

# Coaching the Coaches

Eileen Arney looks at ways of supporting and supervising coaches.

**For learning, training and development specialists, coaching offers unrivalled potential for supporting the shift from training to learning. No management style facilitates learning better than coaching and no learning and development intervention better develops an individual's capacity to learn than a coaching programme.**

There are great challenges, however, in keeping up with innovations and in managing and supporting coaches to make the most of their potential. Research published this month by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) shows how coaching supervision can support coaches and help support the quality of their practice – there will be more on this later in this article.

Coaching is used by an overwhelming majority of organisations. In CIPD's 2006 *Learning and Development Survey*, for example, 79 per cent of the organisations questioned said they were using coaching services. Of these, nearly half were training line managers in coaching skills; just over a third said they were both providing coach training for managers and offering coaching through internal and external coaches. Ninety-three per cent said a coaching culture was 'important' or 'very important' to the success of their business.

But these figures do not tell the whole story. In reality, the arrangements organisations make to deliver coaching services are varied and complex. Coach-training for managers varies from short courses in coaching skills to formal, sometimes accredited, programmes.

Internal coaches may work full-time in this role or may be managers coaching those who are not in their team – perhaps coaching two or three individuals on top of their day job. External coaches will typically work in more than one organisation and may be brought in to support an individual manager, to contribute to a leadership development programme or as part of a broader organisation development intervention.

There is a wide range of skills and experience in all these groups. This is perhaps particularly true of internal coaches, who may have long experience and be highly trained or may be at the very beginning of developing a new skill.

It is not surprising, therefore, that CIPD's research has shown that practices in coaching supervision are equally complex and varied. Carried out by Dr Peter Hawkins and Gil Schwenk of the Bath Consultancy Group, this research showed how organisations are using coaching supervision and gave examples of good practice.

Evidence was drawn from two web-based questionnaires surveying coaches, coach supervisors and those who manage and buy coaching services in organisations. These were complemented by focus groups of practitioners and structured in-depth interviews with respondents from organisations that demonstrate good practice in coaching supervision.

Coaching supervision is a structured process that helps coaches improve the quality of their work and grow their coaching capacity, usually with the help of a more experienced coach or supervisor. It helps them to keep developing their skills and it offers support in what can be a lonely and quite challenging role.

For those who manage coaching services, supervision has two other important functions. It plays a vital role in quality-assurance coaching services, especially where coaches are reflecting on practice in a group setting.

It can also create opportunities for organisations to learn from the insights coaches themselves have into staff morale or the impact of change initiatives or business repositioning.

CIPD's research also showed how quickly the world of supervision is developing and new ways of working are being established. One marker of the newness of supervision is the fact that, while 86 per cent of coaches believe they should have regular supervision, less than half (44 per cent) actually do; similarly, while an even larger majority (88 per cent) of coaching organisers believe coaches should have regular supervision, less than a quarter (23 per cent) actually provide it for their coaches. The reasons individuals give for not having supervision include:

- it is not required by their organisation;
- it is too expensive;
- they can't find a supervisor

The reasons given by those who *organise* coaching also include the fact that it is too expensive and they can't find a supervisor. Hawkins says: 'We can see these as symptoms of a new and forming profession where supervision is only beginning to be established.'

Hawkins and Schwenk found that supervision could take a number of forms. From the questionnaire surveys it was clear that a large majority have one-to-one, face-to-face supervision. This will often be combined, though, with telephone and/or group supervision. Supervision may also be led by an experienced coach, perhaps with relevant experience and/or training, or by a peer. From the focus groups and case studies, however, it emerged that supervision is often combined with other forms of professional development for coaches, including formal training, updating workshops and (particularly for external coaches) briefing on organisational issues.

What this means in practice is that learning and development professionals need to find ways of tailoring supervision arrangements to support coaching services and to meet their own organisation's particular needs. CIPD's research identified a wide range of practice, often innovative and original, which organisations can draw on and learn from. This includes group and individual supervision for internal coaches, often supplemented by skills-updating sessions, to help keep skills up to scratch and provide support.

The case study below shows how supervision has been integrated into a coach-training programme delivered for the Greater Manchester Police by the Centre of Excellence in Leadership (CEL). Shaun Lincoln, director of mentoring and coaching at CEL, says: 'Supervision helps to produce better-informed coaches. Also, if there is anything getting in the way of an effective coaching relationship, they are able to bring that to supervision. It is important that the coaches are able to focus completely on the client.'

In the case of external coaches there is widespread agreement that professional coaches should be arranging their own supervision for their continuing professional development and to provide personal support. There is recognition also, though, of the importance of assessing that this is happening during selection processes.

Schwenk says: 'Supervision should be an absolute requirement for external coaches. It needs to be talked about explicitly at the assessment stage. In practice, organisations often assume that their external coaches will have supervision and they really need to delve into the format and frequency to ensure that these are really satisfactory.'

Drawing on discussions about good practice in the focus groups, he and Hawkins developed some questions to ask when recruiting coaches, with guidance on the answers to look for. These are set out at the foot of this article.

At PricewaterhouseCoopers, a combination of individual and group supervision is offered to internal coaches, and supervision is seen as an important supportive and educative practice. Barbara Picheta, Leader, Coaching Centre of Excellence, sees group sessions in particular as valuable in providing quality assurance, as well as an opportunity to share experiences and to give and receive feedback on practice. She observes: 'To open one's work to scrutiny is important in any helping activity. If you are going to invest in coaches in the workplace, this is an essential part of it – this is not an optional exercise.'

Group supervision sessions can also help draw organisational learning from the insights coaches develop in their one-to-one relationships with individuals. This may, for example, reflect responses to a new policy or to business repositioning and opinions on whether these are working well. If information can be fed back into the organisation on a confidential and non-attributable basis, it can have an obvious value in leadership and management development.

But this does raise important questions about managing confidentiality issues. At PricewaterhouseCoopers, names are routinely changed in discussing particular cases during group supervision and, in any case, the focus will normally be on the work of the coach and the coaching relationship rather than the particular individual being coached. However, Picheta comments that 'coaches contract around confidentiality and revisit it quite regularly; it is important to focus on ethical issues.'

One challenge for learning and development specialists is to make sense of this rapidly evolving industry and to design supervision practices that meet their own organisation's needs. Given the complexity and fast pace of change in coaching, this is no easy task. Hawkins says: 'Because of the proliferation of professional bodies, models and standards in coaching, there is a lack of coherence in the profession which makes it harder to develop a common approach to supervision.'

It is not that learning and development specialists need to be convinced of the importance of their role in managing coaching services effectively. Further evidence of this, if it is needed, comes from a recent poll on the CIPD's Helping People Learn website ([www.cipd.co.uk/helpingpeoplelearn](http://www.cipd.co.uk/helpingpeoplelearn)).

Members of the site's virtual discussion group were invited to comment on a number of propositions about coaching. More than 540 responded and overwhelming agreed that organisations should work towards a culture in which coaching is accepted as the norm. They firmly agreed that line managers should be trained in coaching skills, that coaches should have support (for example, in the form of supervision) and that

learning, training and development specialists have a key role in designing and managing coaching services within the organisation.

This all means, of course, finding a way of delivering and supporting coaching services that most effectively supports each organisation's needs. This includes deciding whether and when to use external coaches, how to use internal coaches, and what coaching skills managers should be expected to have.

Then there are decisions about how coaching fits into the wider learning and development strategy and how this supports the organisation's systems and cultures. It all adds up to some serious challenges for learning, training and development specialists in designing and managing coaching services.

CIPD's research makes it clear that the supervision arrangements put in place to support these coaching services need to be just as carefully designed and managed. As organisations seek to grow their coaching capability, it will become even more important that they know how to support their coaches and make the best use of their services. There is plenty of good practice out there but there is some way to go before all reach the level of the best.

### Questions to ask external coaches about their supervision

Questions	Positive Answers
How often?	At least every two months or a 1:35 ratio of supervision to coaching
From whom And what is their background, experience and qualifications?	An experienced coach with supervision training/experience
What are the benefits of the supervision you receive?	Can describe benefits for themselves, their clients and client organisations
Can you describe a situation where supervision transformed your coaching?	Answer should demonstrate reflective practice, ability to receive challenges and new ideas non-defensively and to apply learning

*[Key points from CIPD's research on coaching supervision are available as an event report called 'Coaching Supervision' at [www.cipd.co.uk/eventreports](http://www.cipd.co.uk/eventreports). The full report of this research will be published at the end of November as a change agenda called 'Coaching Supervision – Maximising the Potential of Coaching.' It will be available at [www.cipd.co.uk/changeagendas](http://www.cipd.co.uk/changeagendas)]*

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