence or absence of the coach as a variable enriched the data with more specific time dimensions.

The respondents varied in their response to this question, from it made “some difference” to it made “all the difference.” One respondent noted that there was more effectiveness due to the development of time management skills. The other four respondents identified focus, support, setting time aside and more effective management of issues while working with a coach. One respondent used the term “support,” which seemed to summarize many of the responses.

Participant 2B note that “the biggest change was that my coach and I set time aside to think about things that I was worrying about or having issues with.”

Participant 1A commented, “I think I was definitely a little bit less frazzled.”

Participant 3C found that “I noticed some difference, but not a ton, mostly because a lot of the conflict that arose within my VISTA position came within that third that I had a life coach.”

Participant 5C saw a difference with “improved time-management skills,” which then provided the opportunity to “be a more effective VISTA member in the latter part.”

Participant 4D brought in deep insight, once again, with these comments, “the time I spent with the coach almost seems, if you can take the sky filled with clouds versus the sky on a sunny day is almost the difference, because of the focus.” This participant went on to say, “the sessions were interspersed, every two weeks . . . I could just hear her words and the power and the advice and the guidance was always there.”

The final question provided an opportunity for the participants to talk about their experience working with the agency, training as a part of their program, and coaching. The responses from this question addressed the nature of the training relationship between the Initiative Foundation and the VISTA members.

Four of the respondents felt that the training plus the coaching was a very large benefit to their experience of working with the agencies as a VISTA member. Respondent 3C shared that, “the trainings were very useful, especially the ones that focused on skills like conflict resolution.” This participant also shared that learning how to run effective meetings was useful. 3C also found the interpersonal development to be beneficial. As was shared in the interview: “(interpersonal development with the identifying the core

values) I actually found extremely helpful, and I think helped me grow in the work environment a lot.” One respondent clearly stated that the integration of training and program is what made this a successful offering for the VISTA members. Participant 4D articulated, “the manner in which (life coaching) was introduced to us as a group was very, I thought, carefully chosen, the timing of it.”

Participant 5E found that there were concepts particularly useful. This participant stated, “The trainings . . . introduced several coaching concepts, such as listening, asking powerful questions, and goal identification. The skills taught in the trainings paved the way for effective communication in my project and for effective coaching sessions.”

Participant 1A felt very strongly about the training experience. She stated, “the thing that I liked the most about my year with AmeriCorps was definitely the training I got at the Initiative Foundation, the training with other VISTAS.” This participant also shared that a lot was learned about “being in a professional setting when it comes to working with non-profits and working with local governments, working with foundations.” In terms of connecting the training and coaching, this participant felt that having a coach plus the training “helped me focus on my work at the VISTA.” This participant also brought up the work with Strengths Finder, and the tie in with the training around this and then follow up coaching.

One respondent felt that there was some benefit but identified some of the trainings as not being what was desired. Participant 2B shared, “(the trainers) were very into using a lot of facilitation lingo . . . but, it’s just really that I feel like we’re not really breaking any new ground or new territory using these kinds of terms.” This participant continued with, “we did a lot of modeling activities that were supposed to model certain scenarios and

situations, but we did little to nothing about actually talking about and addressing real life issues.” This participant was also emphatic about the link between trainings and leaders, “if we’re gonna [sic] create leaders, I really think it’s important to take our real life situations and learn how to work with them versus models.”

### **Summary of Interview Data**

Six questions were asked as a part of the semi-structured interviews. The first question dealt with respondents’ knowledge of life coaching. Three respondents had not heard of life coaching while two had been exposed through various media and social networks.

The second question explored the respondents’ experience of having a life coach. The impact of the experience was seen in areas such as having someone who was objective, identifying core values, improving work relationships, developing better communication skills, exploring different levels of opportunity, exploring career goals, and learning time management techniques.

Question three focused on the impact of having a life coach on the VISTA member experience. All respondents viewed having a life coach as a positive experience. Specific areas that were noted included developing time management skills, having a support system in place, focusing on tasks, developing problem solving skills, learning about leadership and exploring career paths.

Question four addressed taking the coaching experience into the professional world and life. The respondents identified gaining perspective as a key component. Other areas identified included time management skills, development of goals, identifying powerful

support, honoring core values, taking time out to step back and developing areas of strength.

The fifth question looked more deeply at the time spent without a coach and the time spent with a coach to see if there was a marked difference. There was a variance in this response from “some difference” to “all the difference.” Based on the responses, time management, conflict resolution, communication skills, and support system in place were the major areas affected during this time frame.

The final question provided an opportunity for the respondents to comment on the VISTA program components. The question stated: your experience included work with the agency, training as a part of your program and coaching. Tell me about your experience with each. The respondents made connections between the complementary trainings and coaching as well as the ability to function better at the agency due to the skills that were being learned both in a group and as an individual. This was particularly evident in the area of conflict resolution, leadership skills and communication skills.

### **Focus Group**

This section is divided into the focus group questions. Following each question is a summary of the group responses to each question; and as necessary, additional information on the responses. At the end of this section, common themes are provided.

#### ***Impact of Life Coach on Experience as VISTA Member***

The first focus group question provided an opportunity for participants to discuss the ways that having a life coach impacted their experience as a VISTA worker.

There were many areas of impact that engaged discussion in the focus group. To



summarize responses to this question, this researcher identified the areas of impact and provided a brief explanation of how the participants responded to each of the impact areas. This researcher used the method suggested by Hesse-Biber (2006) where literal codes are used to start and then focused codes are identified based on the researcher's insights as well as supporting data such as that from the in-depth semi-structured interviews (pp. 351-352). It is the focused codes that informed the themes that emerged as a result of the life coaching experience.

- Provided clarity: participants identified this as getting clear about a topic or idea.
- Career exploration: participants identified this as being able to look at career options for the future. Career exploration involved taking aspects of training and coaching, such as values and strengths finder and then identifying possible career fields. Participant 8H stated that his coach was “instrumental in exploring career paths beyond the VISTA experience.”
- Conflict resolution: participants identified this as the opportunity to work through conflicts—see different perspectives as well as role play different scenarios around conflict situations. Participant 10J shared that her experience as a VISTA member often involved a lot of conflict in the work environment. This participant felt that working with a coach enabled her to “talk through different scenarios and come up with effective solutions.”
- Leadership as serving: participants identified this as seeing leadership in a different light. Being a VISTA includes a lot of leadership work and there were many new “definitions” of leadership that emerged throughout the program. One new definition came from participant 9I. As this participant shared comments, it was

evident that it was a transformation of thinking about what leadership is and is not, “I learned that leadership is about serving, not power.”

- **Objective person:** participants identified this as someone who was able to look at a situation without being emotionally involved and not being attached to the outcome. The coach was seen as truly being in service of the VISTA member.
- **Opportunity for sorting:** participants identified this as a process of looking at multiple choices and/or decisions and being able to work with someone on sorting through these to arrive at the best solution.
- **Experience as manageable:** participants identified this as having someone to get them through the tough spots and be able to survive the experience of being a VISTA member, which often had challenges—low wages, high stress and unclear work expectations. For this participant, having a coach literally meant the ability to stay in the VISTA program. “Having a coach helped me stay, not quit. I had a support system.”
- **Perspectives:** participants identified this as the ability to look at a topic from different angles and explore multiple concepts around the same subject matter.
- **Explore possibilities:** participants identified this as the ability to look at what might be available or all the different choices that could exist around a concept, topic, program or life.
- **Work to life translation:** participants identified this as the ability to connect what was being learned at work to life. This was especially true for learning specific skills.

- Felt less alone (support): participants identified this as having someone in their corner and knowing that they could be “seen and heard” by the coach.
- Validation of the VISTA’s job: participants identified this as being supported in the role of a VISTA, which is low-pay and high stress.
- Validation of self: participants identified this as receiving acknowledgement for who they are as human beings and the specific set of talents they bring to the world. Participant 9I stated that she felt “seen” and “valued for who she is and what she brings to the world, especially at ‘this age.’”
- Make decisions for next year: participants identified this as having assistance from the coach as options were being explored and decisions made for the future. One participant said that having worked with the coach assisted her in making a decision to continue with VISTA in a different capacity.

### ***Area of Most Impact***

The second question of the focus group explored what participants thought was the biggest area of impact.

Each participant had a different area that resonated with them the most in their VISTA experience. For participant 6F, working with a life coach helped provide clarity around situations and/or decisions. This participant shared that “the use of powerful questions and perspectives helped me get clear about decisions and work plans.”

Another participant, 7G, felt that the biggest impact was, “having an objective person who wasn’t personally or emotionally involved.” This participant said that talking to friends or co-workers wasn’t the same as being on the phone with someone who wasn’t

close to the situation. In addition, this participant said that having some trained to ask the right type of questions made all the difference.

Participant 8H felt that this experience provided an opportunity around career exploration. This participant did share that this was both a personal goal as well as something involved in the VISTA assignment, so it was a natural complement.

In the experience of Participant 9I, this impact was felt in learning that “leadership is about serving, not about power.” This participant elaborated on the experience of life up to this point as it had pertained to leadership. In the “former belief system,” leadership had been about power. Through this evolution of having a life coach, a new story had been written and was being put into practice.

Conflict resolution was the key area of impact for participant 10J. This participant particularly appreciated the difference case scenarios and problem solving dialogues that were involved in both the training and the coaching.

### ***Impact on Next Phase of Professional Career and Leadership***

The first part of question number three explored the ways the VISTA members would take the coaching experience as a VISTA member into the next phases of their professional career. The participants offered the following areas where they would add what they learned from their life coach experiences.

- **Goal Setting**—personal and professional: the participants noted that being able to set goals in both their personal and professional life was a huge component to the VISTA experience with a coach. It was also clear that the coach also assisted the VISTAs in holding them accountable for the goals that were set.

- **Time Management:** the participants noted that getting a better hold of their time and schedules was a key component to the coaching. Part of this evolved through the setting of priorities and work around perspectives. The ultimate result was better time management.
- **Conflict Resolution:** the participants stated that not only was this a key component to the coaching experience but it will also be carried forward into the “real world” following this experience.
- **Asking for what they need:** participant 9I articulated that she could now “ask for what she needed” without feeling guilty. A perspective shift around values and strengths finder led to this discovery.
- **Seeking people who ask powerful questions:** participant 8H said that one of the most important things to carry forward is around looking for people who can ask powerful questions. This participant said that “a new bar is in place” in terms of what is needed to challenge and continue movement.
- **Listening for others:** participants identified that new listening skills were developed and will be carried forward as a result of the experience.
- **More aware—laying a foundation for accepting concept—education**
- **Aware of core values:** participants said that a new awareness around core values was critical in not only the current learning but in what will be brought forward. Participant 9I stated: “knowing my values allows me to step into them and honor them.”
- **Bring goals and values to interviews:** participants said that they now have a firm foundation to bring with them to the interviews as they move forward in life. One

participant commented that knowing oneself is critical to being able to explain it to another person in an interview situation.

- StrengthsFinder—looking at themes of talent: participants stated that identifying strengths and themes of talent was critical to the development as a VISTA and in working with the coach. Participant 6F commented that “knowing these themes of talent and being able to bring them out to the best of one’s ability makes all the difference in the world.”

The second part of question three dealt with how the VISTA member saw this experience changing them as a leader. Below is a summary and descriptions of their answers.

- Get different perspectives and take self out of perspective: participants learned how to not only work on identifying different perspectives but also how to remove themselves from the situation to explore topics more thoroughly and as a leader come up with solutions that may work the best for the organization. Participant 8H stated that in one VISTA work environment, “this new approach allowed me to look at the good of the organization, not the good of myself.” This participant went on to say that this was a good quality of leadership—to take the individual out and put the organization in as the key focal point.
- Asking for what they need: participant 9I reported that being able to ask for what is needed as a leader is critical. This participant learned that if people are clear on what they want and can articulate it, good leadership can be demonstrated and honored in a work environment. This participant compared it to “putting all cards on the table and asking for what card is needed to complete the deck.”

- **Focusing time and energy:** participants said that by having more focused time, it created energy, which then allowed them to step into leadership much better than had previously taken place.
- **Articulated core values:** participants reported that knowing their core values and being able to step into them in the work environment not only made them stronger leaders but it also helped others see them as leaders. One participant identified this as “transparency.”
- **Help others become leaders—give them the tools:** participants said that now that they had been through the process of identifying core values as well as completing the strengths finder, they were much more able to provide tools to others. One participant said, “by knowing myself and what I have to offer, I can in turn give more to others.”

### ***Impact of Training as Part of VISTA Program***

The fourth question focused on the experience of having a life coach as well as having trainings as a part of the VISTA program and the impact this has created. The following list includes the changes that they noticed in their own behavior after the experience:

- They have become better listeners.
- They approach conflicts in a less confrontational manner.
- They are confident in their capacity to achieve the goals that are most important.
- They have learned to prioritize.
- They can make choices regarding relationships.
- They are able to identify resources within themselves.

- They have noticed strength from within self—“knowing”—everyone stays strong here.
- They have decided to become a VISTA leader: one participant made the decision to continue her career as a VISTA leader.

### ***One Word Impact of Life Coach on VISTA Experience***

The final question provided an opportunity for the respondents to give a one-word answer to the biggest impact they have seen from having a life coach as a part of the VISTA member experience. This question was intended to be a one-word response so this researcher would have a bottom line response and assist in the analysis of data. Below are the one-word answers received in the focus group setting:

- Wings
- Goals
- Understanding
- Self-confidence
- Ineffable (there are no words)
- Lightness
- Acceptance
- Focus

### ***Personal Reflections of Participants***

The researcher also provided the participants with the opportunity to comment on anything else that they wanted to say or add to the focus group setting. The participants offered the following items:

- VISTA members should get life coach earlier, but not too early.



- Participants should get the leadership training before coaching—leadership training should be introduced first.
- Leadership training should be used to develop “junior coaches.”
- Good matches should be made when setting up peer coaching.
- Coaching is incredibly beneficial no matter what stage.
- AmeriCorps cares about me.
- I may have quit this Vista experience if it hadn’t been for the coach.

### **Summary of Focus Group**

The first question for the focus group explored the ways that having a life coach impacted the VISTA member experience. Responses included clarity, career exploration, conflict resolution, leadership, objectivity, perspective, exploring possibilities, work to life translation, and feeling supported.

The second question provided an opportunity to look at the biggest area of impact. There was no consensus as the items varied for each participant and reflected many of the areas: clarity, objective person, career exploration, leadership and conflict resolution were all mentioned and discussed in greater detail.

The third question provided the participants an opportunity to talk about taking the VISTA experience into the next phase of a professional career and comment on how this experience has changed them as leaders. All participants noted enhanced skills in the areas of goal setting, time management, conflict resolution, core values, listening to others and seeking out individuals with whom they can grow. The participants expected they would use these skills as they continued as leaders in their future endeavors.

The fourth question addressed the changes in life as a result of having a coach as well as skills that may have been learned in the trainings that the VISTA members were taking. The areas of change included improved skills in listening, conflict management, achieving goals, prioritization, identifying self-resources, relationship management, and making career choices.

The final question provided participants the opportunity to summarize the benefit of having a life coach in one word. Responses included wings, goals, understanding, self-confidence, ineffable and lightness.

### **Overall Summary**

It is clear from the in-depth interviews and focus group data that several areas of impact emerged as the result of having a life coach as a part of the VISTA member experience. These themes of impact included time management/prioritization/goal setting, conflict management, career exploration, core values/strengths, objective perspective, focus/clarity, and communication skills. Each of these themes will be discussed in Chapter V.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

In answer to the research questions of this study, I incorporated data from the in-depth interviews and focus group studies. Several major themes emerged including time management/prioritizing/goal setting, conflict management, career exploration, core values/strengths, objective perspective, focus/clarity, and communication skills. Each of these areas is highlighted below with a summary of the theme and how it showed up in this research study. Comments from the interviews have been included where it was appropriate.

### **Time Management/Prioritizing/Goal Setting**

Time management, prioritizing, and goal setting were identified in both the in-depth interviews and focus group as a benefit of having a life coach in this experience. The VISTA members stated that they were often juggling multiple tasks, and having a life coach to work through time management issues as well as prioritizing job/life functions and setting goals was helpful. Many VISTA members stated that they were consistently working over forty hours per week and part of this was unrealistic work expectations while other components of it involved developing and implementing good time management skills. One of the challenges brought up was trying to work from a plan that had been created by someone other than the VISTA member. The life coach was able to work with the VISTA members in prioritizing the work plan items and making requests within the organization for the goals of the plan if modifications needed to be made. The VISTA members also articulated that these skills would be beneficial as they moved beyond this experience to their future paths.

## **Conflict Management**

The VISTA members identified conflict management as a major area in which life coaching proved to be extremely beneficial. The VISTA members are often working at work sites with limited staff resources as well as limited budgets. In some cases, they stated that they were more qualified than some of the regular employees working at the site. It appeared from comments made that some employees felt threatened by the VISTA member, to the point of worrying that the VISTA member could potentially take over a job position. This created an environment where conflicts occurred frequently, and many times, the VISTA members said they felt “alone” in their work environments. The VISTA members also shared that conflicts arose because there was a sense that staff didn’t want to spend time resolving issues or conflicts because they would most likely be gone in a year anyway. This added to the stress, which in turn, increased the conflict within the office setting. The life coach became not only a source for working through conflict resolution skills and coping mechanisms, but also became the support system for the VISTA member as someone who could be objective and a listening ear.

## **Career Exploration**

While career exploration was not mentioned by all of the VISTA members, it did emerge in both the in-depth interviews and focus group. Due to the fact that many VISTA members come to this program to not only serve but also explore other career paths, this response made sense. Most VISTA members are in their positions for one year. Some members shared that they would be there two years. They pointed out that they have to be thinking about, “what’s next”? The VISTA members who did bring up career exploration

said that the life coach assisted in the exploration of career paths and discussed the characteristics, perspectives, and other factors as they related to potential careers.

### **Core Values and Strengths**

The majority of the respondents stated that work on their core values was an integral part of the life coaching. They reported that being more in tune with their values allowed them to not only work on bringing the best of them to the table but it also assisted them in identifying the key values and strengths of others in their work site environments. The VISTA members had all taken the Strengths Finder assessment, so they shared that knowing their skill sets and themes of talent kept them helped them reinforce what they were bringing to their assigned work sites. This, coupled with the work on conflict management, made for a much better work environment, in general. A side benefit of this was also a boost in self-esteem and confidence. One member said that being “seen” for who she was through her values and strengths augmented her belief in herself and the gift that she could bring to her work site.

### **Objective Perspective**

The VISTA members reported that one of the benefits of having a life coach was having an objective perspective and an individual trained to explore different perspectives with them. The VISTA members stated that other employees were often so busy that they didn’t have time to explore perspectives. Another challenge was in the area of trust. It was difficult for them to have open perspective discussions with co-workers who were concerned that the VISTA member may potentially take over their job. As has been articulated in the other areas of discovery, the VISTA members were often at work sites in which conflict was present. By having the ability to explore the perspectives with an

objective person, possibilities emerged that may not have otherwise been discovered. The VISTA members reported that this was often a critical piece at their work locations.

### **Focus/Clarity**

As was reported in both the in-depth interviews and focus group, getting focus and clarity through a coaching session was extremely beneficial to the VISTA member. Due to the workloads for the VISTA members at the work sites, it appeared that things were often in a state of chaos and it became difficult to think clearly or stay focused due to the many requests piling in from different sources and chains of command. The coaching sessions were named as a “safe place” to decompress and have someone to walk them through getting on track and having a clear path to follow. One VISTA commented that at times, things appeared muddy and yet after a coaching session, it was as if a clear stream emerged again. The ability to be focused and clear about direction was not only a benefit to the VISTA member, but to the organization itself.

### **Communication Skills**

As has already been defined, conflict was something that many VISTA members experienced. One area identified as being worked on with the life coach was in the area of communication skills—verbal and non-verbal. The VISTA members reported that they were able to work with the life coach using metaphors, and played out scenarios in a coaching session so that they would be better equipped to deal with situations at their work sites and sometimes in their personal lives as well. The link to the communication field of study emerged strongly in this area. Interpersonal communications for both the coach and client as well as between staff members at the work sites was critical. All of the themes identified in this study impact interpersonal communications. In addition, the link

to organizational communications is very strong. The operation of the VISTA work sites as well as the individuals working within those sites was often high in conflict and low in trust. Resources were scarce. All of these factors had an impact on the VISTA member and the ability to function within the environment.

### **Summary**

Chapter V provided a discussion of the major findings of the study. The themes that emerged reflect areas where the participants noted personal and professional growth through the pairing of life coaches with their VISTA experience. The positive tone of these themes provided useful direction for administrators who are considering the viability of extending the pilot project system-wide. In Chapter VI, the conclusions and directions for future research are presented.

## CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS

The present study was designed to study the nature of impact that life coaching had on participants in a VISTA program headquartered in central Minnesota. The pilot project of the Initiative Foundation, located in Little Falls, Minnesota, provided the context for the study. The impact and nature of life coaching on the VISTA members was ascertained through qualitative interviews and a focus group. While the population studied was small, the data revealed that for these participants, life coaching had an impact on their VISTA experience.

This qualitative study explored the nature of the impact of life coaching and the themes through which this impact was manifested for participants in the VISTA member experience. The findings from this study showed that areas identified through the themes revealed the predominant nature of the impact that was felt. The themes, as reported in Chapter IV and further explored in Chapter V were as follows: time management/prioritization, career exploration, conflict management, core values and strengths, objective perspective, focus/clarity, and communication skills. In addition to these themes of impact, the nature of impact expanded into having a support system in place for workers who were often dealing with stressful situations and often isolated from other VISTA members. The Initiative Foundation can use this information to prepare VISTA members for the experience as well as implement support strategies for them once they are in their assigned work sites. The Initiative Foundation can also use this information for support of having life coaches for the VISTA member program and to serve as a source for other VISTA member programs who may be interested in retaining life coaches for their VISTA members.



## Directions for Future Research

There are many future possibilities for research. One area that would be interesting to explore is to follow this group of individuals over a time span and see if the skills learned through coaching did, in fact, have a long-term effect and not just an immediate impact in the VISTA program. While limited in scope, such a longitudinal study might reveal additional information about how the experience affected career and professional behavior.

Further study of the emergent themes might reveal the degree to which each of these areas was impacted. Time management, career work, conflict management, and core values were all mentioned by participants in the research. Each of the areas could be explored in a quantitative study to determine if particular concerns are held by all VISTA members, not just those involved with this project. Several of the VISTA members also mentioned metaphors as a tool that had been used in their coaching sessions. It would be interesting to conduct a study exploring the use of metaphor in life coaching.

Self-confidence and self-awareness were mentioned many times in the research data. An examination of the different indicators of self-confidence and self-awareness, and how each of these indicators was affected by life coaching may prove fruitful. A quantitative study could involve a starting point with self-confidence and measure it following the coaching experience to find out how much it changed instead of just knowing that it was impacted.

The coaches themselves might prove to be worthy of study. The possibility exists that coaching VISTA members may be different than their regular coaching practice. A future study might explore the nature of impact to the coach who is working with a VISTA

member. There was a great deal of conversation about leadership. This focus on the link between life coaching clients and leadership could provide another area for exploration.

The participants also had access to on-going training. It appears that this also had a great influence. It would be another area of interest to explore both in terms of the mix of life coaching and training but there are also areas that could be explored with training and the VISTA member experience separate from coaching.

This researcher also sees many possibilities for research in the field of communication study. Interpersonal communications and organizational communications were cited several times in this thesis. Many areas of research could be developed such as an exploration of the themes and their role within an organization or the interpersonal communication characteristics between a life coach and the client. Rhetorical communication also opens the door for research possibilities, especially in the area of fantasy-themes.

It is clear from the data that life coaching had a meaningful impact on the experience of a VISTA member. While it was not a part of this study, this researcher is quite confident that future research would show that the experience of being a life coach might be equally meaningful. This researcher is also confident that the findings of this study will be used as a foundation for future studies. This researcher looks forward to seeing what future research will show in this field of study.

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