

HOW TO DEVELOP WORKPLACE COACHES

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What is a coach?

Some people are born to be great coaches: the good news is that it is possible to make great coaches too.

There is nothing new or mystifying about coaching – it is simply a style of communication which engenders trust, mutual support, personal growth and great leadership. Some natural coaches learn their skills through the good fortune of being born to parents who are natural coaches. Others have teachers or later mentors as their role models.

For many years I worked with one of the world's most famous natural coaches while helping Richard Branson set up the Virgin Empire and going on to run some of his companies. The coaching principles of openness, positive feedback, ownership and a blame-free culture were core values at Virgin, decades before the word 'coaching' was applied in its current sense. A few years earlier, Socrates also recommended coaching skills – although I don't believe the words 'executive coach' are specifically mentioned in his writings! References to the skills have popped up in various forms many times since.

The core principles of a coaching culture are:

- Positive feedback
- Ownership
- A blame free environment

Good coach training should focus significantly in these areas, together with listening skills, questioning skills, and learning to focus on the coachee's agenda.

Who can train as a coach

For natural coaches, training is useful because it identifies the tools they already have and explains why these tools work so well. Some people have partly developed coaching skills and they take to the training like ducks to water – they usually find that the more fluent they become in a coaching style, the more comfortable they feel. There is a third category of trainees who have few inherent coaching skills. They frequently come from backgrounds where directive management is the tradition, or they have been successful high pressure sales people. These trainees find it harder than any others to learn coaching skills – their natural style is deeply embedded in the opposite direction. They are in the great minority, however, as they are not usually attracted to learning how to coach at all. Nevertheless, we have found that this third type of trainee is able to absorb the new style within 3 months of intensive training, provided they make a determined effort to put old habits aside and absorb the new learning. After that, like any coach, they continue to learn and improve with every session.

There is a fourth category of trainee: the ones who have been told they are going on a course, are not clear what coaching means, and have no interest in learning the skills. Ownership being part of the coaching ethos, it is preferable if all trainees have volunteered for the training. However, we have worked with teams of managers who made it perfectly clear that they were not there under their own volition and we have not found this proves too much of a setback. Phrases such as 'I don't have time for this', or 'coaching won't work with my staff – they ask me what to do and I tell them' have come up on the opening morning of the training. However, by lunchtime and without exception, even the cynics are won over when they realise that the tools they are being schooled in will save them time and effort. One of our most reluctant trainees became vociferously pro-coaching after having tried out the new idea of asking her team for solutions instead of telling them, proclaiming 'not only did they like it better – I enjoyed it more too'. Coaching creates a 'feel-good' factor, for the trainees, the trainers, the coaches and the coachees. If something feels good, people will demand more of it. That is human nature.

Keys to successful training of workplace coaches

Coaching is a skill, and learning to coach follows the same pattern as learning any other skill, such as driving, skiing or a new language. These are the criteria for success:

- The learning must be experiential – the only way to learn to coach is by practising the skills. They cannot be learned from books. Imagine trying to drive a car for the first time after having studied the theory only, with no practical tuition. Good coach training will provide role models, with the trainers being experienced coaches able to demonstrate coaching, and plenty of opportunity for practice and feedback among trainees.
- The training must last over a period of time. One or two day workshops will provide a good understanding of the skills and a few tools to use.

However, to develop a coaching style, it is recommended that trainees come back to several sessions in the months following the first bout of training. Such a programme will provide them with mentoring, peer support and motivation to continue practising the skills. We sometimes meet managers who have attended one or two day courses on coaching. While they take to the skills, the new way of communicating feels awkward at first. They complain that they go back to the workplace full of good intentions, disappear under 300 e-mails and, by the time they are able to focus on coaching, they have forgotten how to do it.

- Trainees must be given a safe place in which to hone their new skills. Ideally, this means pairing them up for practise sessions with each other before they experiment in the workplace.
- It is recommended that trainees are taught the techniques of constructive feedback, so that they can successfully feedback to each other after practice sessions.
- Some of the training can be successfully imparted via conference lines. Many coaches find coaching by telephone more effective than face to face. A common question during the training is, '*How do you read the body language of the client over the phone?*' Shifts in the voice are as effective as visual signals – in fact, coaches 'hear' body language on the phone.

Certification for workplace coaches

Some trainees join a coaching course in order to improve their communication skills in general and have no intention of conducting formal sessions. Nevertheless, we find that if participants are trained to the full extent of conducting formal sessions, the various skills and tools will be more firmly embedded than if they are simply taught how to improve their communication skills.

For those trainees who wish to become in-house coaches, some type of assessment and certification is desirable, such as delivering a session to a trainer and receiving a pass mark or otherwise. If the trainee is not up to scratch, the trainer can work with them through feedback and coaching to raise their skills to the required standard.

Trainees who pass their certification can become mentors to other in-house coaches after they have amassed a reasonable amount of experience, say having conducted 60 coaching sessions.

Who can be coached in the workplace

Some staff may have reservations about being coached by certain categories of other staff; for instance some may wish to be coached only by those senior to them, or only by those whose paths they will never cross in the normal

course of work. However, when such relationships are tried out, these reservations usually fall away, as the ownership of the coaching series is so much in the client's control.

There can be conflict of interest if managers are formally coaching their own direct reports, and this is not recommended. However, the managers' coaching skills will make them highly effective leaders when used in an informal way.

It is recommended that clients are allowed to choose their coaches from a selection. The essence of coaching is that the agenda is held by the client, and the selection process should affirm this.

Confidentiality

It is absolutely essential that no reporting back takes place either in specific or broad terms. If there is any suspicion whatsoever that this may happen, the coachee will not be able to achieve the inner focus which makes coaching successful.

External one to one coaches are highly effective precisely because their coachees feel that the confidentiality factor is more secure. However, it is equally important that external coaches are not expected to divulge any information about the coaching, even in the broadest terms.

It is also essential that the coach has no ulterior agenda. Coaches must not be asked to coach other staff towards any particular outcome. The essence of coaching is 'self directed learning'. A simple way of illustrating this is that in normal conversation, we ask questions in order to obtain information. In coaching, the coach asks questions in order that the coachee can obtain information about him or herself. This results in clarity for the coachee to see how they may best move forward – whether or not that means towards the company's annual goals, or out of the door into a new career!

Informal coaching in the workplace

When trainees have practised their coaching skills to the point where they become fluent, their emotional intelligence will have reached a higher level in all types of communication. The coaching skills will have become integrated to the point where they are used naturally with colleagues, bosses, family and friends, the milkman, the postie and the plumber! All their relationships will step up a notch.

New coaches will learn how to 'lead from behind' – a highly effective form of leadership which harnesses the energy of reports by giving them ownership of their work. This results in a heightened sense of satisfaction, which surveys show to be more important than earning power to the majority of employees. For instance, in a recent Gallop survey of 2000 workers, 69% indicated that receiving recognition from their bosses was more motivating than money and

4 out of 5 said recognition or praise motivated them to do a better job. In blunt terms, what that means is that a boss can expect a higher return from an employee by praising them than by paying a bonus at the end of the month. Think about the effect of that on the bottom line.

Coaching is like a happy virus – if one person starts using it, the difference will be felt and small ripples can grow to great waves. One of our coaches was hired by the manager of a services company. The sales of the whole organisation were on a downward turn, yet during the next 3 months, the department of this particular manager showed a 20% increase. His director asked what was happening, and the manager put it down to being coached. This resulted in coaching training being run out across the whole organisation, bringing about a whole culture change and an upturn in the profits.

Uses for coaching skills in the workplace

Coaching is not appropriate in every situation. For instance, if someone runs into the room shouting 'Fire!' it is probably not the time to ask them 'And how do you feel about the fire?' There are times when reports ask for instructions and expect to receive them, or ask for advice in order to tap into their superior's experience. As their coaching skills become fluent, coaches will intuitively know whether to respond in a coaching style or not.

It is recommended that coaches trust their intuition 80% of the time. Intuition is heightened by learning coaching skills and any good training should have an in depth module on active listening.

Once the coach is fluent, the skills come into play unconsciously when and where needed. There are other times when the coach may feel stuck in an exchange with a colleague, boss or report, and can consciously reach into their tool kit for the most useful response.

Coaching skills prove most useful

- when giving or receiving feedback, whether positive or negative
- in the bonding of teams, particular during mergers and other changes
- motivating staff to achieve their best with the most amount of enjoyment and the least amount of stress
- eliminating fears which may block an employee from taking action
- improving assertiveness, particularly during meetings or on conference calls
- working on areas for improvement highlighted by staff reviews or surveys such as 360s

Coaching skills can be applied equally effectively with teams as with individuals – the underlying process is the same.

Measurement in workplace coaching

There is a perception that it is difficult to demonstrate the benefits of coaching in an organisation. However, there are a growing number of effective methods available.

1. 360 type surveys
These can be implemented across the organisation prior to the coaching/coach training and at later intervals, say 6 months or a year. Quantitative comparisons can be drawn.
2. Measurement of bottom line, at similar intervals
This works in an organisation with clear bottom line performance, either in terms of profits or, in the public sector, efficiency of keeping to budgets.
3. Questionnaires put to individuals, at similar intervals, measuring the soft benefits they have received from the coaching/coach training and what percentage improvement they judge this to have on the bottom line.

These can be turned into a fraction, such as:

<i>Amount of benefit received</i>	<i>£1,000,000</i>	<i><u>£800k</u> = 400%</i>
<i>Minus cost</i>	<i><u>(£200,000)</u></i>	<i>£200k</i>
	<i>£800,000</i>	

We find the most effective method is to use values based surveys. As a human being has a personality, created by their values, beliefs and habits, so a company has a personality – we call this a 'culture'. The culture of a company is determined by the values, beliefs and behaviours that its component individuals bring to the workplace. Asking employees to complete surveys identifying the current organisational values, as they see them personally, and the values they would like to see in place, enables the employee to see what values they have to leave behind when they come to work in the morning and triggers a process of change in the workplace.

The results of such surveys, if spread across large numbers in the organisation, can be analysed to see which areas are particular stumbling blocks for the organisation. Limiting behaviours may show up, such as bureaucracy, long working hours or dictatorial management. Employees can be asked to quantify what losses they estimate are occurring because of such behaviours, and the results can be collated into a document which shows what percentage of the bottom line is being lost through such limiting behaviours. The resulting figures may not be strictly statistically accurate, but they will provide useful guidelines on how much the profits could rise if the organisation can effect a change in an area shown to be troublesome.

Conclusion

Organisations cannot change: people do. Any change in the culture of the company will be triggered by one or more individuals, whether a change in attitude, IT systems or hierarchical structure. Nothing will change without the instigation of at least one individual and the co-operation of others.

One of the reasons for the explosive success of coaching and coach training in recent years is that coaching enables individuals to identify what they would like to change in themselves and to effect that change in a positive way. By initiating positive changes in themselves, people inevitably trigger a transformation in their organisations: the happy virus in action.

'If things go wrong in the world, this is because something is wrong with the individual, because something is wrong with me. Therefore, if I am sensible, I shall put myself right first... in the last analysis, the essential thing is the life of the individual. This alone makes history, here alone do the great transformations just take place, and the whole future, the whole history of the world, ultimately spring as a gigantic summation from these hidden sources in individuals. In our most private and most subjective lives we are not only the passive witnesses of our age, its sufferers, but also its makers. We make our own epoch.'
- Carl Jung "The Meaning of Psychology for Modern Man"

'Virgin has always worked on the general philosophy of staff first, customers second and shareholders third. This may sound the wrong way round but we've always believed that if we look after our people well they will look after our customers better and as a result shareholders will benefit in the long term. It seems to have worked so far!'
- Sir Richard Branson

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