

Inside Job

By Liz Hall

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Organisations are becoming increasingly canny about how they use coaching, with many now bringing the process in-house. But is internal coaching merely about cutting costs or can it deliver other benefits?

When coaching firm Laughing Phoenix struck a deal 12 months ago to coach the 30 most senior HR professionals at the Medical Research Council (MRC), one of the conditions was that it would feed back any recurring themes that came out of the coaching process.

Like the BBC, Lehman Brothers and Unilever, which all take a similar approach, the MRC wants to be able to tackle any common issues raised by those being coached and to align coaching with the wider business picture. This attitude is still rare in the UK because of fears about breaching individual's confidentiality, but some employers are clearly taking a different view. As Eunice Aquilina, a former coaching consultant at the BBC says: "Organisations are becoming much more sophisticated in what they are trying to achieve and are maturing as coaching is maturing."

One way they are doing this is by building cohorts of internal coaches – a practice very much on the rise. Businesses increasingly recognise this model as a way to deliver more coaching for less money, although it is still early days in terms of how best to handle this new kid on the block.

About 80 per cent of respondents to the CIPD's Learning and Development survey 2006 said that their organisation aspired to having a 'coaching culture'. Three-quarters said they were investing time and resources in order to achieve this aim, while 18 per cent said they were using a network of internal and external coaches.

Over the past year or so there has also been an increase in the number of attempts to evaluate coaching and much more awareness of the need for the supervision of coaches, with the BBC among those leading the way in both areas. The BBC is constantly developing its evaluation model and is conducting research among those who have received coaching to find out what, for example, they expect from the process and how it helps them to develop as leaders.

But there is still a way to go before organisations align coaching fully with other activities. Only 27 per cent of organisations responding to the CIPD survey felt that coaching was completely integrated into HR and business strategy – but this is changing.

The most popular means by which coaching is delivered is via the training line managers. A recent survey by consultancy Blessing White found that almost 73 per cent of managers had received training in how to coach people, compared with 66 per cent over the previous year.

Employers are becoming increasingly discerning when choosing both internal and external coaches. Unilever was one of the first organisations to draw up a list of

preferred suppliers. It now has a global list of 28 external coaching providers. BP has followed suit, slashing the number of coaches used globally from 800 to 100.

Sam Humphrey, Unilever's former head of global coaching, instigated the tightening of selection criteria. Along with Sue Holland, also a former head of coaching at Unilever and the founder of Laughing Phoenix, Humphrey is among 11 coaches who are working with the MRC to help its senior HR managers develop a consultancy role. She says that Unilever contacted the coaches regularly to 'harvest some of the intelligence' that they had gathered from their clients. In one of the group's Asia-based businesses, feedback revealing a lack of engagement among its leaders allowed the organisation to rectify the problem.

'Hearing the same themes being picked up by two or three coaches is very useful,' Humphrey explains. 'It would be interesting to know, for example, if a coach hears from three people that workplace bullying is rife.'

She argues that tracking trends in this way not only helps organisations to identify which areas to tackle; it also helps coaches to understand the context of their work better. But she stresses that coaches are not told what to look out for and that only information relating to the organisation, rather than individuals, should be gathered.

The BBC, which has 80 internal coaches, gathers them every six months to discuss any common themes. According to Aquilina, issues identified through this process have included leaders needing more support in communicating change or in performing basic tasks such as appraisals.

There are those who remain cautious about gathering intelligence from coaches. John Blakey, director of coaching at IT consultancy LogicaCMG, says: "We are not consciously doing that here. I'm wary of being seen to be operating in that way, because it threatens the trust relationship. It simply makes your clients feel unnerved, wondering if this is the tip of the iceberg."

But Blakey does, where appropriate, use the information he accumulates "in an very informal way, with lots of discretion rather through any structured process that's documented".

LogicaCMG has seven internal coaches, all accredited by the International Coach Federation. All of them have "day jobs" in areas such as HR or sales, and they work alongside external coaches. Blakey says there were compelling reasons for forming an in-house team.

Cost was also a key factor when the BBC introduced internal coaching five years ago. "The former head of executive development, Tony Ryan, saw the value of external coaching for the top level and said: 'If only we could do it for more people...'. Although it is not cheap, internal coaching is cost effective," says Eunice Aquilina, who is now a member of the I-coach academy, a provider of training for coaches.

The fact that internal coaches have a better understanding of the business is another major factor prompting organisations to bring coaching in-house.

“They can provide the relationship and trust in a way that an external coach can’t. And they really understand the business,” says Andy Callaghan, talent management manager at HBOS, which has put more than 2,500 of its managers through two-day “Coaching for performance” workshops, delivered by Performance Consultants. The consultancy has also accredited a task force of 24 coach trainers to make the banking group self-sufficient in delivering the programme.

Callaghan does acknowledge that internal coaches’ familiarity with the business can be a hindrance at times, though, “The temptation is for people to go straight into offering solutions, rather than giving individuals the space to work things out. The coach needs to bite their tongue, giving responsibility and ownership to their client. Some people find that very difficult.”

One way of helping internal coaches to avoid becoming too emotionally involved, as Blakey points out, is to ensure that they themselves have someone to work through issues with. Organisations are gradually putting more emphasis on this supervision.

The CIPD is working with Bath Consultancy Group on research, due for publication this year, into supervision in coaching. Eileen Arney, CIPD adviser, learning, training and development, says there seems to be a consensus that executive coaches, for example, should be responsible for their own supervision. “Even a couple of years ago, coaching supervision was not on the horizon, but now people are asking about it, which is very positive,” she says. Arney says that coaching supervision is crucial to organisations that want to learn from coaching interventions, but there is uncertainty about confidentiality issues,

Supervision is an essential ingredient of coaching practice at the BBC, helping to avoid conflicts of interest and collusion between coach and client. The organisation’s model is adapted from the “seven-eyed” supervision process proposed by Peter Hawkins and Robin Shohet. This considers factors such as the client’s issues, organisational context and the quality of the relationship between practitioner and client.

Supervision is built into the BBC’s accreditation process for internal coaches. In any six month period, they must have three one-to-one sessions with their lead coaches (supervisors) and take part in three shared learning groups with another lead coach.

David Clutterbuck, co-founder of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council, says that most organisations aren’t very good at integrating external and internal coaching, but that there is much to be gained from doing this. Clutterbuck believes that line managers aren’t always the best people to act as internal coaches. “If the organisation is looking for a deeper level of coaching and real insight, it might be difficult to use them,” he says. “Also the line manager might be part of the problem. A lot depends on the nature of the coaching. If it is task related, it is fully relevant for the line manager to be engaged. But the more you move into broader behavioural work, the less appropriate it tends to be to use line managers.”

Internal coaching certainly isn’t for everyone. Sam Humphrey is not a fan, for example. “If you’re looking at coaching to effect a transformation, why use people who are part of what you want to transform? Internal coaching is too much about getting it done on the cheap,” he says.

What is clear is that the coaching industry isn't the Wild West any more and organisations no longer feel as though they are being assaulted by a mass of gold-diggers posing as external coaches. The next few years are likely to see employers consolidating their efforts to join up the various coaching pieces into a clear picture, asking crucial questions about when – and even if – coaching is appropriate.