

COACHING CULTURES: CULTURE VULTURES DON'T WING IT

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Establishing a coaching culture requires organisations to take a careful and considered approach - otherwise it will be out of sync with corporate values.

Top of the development wish list for many organisations is to have an established 'coaching culture' – a phrase that describes an environment where coaching is the norm for individuals, teams and the whole organisation.

However, this desire can lead to ill-targeted spending and effort, warns John McGurk, adviser on learning development and coaching at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). He worries that eager organisations will treat coaching as a stand-alone development method, and isolate it from others, rather than thinking about what they want from it.

"You can't engineer a coaching culture on its own," he warns. "People development managers need to look at what it's for. They need to consider context."

McGurk, who is finishing CIPD research into building a coaching capacity, due to be published in April, gives an insight into the type of self-questioning about the purpose of coaching that he wants organisations to cover. "Ask if the coaching is to empower people on the shop floor. What type of organisation is it? How does this organisation learn?"

Integrated

He stresses that it is up to organisations who is coached, when and by whom, but his overwhelming message is that the coaching must be integrated with the rest of the organisation's development activity. "The CIPD will always emphasise that coaching is a powerful management tool," he says. "It should be positioned as a management technique that complements other management skills."

McGurk is arguing for a strategic, rather than blanket approach to establishing a coaching culture. This means setting up a pocket of best practice and is a method which, elsewhere, some organisations have found to be effective.

For example, at home improvement company Everest, development consultant Lynn Davidson ran a coaching programme in a pilot format for a selected group of managers.

"We had a fantastic learning and development culture already," she says. "We used the coaching to build onto that." Being selected for the pilot programme added a certain cachet, which in turn fuelled enthusiasm for it. "Status was attached to being part of the programme, because the managers were seen to have a sponsor who was good at recognising key talent," says Davidson.

In turn these managers represented the right investment for the company.

"We chose the right people - in other words, those who are key to the long-term development of the company," she says. She advises that others look to build their coaching cultures gradually.

"A classic mistake would be to try to go too global too quickly," she says. "Or to think that coaching could solve problems, such as morale. Potentially, if you don't have a learning and development culture already in place, it is going to make it a lot harder."

Culture change expert Heather Wright agrees. She is founding director of Advance Performance, where she advises organisations that are looking for a different environment to prepare the ground by encouraging employees to ask questions.

"When we first go into an organisation we don't talk about coaching," she says. "We set up a culture where people say 'what we need is coaching'. This helps them to buy into the changes and stops it being a tick-box exercise."

Behaviours

At Newcastle Business School, associate dean for executive development Jane Turner agrees that anyone trying to introduce a coaching culture should steer clear of trying to do this on top of an infertile hierarchical structure.

"What we are talking about is a shift in behaviours," she says. "The command and control approach doesn't get the best from people."

Turner, who previously worked in HR and leadership roles at major phone and car retailers, says that it is important first of all to "get the board listening" and to get them to understand what a coaching culture looks like.

"They need to know that it's about people who are valued taking risks, and that an authentic and genuine dialogue would be going on. Senior people might be challenged."

She advocates a building-block approach, with the coaching tied into specific projects and clear outcomes. This makes it easier to see if the project will achieve its objectives and so help to evaluate the benefits.

Turner took this approach with Northumbria Police, when she devised an executive coaching programme around a leadership competency framework. "The strategic imperative was around the development of an empowering culture, underpinned by transformational leaders," she says. "This intervention was to complement the significant technical training which senior police officers engage in."

Turner says that coachees have welcomed the opportunity to think about their leadership styles.

"Engagement with the process has been quite overwhelming. In such a unique, demanding environment, coachees have found the coaching space invaluable," she says.

The idea of 'creating space' is a common theme in coaching. For example, at Towers Perrin, senior consultant Anna Marie Detert finds that coaching lends organisations a safe place to explore development.

She thinks that the best way to establish a coaching culture is to put "super coaches" in place. These are internal experts who focus on encouraging others to become coaches. "People will then imitate behaviour without being told to do it," Detert says. "It's not quite peer coaching but it is about someone experienced showing the ropes."

Benefits

Detert recommends tying the coaching to a business need or operational output. This is especially useful for convincing the board or senior managers of the benefits of such a culture.

For example, she set up a pocket of coaching on an oil rig. This rig was shown to complete more projects with lower costs and better performance in compliance and health and safety than a similar rig. "This became a way of measuring and comparing the benefits of coaching," she says.

At business coaching specialist Meyler Campbell, managing director Anne Scoular believes that arguing the business case is the best way to convince senior managers to buy in and to back this up with high-profile success stories.

"The most successful argument for a coaching culture is when board members see the results of a coaching programme walking around the building," she says.

However, Scoular is wary of too much hype and of unrealistic expectations.

"Changing culture takes time," she warns. "Some people say it takes 10 years, and we know from research that the key to development is having it integrated back into the workplace and having the behaviour role modelled. Many activities, such as training people to be thought leaders, have to be sustained over a long period."

Ultimately don't expect miracles, particularly if the groundwork hasn't been done. "A coaching culture can only be built in an organisation where there is authentic support from senior management, line management, colleagues and, of course, the individuals being coached," Scoular says. "Never waste money on people who are determined not to be coached."

7 Steps to a Coaching Culture

Peter Hawkins is honorary president of the Association of Professional Executive Coaching Supervision and chairman of Bath Consultancy Group. He gives this road map to a coaching culture:

1. Recruit external coaches for some executives – these coaches should work to the organisations' remit. Executives could choose their own coach but only from the employer's approved list.
2. Develop an internal coaching and mentoring capacity – this should be properly supported with training and supervision for internal coaches. Internal coaching communities can be created.
3. Actively support coaching endeavours – senior people should be publicising the benefits of the coaching they receive. Internal coaching communities should be meeting regularly to review progress within the organisation and of their own development.
4. Coaching becomes the norm for individuals and teams – anyone can demand coaching.
5. Coaching is built into the HR and performance management processes of the organisation. This includes giving managers 360-degree feedback on their coaching style, for example.
6. Coaching becomes the predominant style of managing throughout the organisation – the structure of the organisation should have moved from one where 'problems come up and solutions come down', to a flatter structure where 'challenges come down and solutions come up'.
7. External stakeholders are engaged in the coaching culture – customers, suppliers and investors become aware of the organisation working with them and supporting them to mutual benefit.