

Inside Broadcast

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Concerns about confidentiality mean many firms prefer external coaches to the home-grown variety. But at the Beeb a small army of internal coaches is transforming leadership and management styles.

Rod McKenzie and Kevin Marsh will be familiar names to many BBC radio news fans. As editors of 'Newsbeat' and the 'Today' programmes respectively, they probably exist in listeners' minds as hard-nosed newshounds with little time to spend on their own development – let alone other people's. But alongside their day jobs, both men also act as internal coaches in one-to-one coaching sessions, helping other BBC executives to address their management and work challenge.

Over the past 10 years coaching has become firmly established as a development tool for managers and leaders in the UK. Many companies use external coaches, but this can be expensive, so when the BBC decided a few years ago to expand coaching beyond the boardroom, developing an internal capability was the only real option.

After first experimenting with this approach in the late 1990s, the corporation now has several clearly defined programmes aimed at different groups and delivered by 65 BBC coaches, who come from across the organisation. Head of executive coaching Liz Mccann reckons that between them they are coaching upwards of 200 people at any one time. And with demand growing, 12 more coaches are being trained.

The advantages of internal coaching are not only financial. "The coach comes with a deeply embedded understanding of the culture that is the BBC," says Felicity Milton, head of genre management and business affairs. In her day job, Milton is in charge of the business side of commissioning drama at the BBC, but she had also been coaching for the past four years. The BBC, she believes, gets a double benefit from using internal coaches as the coaches develop skills and techniques that make them better managers themselves, as well as helping the people they coach.

Mccann first learnt about coaching in the 1990s when John Birt, the then director-general of the BBC, had a coach who would fly from the US to meet him. She thought it would be useful for coaching to be more widely available, and decided to get some training for herself and her colleagues. In conjunction with the BBC's training and development department, they set about offering coaching to the corporation's executives. The response was overwhelming, she says, and by 2000 the organisation decided to formalise its approach.

"We realised it wasn't enough to have a bit of training and enthusiasm, so we created a coaching foundation course," Mccann says. Selection is rigorous. Applicants take part in a role-play, which is assessed by a psychologist, and have an interview. If accepted, they have to do pre-course reading and complete exercises. The course consists of two three-day blocks of training, each followed by six weeks of coaching volunteers under observation,

plus a final training and assessment day. They are bound by the same rules of confidentiality as external coaches with whom they would otherwise have no contract.

To ensure quality is maintained, coaches undergo ongoing development. They are required to join a shared-learning group and meet a supervisor every two months. The group gets together in the alternate month. They can also have an optional half-day of continuing professional development each month.

The BBC has three main coaching routes. One is for middle and senior managers, who can request coaching on an ad hoc basis and will be allocated a number of hours according to their seniority. Second, everyone who attends the BBC's leadership programme, aimed at team leaders and run in partnership with Ashridge, has the option to receive some coaching. Lastly, there is a new programme, called "First 100 days", launched last September, which, as its name suggests, offers coaching to executives in the first three months in a new job.

"If you don't make your impact in the first three months, you've missed your chance, so we work with someone from the start," says Mccann. The coaching starts with a meeting between the coach and their line manager. For four weeks after that, coaching sessions are weekly, and then the coach and coachee can decide the frequency.

The BBC also offers a coaching skills course, which teaches managers some of the techniques they can use in their day-to-day jobs.

As with any training, it's hard to quantify the benefits of coaching. The "First 100 days" scheme is being evaluated, while the coaching offered on the "Leadership programme" is consistently cited by participants as one of the most useful elements of the programme.

But Mccann is certain coaching works. "I'd like everyone to be able to have coaching, and to offer it to them when they are starting out," she adds: "I'm constantly impressed by how much people will do for no promotion and without extra money. It's a special community."