

# The case for coaching

[Coaching and mentoring](#) / 27 May 2011



Training managers as coaches can offer huge benefits to your organisation

Once the preserve of blue-chip CEOs, coaching is becoming increasingly popular at all levels – and no wonder, when it can build confidence, develop new skills and improve performance, explains Helen Mayson

Could coaching be the UK's most undervalued development tool? According to a new survey by the Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM), 80% of organisations have used coaching in some form in the last five years, yet it's more often used for CEOs and senior executives than at line manager level. But if your managers were coached by their peers and even trained as coaches themselves, the business benefits could be huge.

Heather Bunney, head of diagnostics at learning and development provider Cegos, says coaching is a great fit for organisations facing cuts and looking to get more from less. "In the difficult times we're in, the potential for managers to coach their individuals to better performance, whether that's from poor to good or good to great, is huge."

The ILM survey reveals that 45% of managers think coaching improves their performance, and 42% say it gives them greater confidence in the workplace – surefire reasons to explore coaching for managers at all levels.

"It's absolutely true that more organisations are seeing the benefit [of coaching]," says Gladeana McMahon, chair of the Association for Coaching. "What tends to happen is that they've used external coaches first, and because of the benefits of that, they've started to think 'hang on, if this is what happens with external coaching, what would happen if we started to create a coaching culture in the organisation?' They're trying to get managers to coach their staff a bit more."

## **Manager as coach**

Training team leaders and managers in coaching techniques, which include things like better listening skills, empathising, goal-setting, questioning and feedback, is a big step towards creating a coaching culture. “I’m a big advocate of manager as coach,” says Jani Rubery, consultant at specialist executive coaching practice Sandler Lanz. “I liken it to the coaching you’d be doing on the football pitch. You’re helping me hone my skills. You’re close to me and you’re giving me confidence and feedback.”

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Gladeana McMahon, chair, Association for Coaching

With poor performance or attitude problems, coaching can help managers reach the root of a problem, which often isn’t the most obvious or apparent. “Quite often the presenting issue isn’t what’s causing the problem,” says Sabine Stritch, programme director for the postgraduate certificate in coaching at Roffey Park, an executive education provider. Using listening skills and empathising, core concepts in coaching, can help reveal what’s really causing the issue.

But it’s not just problem team members who can benefit from a coaching style of management – all types of employee, including your high performing team members, can advance through being coached. “Coaching works in all situations, but I’d argue that it works even better when you’re going from good to great,” says Bunney. “At that point you’ve got people who have the skills and possibly the will, they just need the right focus to let them develop themselves.”

## **A coaching culture**

For organisations looking to build a coaching culture at work, leaders should first examine why they feel it’s the most effective route forward, says Stritch. “It needs to be a strategic decision,” she says. “Why does the organisation feel they need coaching ability? What usually comes out is that their managers are in a space of action and achieving goals, not in a space of ‘let’s create and develop the team so we can get to those goals’.”

This “maelstrom of action”, says Stritch, can distract managers from what they should be doing, instead leaving them feeling overloaded and unable to delegate. “Actually, their job isn’t ‘doing’ at all. Their job is getting others to get to a place where they can do and then hold them accountable for doing so. That is really what management is.”

Establishing a coaching culture at work could start with something as simple as sending your managers on a coaching skills course, says McMahon, which teaches managers to communicate with people in an engaging way rather than resorting to the old-fashioned command and control approach. “They would then create a structure with their teams that was about coaching staff to take responsibility to do more for themselves, to step up more.”

As well as developing the skills and responsibilities of team members, coaching can be incredibly beneficial to managers too, says Stritch. “Managers find themselves quite empowered through empowering others, and find they can do strategic stuff that they could never do before. They have time to look at where the department should be going, maybe even where the organisation should be going. They have time to influence upwards and make themselves visible. It’s a completely different way of working,” she explains.

## **Winning combination**

Coaching works well when integrated into traditional training programmes and can help embed lessons from leadership courses. “Training plus coaching equals success,” says McMahon. She believes an effective coaching culture is exemplified by “attitude, plus training your managers.” But to really make it a success, enthusiasm for coaching has to come from the top. “If the senior level of the organisation have not bought into coaching, you can train however many you want to at the lower levels and nothing happens,” says Kay Howells, executive director of coaching at Public Sector Management Wales (see case study, left).

To tackle the lack of understanding of coaching in the Welsh public sector, PSMW sent 50 senior leaders and CEOs on a three day coaching skills programme. It has gone “incredibly well” says Howells, with many of the participants expressing interest in becoming coaches themselves. “That’s been the best thing we’ve done in terms of raising awareness. Coaching cultures take years to implement, but if you’ve got your senior team thinking, talking and doing something about it, then things are going to shift.”

A particularly strong area for managers trained in coaching skills is goal setting, one of the core objectives of management. “Coaching is practical, person and outcomes focused,” says McMahon, which makes it easier for managers to elicit clear, well-defined and emotionally engaging goals from the person being coached. Managers trained as coaches are able to both set SMART goals and ask questions from a goal-focused mindset, helping their employees achieve their aims.

## **Changing habits**

There can, however, be problems getting managers to adapt to a coaching style of management. The very fact that many managers are promoted to supervisory positions because they are technical experts or particularly good at their jobs means they may lack basic management and communication skills. Employers need to invest time in training new managers, and coaching techniques can help develop some of these softer skills.

“Managers are in a really good comfort zone when they have their to do list,” says Stritch. “The stretch is to allow themselves to see their job in a different way and not to do anything. They’re not here to achieve, they’re here to help others achieve. Their own image of what a manager should do can stand in the way.”

While larger organisations have been using coaching in this way for a while, some smaller companies are only now waking up to the fact that coaching matters. For organisations

interested in engaging in coaching, the first step is researching what's available, says McMahon. "You can then make a decision about what's best for your organisation, and then start to introduce it. It might be that you start off by testing out a bit of coaching, usually on challenging individuals – if you start with the challenging ones and that's successful, then what could it do for your high performing individuals?" she says.

## **Trained teams**

Once an organisation has established a coaching culture, they often take things a step further, says McMahon. From teaching all managers coaching skills, they move on to training managers as accredited coaches. "Sometimes that's forming a dedicated coaching unit within the organisation and sometimes that's people who are managers or staff who are trained up, and they offer internal coaching to other staff," she says.

Measuring the results of coaching programmes and coaching skills courses, as with any form of training or development, can be tough – but it is possible. According to the ILM survey, only 39% of organisations undertake specific evaluation of coaching interventions, meaning many are unsure of the impact it has on staff.

McMahon says that coaching can have a strong positive effect on an organisation, as long as measurable outcomes are set and the coaching is assessed by whether those outcomes are met. "If they are, the company's happy because they are funding it, the employee is happy because they get what they need from it, and the manager is happy because their life is easier. So you've got a much happier, more productive and more aligned group of people."

## **Building bridges**

Making managers into informal coaches can also strengthen the relationship they have with their direct reports. "It gives the two of them a different way of connecting to each other, a different energy together in terms of achieving goals. They're focusing all of their energy into the same direction," says Stritch.

From executive level coaching to basic manager coaching skills, it's the deliverables that coaching can offer that make it such an appealing prospect to savvy employers, says McMahon. "Once you've actually seen how coaching can help your organisation, how it can develop your staff, how it can save on time, energy, absenteeism, conflict, better staff relationships, it's a no brainer."