

Your Organisation: where is it on the road to becoming a coaching culture?

David Clutterbuck and **David Megginson** examine the theory and reality of changing to a coaching culture and offer some practical advice for a deep transition.

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Key Learning Points

- There are a number of basic issues that stand in the way of coaching being used to its fullest effect. Resolving these will improve the transition to a coaching culture.
- Coaching opportunities present themselves in a number of ways. Taking full advantage will reap the benefits of creating a coaching culture.
- Training and development professionals can play a significant part in changing an organisation from one that doesn't have a coaching culture to one that does.

We define a coaching culture as one in which the predominant style is managing and working together, and where a commitment to grow the organisation is embedded in a parallel commitment to grow the people in the organisation. According to CIPD research, 88 per cent of UK employers say they use internal coaching and 72 per cent use some form of mentoring. Yet we can find very few organisations where HR professionals or senior managers can honestly say that one-to-one development has made a significant and sustained impact on the overall business. The reality is that coaching and related behaviours are typically spasmodic, patchy and only loosely connected to the engines of the business.

That's not how it *should* be, of course. In theory, continuous development of people, through feedback, learning dialogue and individual experimentation, should drive every business process, from customer service to strategic planning. So why doesn't it?

The Basic Problems

From our research and experiments in large UK and European employers, it would seem there's a number of basic problems. Some of the most common include:

- Lack of competence and confidence by line managers and others in their ability to coach
- Inability of employees in general to be coached, and to know when and how to acquire coaching
- Failure by leaders to be role models and to lead the strategic change to a coaching culture
- Failure to address the barriers raised by the existing culture

Lack of competence and confidence

There's a key role for trainers here in designing coaching training that addresses both initial needs and supports people in becoming more adept over time. Kellogg's Europe introduced the concept of 'master coaches', senior managers from across the European business who claimed a particular interest in coaching and demonstrated an aptitude for people development. Their role was to champion and model coaching in their area of the business, as well as to be a resource for other senior managers after their training.

After participating in a two-day Advanced Coaching Skills programme, we organised the master coaches into an externally facilitated learning set to:

- Manage their own agenda
- Request expert input where required
- Share their experiences of 'off-line' and 'line' coaching
- Coach one another in skills development, and
- Monitor progress

The initial coaching skills we developed included the GROW coaching model (**G**oal, **R**eality, **O**ptions and **W**ay forward), and some additional questioning and listening techniques. The master coaches benefited from additional skills building when they met as a group every two months.

At Kellogg's the master coaches were initially a little uncomfortable with their role, but started to be more at ease after they had been offered and experienced quality coaching for themselves. We concluded that to develop others, the coaches needed to be developed first. Their development needed to go beyond providing them with practical coaching skills. The coaches needed to be developed according to their individual needs and set a development agenda for themselves.

The structure of the Advanced Coaching Skills programme offered new opportunities for the master coaches to work as observer coaches with senior management participants and to meet with their coachees after the programmes to support them in their new coaching style. The consequent confidence and expertise of the master coaches is apparent in the positive feedback from participants on the Advanced Coaching Skills programme. All the directors, general managers, vice-presidents and the president in Europe have voluntarily either participated in the programme or are booked onto future programmes and there has been a significant volume of requests from the next organisational level to form a new cohort of master coaches.

Inability to accept coaching

Being a coachee takes courage, especially in an organisation in which admitting weakness is risky. One of the core factors in creating a coaching culture is to make people aware of the myriad of opportunities around them for being coached and to convince them that there are few if any downsides to seeking coaching help.

One of the most common reasons coaching opportunities are missed is that people simply don't recognise them until it's too late – and sometimes not even then. It's so easy to become buried in doing, that learning opportunities flash by like rural railway stations on an express line. It helps to be aware of the kinds of situations in which

coaching opportunities arise. The 15-point coaching checklist (see below) is far from exhaustive, but it provides a useful starting point for teams to use for learning review.

The problem with convincing people they should put themselves forward for coaching is that they are often very aware of the barriers. Unless there is an organisational norm that acknowledges these and actively attempts to remove them, there will be very little change in coaching seeking behaviour.

Failure to lead change

The development of a coaching culture often takes place in a piecemeal way, and this is one of the principal barriers to its effective implementation. Another barrier is the over-emphasis on the role of HR in making this move. This is not to say that HR does not have a crucial role; it certainly does. However, this role, in our view, is best seen as one of facilitation rather than leadership.

What are the actions that the senior group needs to take in managing the move to a coaching culture? We have identified the following from our work in a number of organisations.

Having a clear view of the strategic leadership role of the top team

In one company that we have worked with, the top team plus all other leaders throughout the organisation worked through a process of organisational learning, using, for example, Chris Argyris' framework for better advocacy and better inquiry. In this case the top team was ready both to give the underlying reasons for its actions and to expose these to critical examination. The team was also adept at exploring the reasoning of others – not as personal criticism but as seeking the truth. This significantly contributed to the congruence of its working towards a coaching culture.

Developing leadership practice of the top team

How the top team interacts with staff and the priority it gives to listening to their concerns is a crucial symbol of commitment. The following example will illustrate this.

When he was director general of the BBC, Greg Dyke suffered a serious fire at his home one night. The next day he had arranged to see a group of engineers as part of his mission to listen to the unsung heroes of the organisation. Many assumed he would cancel such a non-strategic meeting in the circumstances. But Dyke recognised the symbolic importance of the event, and in spite of his own distress and lack of sleep he went to the meeting. No wonder people believed him when he said he wanted to change the way the organisation was managed.

Develop a coaching story

In Kellogg's Europe, a major initiative that ante-dated the move to coaching was a project called 'our story'. We found that developing our story at a country level gave management teams confidence to hold on to and pursue an agreed direction on how the business should be managed. Having a coherent story seems to serve as a flywheel to stabilise the movement of the company. Where the story had been most strongly developed the country management teams were not diverted by other priorities and

projects that impacted on them. The story doesn't have to be about coaching, though it does have to be congruent with the coaching approach.

Developing a mandate for the coaching style throughout the organisation

Top management's strategic leadership involves 'giving permission'.

One of us worked with the top team of a public transport organisation that was in the process of being privatised. The technical and HR director was leading the move to accountable, creative, results-oriented management. At a meeting of a large number of managers, one of the new breed reported how he had taken an initiative in his depot, and that it looked as if it was going to have positive results. The director leading the project expressed his horror that the depot manager had taken this action without seeking permission.

In spite of facilitator attempts to work through the situation, this single act set back the projected move to initiative and greater responsibility for many managers in the organisation. People pay far more attention to what leaders do in practice than they do to what leaders say they want to happen.

Advocacy of and inquiry into the move to coaching

The move to coaching needs to be treated as an experiment. This seems paradoxical and counter-intuitive to many leaders, for whom clarity of intent and fixity of purpose has been a touchstone of excellence throughout their managerial careers. However, the coaching way requires a strong attention to the unfolding reality of the situation and this requires examining the effect of change efforts rather than remorselessly pressing ahead. Coaching also requires – of course – listening, involving and seeking wisdom from others, and so it would be counterproductive to be doctrinaire about what should be done and how it should be implemented.

Failure to address the barriers raised by the existing culture

In particular, most organisations today are ruled by the tyranny of e-mails and constant action. Time for reflection is not valued, so people tend to work in an increasingly frenetic way. Inevitably, this means they work harder and longer, but not necessarily smarter and better.

Along with the move to hyperactivity has come the demise of dialogue. Communication has become increasingly transactional, rather than relational; shallow and fleeting, rather than deep and meaningful. As every trainer knows, the real learning in a workshop occurs when people have time to talk and reflect together. In the normal working day, the loss of these opportunities makes learning an increasingly isolated affair – and hence less questioning and less sustainable.

Finding solutions

So what can training and development professionals do about the issues and problems raised so far? They can:

- Give people the feedback they need to be aware of their capabilities as coaches

- Provide a breadth of training and support resources
- Change the rules about access to coaching
- Incorporate coaching behaviours and processes into all workshops and seminars, and
- Measure the impact you are having on the culture change.

Giving feedback

There are many types of questionnaires for members of coaching pairs to use. In our forthcoming book, we have also developed questionnaires for team leaders and teams. The focus here is the team rather than a pair. Managers can get team members to fill out the questionnaire openly (or if this is seen as too confronting, anonymously and the range of responses can be presented on a chart. This can be useful for coachees as well as coaches, on that it often highlights different responses to the same stimulus. It reminds them that no one approach will work equally well for all.

Within the team, the coaching culture will usefully be a microcosm of that in the organisation as a whole. In practice, teams vary considerably in how supportive and enthusiastic they are about coaching behaviours. Another questionnaire is useful in assessing attitudes and practice within the team, and in stimulating open discussion about intra-team developmental behaviours.

Training and resources

There is a range of training and support services and they are not just confined to the classroom. They additionally include coach the coach, regular tips on good coaching practice and supervision. Consider these three examples.

- The European Mentoring and Coaching Council's new kite-marking process for qualifications has as its first level the equivalent of a five-day course, with follow-up support (www.emcouncil.org).
- The Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire Strategic Health Authority deliberately gives more training to coachees than to coaches, because it wants to reinforce the active role of the coachee in managing the relationship with his/her own learning.
- Siemens Business Services, in a programme designed through the European Foundation for Management Development, gave coaches seven days' training in three blocks. After the first (three-day) block participants were told to do no coaching. Instead, they just had to observe the performance of their staff. The argument was that if they can't observe skilfully, then they will be in no position to coach.

These examples challenge the 'making do' with a lowest common denominator that goes on in many organisations where a day's course for senior coaches is considered enough.

Changing the rules

Allow people to demand coaching. Switch the emphasis of learning provision from just-in-case to just-in-time, and from nose-to-screen to face-to-face. Jan Hein van Hoolen of ABN-AMRO says that in his company 'people know they have a licence to remind their

bosses of how they are supposed to behave. If I'm tired and not providing coaching behaviours (for example, if I've relapsed into being coercive) then people around me hopefully feel able to say, "I feel uncomfortable about this..."

Incorporating coaching behaviours

Swap talk and chalk for reflect and explore; apply coaching models like GROW to business processes such as strategic planning. A challenge for developers is to ensure that all training is delivered in a coaching way. How would this transform the portfolio of courses that you offer?

Measuring impact on the culture change

Track the key indicators and agree with top management practical intervention to reinforce progress on each.

In conclusion

We see the progress to a coaching culture going through four broad phases. In our forthcoming book we have a questionnaire to measure this progress. Below we conclude this article with a brief description of each of the four stages – nascent, tactical, strategic and embedded.

- At the *nascent* stage, an organisation shows little or no commitment to creating a coaching culture. While some coaching may happen, it is highly inconsistent in both frequency and quality. Top managers present poor role models and coaching behaviours tend to be abandoned in the face of more urgent, if less important, demands on managers' time. Any executive coaching provided is uncoordinated and typically the result of severe performance problems with a few individuals or a status boost for senior managers incapable of (or unwilling to engage in) self-development. People tend to avoid tackling difficult behavioural or ethical issues out of embarrassment, ineptitude, fear or a combination of all three.
- At the tactical stage, the organisation has recognised the value of establishing a coaching culture, but there is little understanding of what that means or what will be involved. Top management sees this issue as primarily one for HR. There are systems in place to train coaches and/or mentors, and there are numerous discrete HR systems such as succession planning and appraisal, but the links between these and the coaching process are at best tenuous. There is a broad understanding among individual contributors and managers of the potential benefits of coaching, but commitment to coaching behaviours as integral to management style is low. People recognise the need to tackle difficult behavioural or ethical issues, but will only do so in environments in which they feel very safe.
- At the *strategic* stage, there has been considerable effort expended to educate managers and employees in the value of coaching and to give people the competence (and therefore confidence) to coach in a variety of situations. Managers are rewarded/punished for delivery/non-delivery of coaching, typically linked to formal appraisal of direct reports. Top management have accepted the need to demonstrate good practice and most, if not all, set an example by coaching others. They spend time getting across to employees how

coaching behaviours support the key business drivers. However, while the formal coaching process works well (in part because it is measured), the informal process creaks at the joints. There are plans to integrate coaching and mentoring with the wider portfolio of HR systems and, at a mechanical level, these largely work. People are willing to confront difficult behavioural or ethical issues on an ad hoc basis, and there are good role models for doing so with both resolution and compassion.

- At the *embedded* stage, people at all levels are engaged in coaching, both formal and informal, with colleagues both within the same function and across functions and levels. Some senior executives are mentored by more junior people and there is widespread use of 360° feedback at all levels to provide insights, into areas, where the individual can benefit from coaching help. Much, if not most, of this coaching and mentoring is informal, but people are sufficiently knowledgeable and skilled to avoid most of the downsides to informal mentoring. Coaching and mentoring are so seamlessly built into the structure of HR systems that they occur automatically. The skills of learning dialogue are sufficiently widespread that people are able to raise difficult or controversial issues, knowing that their motivations will be respected and that colleagues will see it as an opportunity to improve, either personally, or organisationally or both.

If the training and HR functions can be honest with themselves and promote honesty across the organisation, on the pace and quality of progress towards a coaching culture, a great deal can be achieved. Perhaps the biggest mindshift of all, however, is to evolve from being the providers of answers to becoming the askers of better questions.

Coaching checklist

Below are 15 opportunities for using coaching in the workplace.

1. When a new project or assignment is given
2. When an error has been made
3. When a new member joins the team
4. When there is feedback (from any source)
5. When there is conflict between members of the team, or between the team and outsiders
6. When people feel a lack of confidence
7. When the team is in danger of getting complacent
8. As a result of regular development reviews (both team and individual)
9. When there is a change in technology or business process
10. Where inappropriate, inadequate or dysfunctional behaviour is observed
11. Where targets are missed
12. When individuals or the team wish to raise their game
13. When people feel they are operating too much in 'coasting' mode and need to be stretched more
14. When one person acquires a skill that could be helpful to others
15. When organisational politics intrude

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References

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2. Jan Hein van Hoolen, Ibid.