

‘Remedial coaching doesn’t work’

Paul Haigh, Chief Executive of Kensington and Chelsea Primary Care Trust, began working with an external coach at the trust’s inception 18 months ago, *writes Anat Arkin*.

“All our directors were new appointments to a brand-new organisation and we sought help in how we could work most beneficially together and iron out any tensions that might arise,” he says.

Haigh and his fellow directors have each had four or five confidential sessions with Zoe Gruhn, director of leadership and coaching at Hay Group UK. Gruhn has also shadowed team meetings and used her observations to address both group behaviour and Haigh’s leadership style. “The aim was not to focus on a specific problem but to interrogate how I go about doing my job,” he explains,

As a result of this process, Haigh now has a better grasp of when and how to use different leadership styles.

Working in a very different environment, Paul Abberley, chief executive of Asset Management UK and global head of fixed income at ABN-Amro, has been on a similar voyage of discovery. “In the past six months I’ve become more aware of the range of styles I could be using and have certainly been using a combination of them more effectively and intelligently,” he says.

Describing how Gruhn has used “live” case studies and real situations as a platform for her sessions, as well as shadowing him. Abberley adds: “Coaching was an alien subject at the start of this process. I didn’t know what was involved or have any preconceptions, but so far it’s made a visible impact.”

Like Haigh, Abberley was already a successful leader when he turned to executive coaching. According to Neil Paterson, who works with Gruhn in the Hay Group’s coaching practice, the process is most effective when it sets out to make good people even better.

But many firms do not use coaching to fine-tune the performance of their star players. Instead, they bring in coaches to provide remedial support for those who are not up to speed. That is why a lot of coaching focuses on individuals’ weaknesses and - as Richard Boyatzis and his colleagues point out - fails to produce lasting change.

“My experience is that remedial coaching doesn’t work,” Paterson says. “That may get someone to feel better about themselves, but in terms of what the organisation wants - improved performance - you are not going to get that transformation.