

Swifter, higher, stronger



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‘There are many ways that training has benefited from the growth of coaching’.

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People Management
20 May, 2004

In January 2002 I went skiing after a gap of six years. As I waited for my skis to be adjusted at the ski-hire shop, the assistant told me: ‘You’ll find it much easier with the new shape skis. Ski designers have learned so much from the design of snowboards.’ On the slopes I discovered for myself that he was right.

Whenever a new technology arrives, it benefits old, related technologies. Executive coaching is a new ‘technology’ that, like snowboarding, has grown rapidly in popularity and reputation. It has had some profound, and beneficial, effects on that older, but related, technology training. Many of the trainers I meet and work with are coaches too. They have the opportunity in the slower and more intense focus of their one-to-one work to study closely and reflect on what helps and what hinders personal and behavioural change. The lessons they learn inform their training practice to no small degree.

Snowboarding didn’t lead to the replacement of skis with something else altogether, but rather built on and improved their design. Similarly, coaching has led to a greater understanding of and emphasis on the best features of training. ‘Learner-centred learning’, as opposed to ‘teacher-centred training’, has become the norm rather than an example of excellence. Training is designed to allow and encourage reflection, rather than to get as much information across in as short a time as possible. Establishing respect between trainer and participants, as well as among participants themselves, is now seen without question as an essential backdrop to successful training. And our understanding of what ‘respect’ really means has moved forward. Respect is a deep appreciation of the fact that everyone is always already in the middle of something. The effectiveness of any intervention, be it a coaching session, or a training programme, will be critically determined by the extent to which the coach or trainer acknowledges and responds to all the things their client(s) are in the middle of. Good trainers always begin by asking participants about their expectations of the course. This was one way to acknowledge they hadn’t arrived as empty vessels waiting to be filled, but rather as full vessels hoping to be able to squeeze a few more drops in. Now trainers will take time to explore their participants’ worlds, to find out what is on their minds, and to make connections as often as they can between the material of the course and the preoccupations of the participants.

There is another important way in which the perspective that trainers get from coaching informs their training practice. In the spotlight of the one-to-one coaching relationship, the coach experiences how critical their own beliefs and attitudes are. The coachee will learn more from what they are than from what they say. If what they are conflicts with what they say, the coachee will learn little (and the coachee’s scepticism is likely to be all too apparent).

In the training room too, though the effect is more diffused because there are many people there, participants will be helped or hindered by the beliefs and attitudes of the trainer. Gone are the days when the 'best' training was done by experts who already knew everything about the topic. If they already know everything, they are not themselves learning. And if the experts aren't seen to be learning, participants cannot 'catch the habit' of learning from them.

Yet this is one of the most valuable things that can happen in the training room. It is far better that participants leave with a multitude of questions and the determination to find out the answers, than with a book full of notes and a disinclination to open it. If the trainer 'models' learning, by showing curiosity, and by learning as much from participants as participants do from them, then the desire to learn will be strengthened.

The growth of coaching has encouraged us as trainers to re-emphasise the importance of our participants and of ourselves in the learning exchange business we are in. Even if we don't coach ourselves, we have colleagues who do, we read articles and books about it, and we work with participants who have experienced it. The influences are many, and undeniably positive.

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