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Creating a Coaching Culture

Abstract:

Purpose of this paper	How to create a coaching culture in organisations through coach training and external coaches
Design/methodology/approach	The writer draws on her experience in corporations as a board director and as a consultant to organisations in the field of coaching.
Findings	Conclusions are drawn about the effectiveness of coach training over external coaches and the best ways of implementing a coaching culture.
Practical implications	Advice is given regarding: • The principles of a coaching culture • How to launch a coaching programme • A ten point plan for implementing a coaching culture • How to choose external coaches • How to choose coaching skills training • Challenges of coaching in the workplace • Informal coaching in the workplace • Uses for coaching skills in the workplace

Introduction

Most large organisations in the world today have coaching programmes in place. These may take the form of external one to one coaches for middle and/or senior executives, management training in coaching skills, or training internal coaches. A particularly innovative approach has been taken by a number of public sector organisations including Kent County Council, who have formed the Kent Coaching & Mentoring Network, recruiting approximately 16 organisations for which the Council provides coach training. Out of this, they have created a pool of coaches from within the organisations who can provide coaching services which are charged for, but all the funds move from one public purse to another without involving external consultants.

There remains a lack of clarity about what the term 'coaching' really means. When running training courses for managers, it is common nowadays to find that one or more of the managers will already have received training in coaching skills while with a previous organisation. Sometimes I have heard managers say that they did not see the value of coaching after their last training, but now they understand it; one wonders what exactly they were taught the last time.

The pillars of a coaching culture

Drawing on my own experience as a corporate MD and Board Director, I believe that there are three principles underlying a coaching culture:

1.   Responsibility

The more a manager takes responsibility in the workplace, the less that manager's reports will take upon themselves. People are naturally creative, enjoy contributing and like to have a measure of control of their workload. These instincts will be curbed by managers who bully, criticise, humiliate or micro-manage their staff. However, being left alone without any positive feedback or suggestions for improvement does not encourage people to take responsibility either; and this is where the other two elements come in.

2.   Self-belief

People's self-belief can be boosted by praise from their bosses and peers. Outside recognition is not all that is needed, however. Think of a child learning to walk; it is encouraged by praise from the parents, but the key aspect is that the child is allowed to learn by falling down. Hence the third element in the trio:

3.   Blame free

Research shows that human beings learn through making mistakes, so people must be allowed to make their own individual progress through trial and error, from the

CEO to the most junior new recruit. People need the space to experiment, plus a measure of support, some suggestions, good role models, clear guidelines of what is expected of them and appropriate training for the job.

A useful question to ask oneself when a report makes a mistake is '*What response from me will help this person develop and remain motivated?*' In many cases, the answer to this is to remain silent. If someone knows he has made a mistake, and how to correct it, input from his manager may just make him feel worse, lowering energy and motivation. Given the chance to demonstrate his skill by showing that he knows how to correct the mistake will provide him with a feeling of satisfaction, pride and raised motivation.

Of course there are times when people are not aware of their mistakes, or are behaving unacceptably. The coaching approach here is to ask people to discuss their performance before simply telling them what is wrong. The chances are that when given the chance to talk, the person in question will describe the problems and come up with the solutions which the manager was planning to talk about, relieving the manager of the dilemma of how to address these issues at all.

If the person persists in a 'blue sky' approach without admitting that anything is wrong, the manager might then be a little more direct, and say '*And what challenges are you facing?*' If this fails to elicit any self-searching, then simply offer the feedback, preferably asking permission first, eg '*Can I share with you some things I have noticed about your performance?*' People are usually more open to listening when they have had a chance to talk at length first, and when they are asked permission, which gives them a feeling of control in the situation.

Managers struggle about how to give 'learning' or 'developing' or 'negative' feedback. The soundest rule of thumb when faced with the question of whether to give feedback, or what feedback to give, is to ask oneself 'What would I like to hear in this situation?' And then act accordingly.

It is rare to find an organisation where all three of the above elements are present and, even if they are, they may each fail from time to time. However, the more they are respected, the higher the level of trust will be throughout the organisation. There is a certain 'tipping point' where occasional failures in leadership and team relationships can be absorbed and forgiven, just as they are in a loving family.

How to launch a coaching programme

The question of where to start with a coaching programme is possibly the most frequent one I am asked, and it is usually more to do with budget and buy-in than choosing the programme itself. The first dilemma is whether to invest in external coaches or training managers internally, and within that whether to train in coaching skills for managers to use in their day to day activities, or to aim for a team of accredited internal coaches.

I sometimes hear organisations planning to provide external coaches to one layer of management, with the intention that they cascade the coaching down to all the levels below them. However, having a coach, being a coach, and teaching coaching skills to others are three very different areas. The first will not provide the skills required for the second and third. A coachee may appreciate the benefit of a coaching approach but will have no idea of the underlying structure and principles which make the coach so effective.

In my experience, if budgets are limited, training the managers in coaching skills will produce a more profound effect on the organisation than giving them one to one coaches, reflected in the Chinese proverb: *Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.* In addition, during and after the coach training course managers will receive effective coaching from each other. Of course, if budgets stretch to both external coaches and coach training, then that is the best of all options.

Next comes the question of to what extent the managers should be trained. An organisation, and often its managers, may believe that the managers do not need or wish to become internal coaches, so may provide perhaps a two day course in coaching skills which is supposed to turn them into coaching managers. However, in my experience what tends to happen is that some of the managers will become so enthralled by coaching that they will act as internal coaches anyway, but without having had the depth of training required for this. It is not a disaster, because coaching is 100% coachee led, so provided the principles are adhered to, the managers cannot do any great damage. However it is more desirable that they should be trained in how to deliver a series of sessions, to understand the need for a coach to have a supervisor, practise continuing professional development and regular refreshment of skills and knowledge.

Ten Point Plan for creating a coaching culture

Below is a plan which might form a basis for any organisation to acquire a coaching culture:

1. **Vision and purpose:**

   A coaching approach to any situation is to start by looking ahead to the desired outcome. This makes the pathway clearer, unifies people and aligns purpose. It enables progress to be measured and confirms whether the project is heading in the right direction. This can be achieved in a variety of ways from simply talking to people to find out what they want, up to launching a full-scale training needs analysis involving surveys, focus groups and interviews.

2. **Organisational health check:**

   Once the goals of the programme have been defined, it is time to explore the current situation. What resources are already in place? What else is required? What needs to be changed? What has been achieved so far? Who needs to be involved? If a large training needs analysis is being undertaken, this stage should be covered at the same time as defining the goals.

3. **Stakeholder mapping:**

   The stakeholders are the people who are affected by, or have an interest in, the coaching programme and the diagram below shows how the stakeholder map might look in a typical organization:
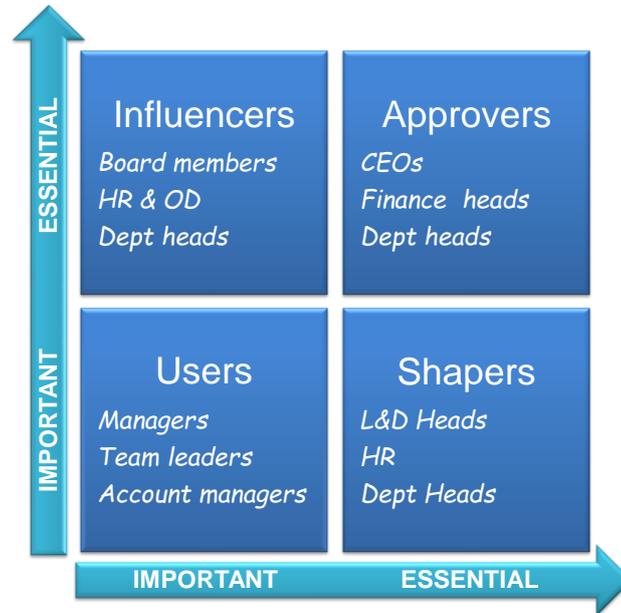
There are people who will influence the programme and those who will give approval for it. Also there are the ones who will attend the programme, and those who will shape and plan it. The approvers are essential, or the programme will never happen. The shapers are also necessary in terms of putting it together and driving the process. However, when designing the programme, it is productive to take in the views of everyone who will be touched by it, not only the essential players. The actual job roles in each section may vary from organization to organization and some may fit into several categories.

Always try to involve people who will champion your plans and who have influence with decision-makers. All of the stakeholders are important; some are essential to whether the programme runs at all:

- The Influencers might be board members, HR & OD heads and department heads.
- The Approvers might be CEOs, finance heads and department heads
- The Users might be managers, team leaders and account managers
- The Shapers might be L&D and HR heads, and department heads

The categories will vary from organisation to organisation.

4. Getting buy-in:

If the visioning and health check has been meticulously undertaken with all the stakeholders, then buy-in will be in place by now. Each of the parties will have a sense of ownership of the programme and how it will meet their needs. Visioning also tends to raise enthusiasm and energy, so the programme will already be building momentum.

5. Where to start:

Notice how far down the list this comes. A lot of foundations need to be laid even before planning, never mind executing the programme. It is like decorating a house: if the filling and sanding is not done properly, the final effect will suffer.

Now is the time to research potential providers and narrow them down to the ones who can help the organization fulfil the objectives identified by the training needs analysis.

Start with simple conversations. A great deal can be learned by talking to experts – even if they are trying to sell you their products – and this is an effective, free-of-charge way to find out what you need to know. These talks might trigger further research, and through all of this you will start to formulate a picture of the best type of programme to choose.

After that it is simply a question of narrowing down possible providers. In my experience, 80% of the value of anything that involves people depends on the quality of the people involved. After identifying a pool of suitably experienced suppliers, find out who you want to work with by speaking with them. Only these suppliers should take part in a detailed tender process, to save your time and theirs.

6. What to measure:

Notice that measurement starts here, before the programme has even been designed. Once we have ascertained what the intentions for the programme are, we can put in place yardsticks for measurement. It is crucial to differentiate the benefits derived from the programme as opposed to other programmes or situations which might be happening in the organisation at the same time, by including these questions:

- What benefits are solely due to the coaching programme, and to what extent (as an estimated percentage)?

- What tangible benefits have accrued to the organisation because of the coaching programme? If qualitative or 'soft' benefits are offered, try to pin them down to quantitive or 'hard' ones. Take this conversation for example:

> ROI reviewer: How has the coaching programme benefitted the organisation?
> *Participant:* *'Our customers are happier'*
> ROI reviewer: *'W*hat difference does that make to the organisation?'
> *Participant:* *'We are selling more products*'
> ROI reviewer: *'B*y what percentage do you estimate that raises profits?'
> *Participant:* *'10%'*

By asking these questions across a number of stakeholders, a pattern will emerge. ROI is explored in more detail in my article "ROI in Coaching".

7. Implement pilots:

It is advisable to start with one or more pilot courses to ensure everything is on the right track. Ideally some key stakeholders should attend, so that they can make suggestions about how to adjust the training to be as useful as possible in terms of fulfilling the agreed goals for the programme.

8. Evaluation and forward planning:

Once the pilots have taken place, the programme can be re-evaluated to identify any adjustments that need to be made to suit a particular organization. All the relevant stakeholders should be canvassed for their opinions. Not only will valuable information surface but it will reaffirm their sense of ownership of the programme.

9. Implement next phase:

After adjustments have been made, you can roll out the whole programme.

10. Maintain the momentum:

Coaching programmes tend to have a momentum of their own because of the enthusiasm they generate and because the effects are immediately noticeable throughout the workforce. People see that the newly trained managers are communicating more effectively, delivering better results and are altogether nicer to be with. These reactions can be captured and capitalised on by setting up coaching activities like co-coaching or supervision groups, and providing coaching related CPD (continuing professional development) training. It is also a good idea to have refresher days, perhaps one every six months.

References

Wilson, C. (2020) **Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training** London, Kogan Page.

About the author
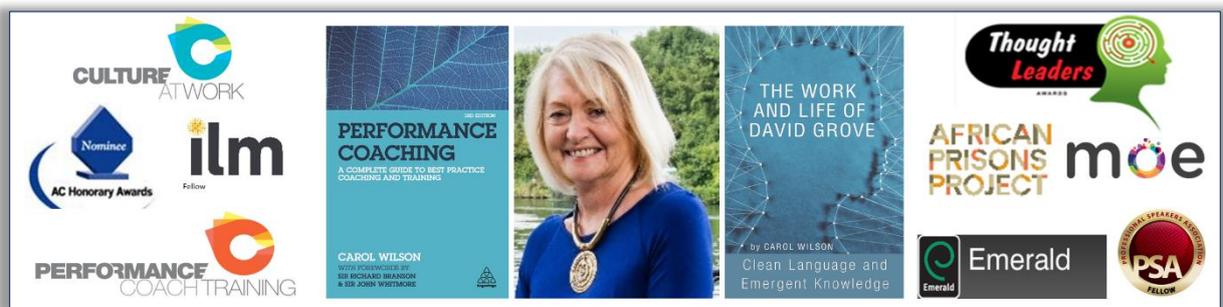
International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations worldwide and has won awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of *'Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training'*, now in its third edition and featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, and '*The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge*'. She has contributed to several other books and published over 60 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.