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# Building a coaching culture

## A development journey for organisational development

### Abstract

This paper provides an overview on the development of a coaching culture. It draws on best practice developing within the US and European Union to offer a five stage model for the development of a coaching culture within organisations. The five stages are: Informal external coaching, Professional External coaching, Coaching for all, Coaching as a management style and Coaching across the network. It suggests that many organisations have aspirations for building a coaching culture but that many organisations are currently at level one, two or three on the journey.

Key words: Coaching culture, coaching research, best practice in coaching, internal coaches, appointing external coaches, coaching as a management style.

### Introduction

Over the past decade coaching has continued to grow in popularity as an organisation tool for supporting learning, change and development, with a growing evidence base (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh & Parker, 2010). As response to this evidence, a growing number of organisations are seeking to develop coaching cultures. However, there is often a mismatch between the reality of practice within the organisation and the rhetoric of what executives claim to be happening. This paper will firstly briefly review the nature of coaching and define coaching practice, as well as consider the nature of organisational culture. It will then consider a series of levels which will help organisations move forward towards creating a coaching culture.

### What is coaching & what is organisational culture?

There is a considerable and wide literature on organisational culture and within this considerable debate about the nature of culture. Culture corresponds to different terms, meanings and definitions amongst various business sectors. Some people define it as a set of rules and principles; others relate it to the psychology, attitudes, experiences, beliefs and values (personal and cultural values) of an organization. Deal and Kennedy (1982) defined organizational culture as *the way things get done around here*. Schein offered a more formal definition,

"A pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way you perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 2004, p. 17).

The common view which pervades these definitions is that culture is both seen and unseen. Further, there is wide spread acceptance that organisational culture is difficult to change.

The debate on the definition of coaching has been relatively short, but writers have offered a wide number of alternative definitions of what is coaching and executive coaching. One of the most widely quoted definitions is Whitmore's (1997) definition which defines coaching as:

*"unlocking a person's potential to maximise their performance. It is helping them to learn, rather than teaching them"* (Whitmore, 1997, p8).

In the organisational arena, Kilburg define has been widely quoted. He views coaching as;

*"a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and, consequently, to improve the effectiveness of the client's organization within a formally defined coaching agreement"* (Kilburg, 2000, p 142).

We see weaknesses with this definition too. One potential weakness is that by too tightly defining the processes, other ways of working are excluded. Instead favour a more open definition:

*" a Socratic based future focused dialogue between a facilitator (coach) and a participant (coachee/client), where the facilitator uses open questions, active listening, summarises and reflections which are aimed at stimulating the self awareness and personal responsibility of the participant"* (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011).

In this definition we are suggesting that the term Socratic dialogue refers to the belief held by the coach that the coachee already has within them the answer to the question or is able to identify a route to discover the answer. Thus the role of the coach is not socio-educational, but is more guided discovery, with the skill of the coach in shaping questions and focusing attention on the next step of the journey.

However, one of the continuing threads of debate in the English speaking journals (such as *International Coaching Psychology Review*, *Consulting Psychology Journal*, *Coaching: An International Journal of theory, practice & research* and *International Journal of Evidenced based Coaching and Mentoring*) is the argument concerning coaching's overlap with counselling, consulting, mentoring, OD, appraisal and training. These interventions could be illustrated by a spectrum with OD as a directive, imposed approach on one end and counselling as an individual, healthy and unrestrained approach on the other end. Coaching draws on the differences and similarities with these interventions.

In respect of counselling, for instance, McKenna & Davis (2009) highlighted the importance of the relationship between the coach and the individual client and the role played by empathy in building and maintaining this relationship. In coaching, a relationship is formed more as an equal partnership, while in counselling a more hierarchical relationship often exists. A further difference is that while in counselling the focus is the past and present, in coaching the focus is towards the future and on building new ways of being. This has several implications for coaching practice. The first of these is the heavy emphasis placed on goal setting (Passmore, 2003). Secondly, the level of challenge which is used by the coach to help the individual client to critically reflect on their behaviours, attitudes and beliefs and to use the down turns in their career and life as useful learning points. As Warren Bennis noted “Leaders learn by leading, and they learn best by leading in the face of obstacles. As weather shapes mountains, so problems make leaders” (Bennis, 1998, p146) .

In terms of a comparison with appraisal, the appraisal is usually delivered by the manager and is top down, and often with a focus on omissions in performance in contrast with a focus on success. DeNisi & Sonesh, (2011) have noted that the focus has shifted from improving the appraisal process to integrating feedback from appraisal into plans for behaviour change, which for example can be implemented through coaching.

As with all definitions there is the potential for further debate. This on-going debate helps us to more fully understand the nature of coaching and its limits and boundaries. We would encourage the development of a debate within the Polish coaching community to clarify and agree the nature and boundaries of the intervention and its meaning within Polish organisational culture.

## **Developing a coaching culture**

While the research evidence suggests coaching is now wide spread in its use within organisations across Europe (Bresser, 2010), the transformation of organisations into coaching cultures is less well researched and from experience in the UK is less well established.

As yet there is no agreed definition of what is a coaching culture, although the issue has been considered by other writers (for example see; Eldridge & Dembkowski, 2004; Clutterbuck, 2003). Clutterbuck (2003) has suggested that a coaching organisational climate has the following eleven features:

**Table 1: Eleven Features for an Organisational Coaching climate**

Personal growth, team development and organisational learning are integrated and the links clearly understood
People are able to engage in constructive and positive confrontation
People welcome feedback (even at the top) and actively seek it
Coaching is seen as a joint responsibility of managers and their direct reports
There is good understanding at all levels about what effective developers and developees do
Coaching is seen primarily as a opportunity rather than as a remedial intervention
People are recognised and rewarded for their activity in sharing knowledge
Time for reflection is valued
There are effective mechanisms for identifying and addressing barriers to learning
People look first inside the organisation for their next job (a typical average would be that only one in five does so!)
There are strong role models for good coaching practice

Clutterbuck (2003)

This set of behavioural features is a useful start when considering how organisations might build a coaching culture. Since this publication in 2003 there have been a growing number of organisations who have claimed they have established a culture which they term 'a coaching culture (see for example *Coaching at work*). The independent evidence to support these claims however is often lacking, along with definitions of what is meant by the term 'coaching culture'. In this section we will seek to define a coaching culture and secondly identify a series of steps in a journey towards achieving such a culture. The five levels we will discuss are: Informal external coaching, Professional External coaching, Coaching for all, Coaching as a management style and Coaching across the network.

Let us first consider defining what we mean by coaching culture. This is a difficult term to define given the complexity of clearly defining culture and coaching, discussed above. In setting out this definition we invite others to reflect on it and to discuss this idea and how it can be more meaningfully defined.

In this paper we have defined a coaching culture as:

*“A coaching culture is one where coaching, the use of reflective and provocative questions, is used consistently by all employees and by key partners, to help develop understanding, insight and personal responsibility for those responsible in delivering the organisational outcomes. While it is not the only way which the organisation leads and manages its employees or works with its partners, it is the primary leadership, development and learning style used in the organisation”*

### **Level one - Informal external coaches**

Many organisations hold the presumption that if they use external coaches this already have a coaching culture. However, from our experience of working with multiple organisations and consulting firms in the UK, the appointment and management of coaches shows coaching is still in the development phase when compared with other interventions. It is still common in the UK for the external coach to be appointed by the individual director based on a personal recommendation from a business contact or from the coach and director meeting at a networking event. In such personal appointments there is often little feedback to the organisation or little input from HR or others on what the coaching should focus on to deliver the greatest benefit to the organisation (who is usually paying for the intervention). For these reasons, we would consider this a coaching culture at the ground floor or level one.

### **Level two - Professional External coaching**

At level two on the journey towards a coaching culture, we would suggest that coaches would be appointed in a professional manner, in a similar way to other consultants and trainers. The appointment process may involve formal selection panels selected, as well as clarity around how the coaches are managed; what are the expectations of coach supervision and how organisations make use of information gathered at supervision stage. Most importantly at this stage the organisation sees coaching as part of its wider HR strategy and a key part of its talent management and OD objectives.

For the appointment process we are already beginning to see a growing use of systematic and procedural based appointment processes. In order to select the best or most suitable coaches the organisation needs to establish clear and transparent criteria, in a similar way it does for employment selection. What these criteria are will depend on the organisation however we would encourage organisations to consider the following criteria in selecting their own 8-10 key criteria.

**Table 2: Possible criteria for coach selection**

Qualifications in coaching
Experience in coaching – number of years , hours of coaching
Experience in business – positions held
Experience of coaching other senior executives (or in the organisations sector, ie retail)
Understanding of the evidence of what works in coaching practice
Demonstration of competence – observed coaching exercise

Firstly, the significance of relevant coaching qualifications is a way of differentiating highly trained coaches from the masses. In reviewing coaching qualifications, many are offered by providers with little or limited assessment. As a result formal qualifications from universities are preferred to those from commercial providers, even where such courses are accredited by the major trade bodies such as the International Coaching Federation (ICF), Association for Coaching (AC) or European Mentoring & Coaching Council (EMCC). For organisations seeking the top 5% of coaches a masters degree or post graduate qualification is now the gold standard for coach training.

A second criterion is experience. This may come as coaching experience, as well as business or sector experience. What matters will vary, but research in mentoring as well as coaching confirms that individual clients expect their coach to understand the challenge they face. If the client is a board level director, the coach's ability to understand and build a relationship is enhanced if they too have been a director or have had significant experience of coaching at this level.

A third criterion is the understanding held by the coach of what works in coaching; i.e an understanding of the science of coaching. Great coaches know what it is they do that works, in the same way that a doctor understands the science of the human body to understanding which treatment will be effective to cure the back pain or the skin problem of their patients'. The selection process should not assume that coaches understand the science of what they practice. In fact from experience this is rare given the low level of training in the sector. As the profession of coaching develops and more coaches receive post-graduate training this is likely to change.

A final aspect to consider is using observation to observe a coach working on a real live issue, may be with a real manager or with an actor. This allows the selection panel to not only make judgements on what the coach say they do, but observe their use of a number of coaching models as well as tools and techniques.

In the UK, these smart methods for selection can help organisations identify the best 1-3% of coaches. In a market where there is over supply of coaches, organisations need to adopt sophisticated techniques to ensure they appoint the very best.

Once coaches have been appointed, organisations at level 1 have more sophisticated way of managing and reviewing the coaching assignments undertaken within their organisations. As in previously mentioned at level one, most organisations are not actively involved in the process of managing the relationship with the coaches which work in their organisation. At level two organisations take a systematic approach to managing. This might involve tri-partite meetings for appointments and reviews, managed supervision and briefing coaches on the wider organisational agenda

Firstly, the tri-partite meetings at the commissioning of the coaching assignment and at the final review offer a chance for the coach, the individual client and the organisational representative (may be the line manager or the HR manager) to set out and agree the agenda for the coaching assignment. The agenda should not be issues already discussed with the individual client and should be a blend of their priorities and the priorities of the organisation drawn from appraisal information, feedback and future development plans (talent management) for the individual. The agenda should also be aligned with the organisational HR strategy and competency framework, so progress can be tracked. At the end of the assignment the meeting between the three stakeholders can allow a review of the achievements and what may be next for the individual's development.

A third aspect is the use in phase two of coaching supervision provide by the organisation. This involves bringing all external coaches together to support their development, gather organisational wide issues and common themes which are emerging in their practice, without breaching individual confidentiality and also offering the opportunity for HR to brief coaches on the on-going organisational development and HR strategy. In this way coaches can understand the changing dynamics within the organisation and feedback anonymously information about common themes and issues which can help HR in their wider people management.

One common challenge raised about such feedback is that coaching is confidential and is for the individual. We don't hold the view that coaching is a personal benefit, like a company car. Instead we see coaching as a tool for enhancing the performance of the individual and thus the organisation. Feedback, when well managed through an independent external supervisor allows high level information about changing work pressure, morale or bullying to be feedback for the organisation to consider an organisational response. Further, by offering briefings for coaches, coaches are able to understand the forthcoming plans for the organisation and be guided to focus on specific issues with their coaches which enhance the wider OD strategy.



The third level of building a coaching culture involves the move to introducing coaching for all staff, not only the senior managers or executives. At this stage, organisations have tended to move towards creating a cadre of internal coaches, as the use of external coaches for all staff is expensive and for most organisations is unaffordable.

The first step in this process is building a pool of internal coaches. This involves selecting and training individuals throughout the organisation. From experience we have found that inviting volunteers is helpful, as such individuals are more likely to remain involved with the future programme and make time for coaches than those pressed into coaching service. Secondly, in selecting volunteers, there are three factors for organisations to consider. These are the existing communication skills of volunteers, their useful life within the coaching pool, the time they have to undertake coaching as part of their role

**Table 2: Questions to consider when nominating internal coaches for training**

Has the individual got adequate communications skills which can be further enhanced through individual training (for example do they make eye contact during a conversation, do they greet people with a genuine smile?)

Has the person got 3 or more years of service in the organisation?

Will their manager release them to carry out 2-6 hours of coaching work a month?

While some people volunteer they lack the basic interpersonal skills on which the training will build. If the individual is extremely introverted and has difficulty making and holding appropriate eye contact, in our view this makes them unsuitable for coach training, until these more basic communication skills are developed. Secondly, organisations sometimes nominate people who are due to retire or are being made redundant. While this may be a nice departing gift for the individual, this will rapidly diminish the pool of internal coaches. In one programme one of us was involved with 40% of the internal coaches who volunteered had left (some to set up their own coaching practices) within 12 months of them completing the training. This results in the need for costly retraining of a second wave of internal coaches within a short period, often before any benefits have been delivered.

In terms of training, we would advocate formal but less rigorous training than for professional external coaches. One route is for internal coaches to complete 5-10 days of training over a three to four month period, and with some form of practical independently assessed work.

Supervision and on-going support is important for this group too, and we would advocate a similar model to the one described above with the organisation using an independent and trained external coach supervisor to support, develop and brief the coaching pool.

The third level for organisations on the journey to creating a coaching culture is to use coaching as the dominate management style. This usually involves training managers in coaching skills, alongside wider management skills training, to help managers recognise their preferred current styles of leadership and offer them both options and skills in using different ways of leading depending on the individual and situation. There are a wide variety of leadership models on which organisations can draw (see Passmore, 2010). One model for achieving this is to draw on Goleman's six style of leadership (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2003).

By using a coaching leadership style the aim to develop employees to solve their own problems. When an employee presents with a problem by using the coaching style managers help the individual to explore the problem, risks and benefits, and identify a solution. Through repeated use of the style employees develop the skills to solve their own problems, and the manager can delegate further responsibility for tasks to individuals. This is not to suggest that using the coaching style is the solution to all management issues, Goleman's research (2003) clearly identifies that the best managers are able to use a wide range of style to suit individuals and situations.

To achieve this level of competency in coaching, managers have to be trained in basic coaching skills, including managing a learning conversation, building rapport, holding an employee in a place of discomfort to provoke deeper reflection and critical thinking and using silence to encourage the individual to come up with their own ideas. Moreover, to maintain the effectiveness of coaching, every 4 to 6 months, organisation need to hold update meetings, where relevant feedback and support is provided.

A final aspect to consider is how the organisation will make space for coaching conversations. In the past decade there has been a growth in open plan offices using pods and hot-desking areas. Organisations need to plan spaces for coaching conversations. This can involve break out areas, informal seating by the water cooler or coffee machine. These need to be plentiful for coaching conversations to flourish.

The fifth level is spreading coaching beyond the traditional boundary of the organisation into supplier and partners. The success of many businesses is based on their close working relationships with a select group of key suppliers. These may be manufactures of parts, franchise holders or partners who deliver part of the organisations service (such as a call centre). At this level this is about encouraging stakeholders to introduce coaching into their own organisations or teams that work with the organisation. This may involve drawing stakeholders into a big conversation through methods such as Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperryder & Whitney, 2005; Lewis, Passmore & Cantore, 2007). It may also be about partner and franchise organisations training their own staff in coaching skills and adopting similar practices with their own staff teams.

## Conclusions

In this short paper we have explored the idea of organisations developing a coaching culture. We have defined coaching and culture and offered one definition of what a coaching culture is. We have in the following sections offered a journey plan for organisations to assess their own organisations current practices and a way for them to move forward to further embed coaching in their day to day work.

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