

HOW IS COACHING SERVING MANAGERS IN BUSINESS?

A look at how coaching is being used in organisations beyond executive level

If you run a Google search on 'coaching for managers', ambiguous phrase though it be, the first three pages are overwhelmingly devoted to resources offering coaching skills training for managers; at the time of writing, only two entries out of thirty three actually offer the service of coaching specifically to managers.

What does this say about what is happening in business and how coaching is being implemented at management level?

Before considering this question in more detail, let's first have a look at how coaching is currently positioned in the market. In general, a polarisation can be observed between executive/ leadership coaching and 'life coaching', with a few specialist providers also being recognised in areas such as presentation, education, health, etc. As this article is looking primarily at coaching for managers, we will focus here on the business end of the spectrum.

Executive Coaching is now firmly established as a core development resource at senior and board level within organisations. Various research projects have demonstrated its value in relation to both measurable and intangible criteria, substantiating considerable investment in this field. Successful executive coaches can therefore command a certain fee level that drives the status quo for coaching professionals in business.

A welcome corollary to this maturing of executive coaching is an increase in recognised coaching credentials, supervision provision and the formalisation of standards within the profession. It has also meant a fast expansion in the number of coach training providers and it remains the case that individuals and organisations with minimal expertise and experience can still be found offering their services. In a growing market, let the buyer beware!

But what about managers?

In many ways the lot of a manager is a very tough one. Pressurised between two sets of expectation, from 'above' to perform strategically and also to provide day to day support to their people for bottom line delivery, managers are typically subject to considerable demands and stresses. And now a further responsibility is being asked of them; to become coaches.

As the benefits of executive coaching have become commonly accepted, many organisations have recognised the value of promoting coaching more widely to their people. Realising that those who adopt a coaching style tend to be more effective in managing their people, businesses want their managers to develop as internal coaches, triggering the remarkable rise in training providers.

Management development programmes can be very effective in providing specific tools, skills and resources. And there are various excellent trainings available, both inhouse and external, many of which include a dedicated coaching element.

All well and good. But where do these managers go to be coached themselves? Reputable coaching skills programmes include the experience of being coached regularly as part of the process. Once the training is completed, however, many managers then find themselves expected to act as coaches to others with no regular reciprocal support themselves.

Of course, line managers can be a valuable coaching resource, but often it is just not possible to access them when needed, because of time or geographical constraints: they are very busy people and are often away from the office. Or it may simply not be appropriate to go to a line manager for coaching where the subject is personal or something that the individual feels uncomfortable sharing in this context.

So while the trend towards managers learning and using coaching skills is entirely to be welcomed, it cannot be regarded as a complete solution. Some managers are simply not cut out to be coaches. Even those with real aptitude and good training are still operating within the system and can not therefore provide the same service as an external provider, nor indeed the expertise of a dedicated professional. There also remain issues of consistency, quality control and boundaries.

So if we consider where coaching is currently being positioned in the business world today, we can broadly identify two main areas of formal activity. Executives and team members directly benefit from receiving coaching that is actively sponsored by the organisation:

1. Senior people are receiving executive coaching , mostly from external coaches, to help them develop their awareness and performance and strategic thinking
2. Managers are increasingly expected to act as internal coaches to help their people raise their practical performance and delivery

Managers effectively fall between the two provisions, albeit their performance is no doubt enhanced by the acquisition of coaching skills,

Budget is often a significant factor in this anomaly. Extending executive coaching to all levels of management is seen as being very costly and this has contributed to the current situation. Quality coaching is expensive and therefore exclusive.

In response to this constraint, some coaching organisations are now considering how to widen the provision and scope of coaching to business and make affordable quality coaching directly available to managers. In the UK, for instance, Coaching on Call's innovative approach is being implemented successfully by organisations like World Duty Free and TNS World Panel.

The evolution of coaching into organisations continues. With the development of models such as Coaching on Call supported by bespoke new technology, a more even distribution of resources is achievable. This can only be welcomed as the practical value of coaching becomes better understood and providers develop more sophisticated ways of bringing effective coaching to the wider business population.

January 2009