

# Whistle While You Work

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What are the quantifiable business benefits of coaching? Why is coaching a good idea? Both of these have always struck me as particularly daft questions. Next time you get asked, reply with: 'Good question – maybe we shouldn't talk to people about how they are doing and what needs to be improved. Why don't we just hope that they'll work it out on their own?' Of course, the more timid among you might then want to make a run for the door.

An organisation needs to be interested in understanding what people really think, and to encourage relationships based upon open dialogue – otherwise it is doomed. You won't access ingenuity and spirit if you don't have channels open. Coaching is a way of achieving these aims.

However, 'coaching interventions', or training lots of people in an HR function in the skills of coaching, are not necessarily a good idea. Neither is giving people access to external coaches a good thing in its own right. I have worked in organisations where both of these approaches have been advanced as a panacea, and even colluded with this view myself. What I've learnt is that coaching is often superimposed as a solution to more deeply rooted problems, such as how people work together and how they are engaged with the business.

I believe a climate of coaching and feedback needs to exist for organizations to outperform their competitors consistently. I'm just not a big fan of subcontracting the delivery of this to others. You might need external help at the start to encourage dialogue and listening, but eventually these behaviours have to be lived by line managers acting as coaches. They can't be watching from the stands while the coach is on the pitch with the players.

A few years ago I worked in an executive team as part of an international business. We recognized that our senior managers were mostly dysfunctional barons with low-level people skills. We agonized about why we had such a leadership cadre, and quantified their failings with every competency model and behavioural assessment you could imagine.

The time spent talking about these senior people was about 10 times greater than our collective investment in talking to them. So nothing really changed. We chose not to address the painful fact that their behaviour could be a response to our leadership and instead decided that they lacked insight about themselves and openness to feedback.

Instead of seeing this area as our responsibility, we employed external coaches to tackle it on our behalf. Inevitably, most of the coaching sessions were taken up with the senior managers complaining about how terrible their bosses were. Things started improving only when we changed the behaviour of those bosses, including replacing some people who were unable to perform role-model coaching.

So how do you go about creating a coaching culture rather than just giving people access to coaching? The New Year is a time for taking stock and for renewal, and so is a great

opportunity to engage your senior colleagues in some honest debate. I emphasise that this needs to include the executive or most senior team, because I have never seen a coaching culture that doesn't start at the top. I'd like to believe one could exist – but then, I'd like to believe in Father Christmas too.

The first step is to assess what position your leaders are starting from. It is a good idea to engage the executive team and get their support before you start asking questions – otherwise it may be time to run for the door again. The following approach may lack sophistication but will save you a lot in consultancy fees.

- Talk to the secretaries of your executive team and conduct a rational assessment of their bosses' diaries, quantifying how they have spent their time over the past eight weeks in a pie chart. Pay particular attention to the two segments of the pie chart that you should label 'reviewing things that have already happened' and 'coaching and developing my team'. I guarantee that the former segment will be much bigger than the latter.
- Ask the executive team: 'How do you spend your time?' and 'How do you think you should spend your time?' The first answer will show they are in denial, and the second will be inversely proportional to what is actually shown in the pie chart.
- Ask the direct reports of this executive team: 'What sort of relationship would you like to have with your boss that would enhance your contribution and personal well-being?' and 'What's it like now?' Not everyone will be candid about this, but you should at least get some useful impressions.
- Confront the executive team individually and collectively with your findings from the above, and engage them in a discussion about what they really stand for as leaders. How do they want to lead others? What is getting in the way of this happening now? What will they commit to changing?

If the responses to all the questions are negative, and you don't stimulate any appetite for improvement, then any coaching interventions you impose will be a complete waste of time and money. In this event, I would suggest you invest your energy in 2006 in finding another job.