



Is it time to ramp up in-house coaching?

Clive Johnson and Jackie Keddy explain why options for delivering and evaluating coaching offer more flexibility than might often be perceived.

Weighing up the options

At a time when many organisations are looking for ways to ensure value for money, it might be tempting to wield the axe in the direction of what might be seen as “nice to have” but expensive activities. For many, employing top-flight coaches might be one such target (not to mention the still expensive though perhaps less than top-flight coaches). One question which many may be pondering then is -- *is now the time to bring coaching in-house, or at least, to build up internal capability?*

Where coaching is concerned, the options may not be quite as simple as an “either/or” - or “in-house/externally sourced” proposition. Using external coaches may still be preferable for meeting some needs, whilst purely financial considerations may detract from the value which different coaching options provide.

To make sense of which way forward is most appropriate, it makes sense to start with an assessment of the effectiveness of coaching in its current form. For many organisations, this has long proved to be an elusive task. More than 80% of organisations questioned by the author in a recent survey had no real way of measuring the benefits being delivered from their coaching investments, though not through a lack of desire to prove their value.

Fortunately for many, goodwill and the positive experiences of senior executives (in other words, those who typically approve budgets for coaching spend) had themselves often been on the receiving end of coaching, and recognised the value it can provide.

However, goodwill is not enough when businesses are facing tough decisions about expenditure. Real, tangible proof of one investment's worth over another is needed.

One size fits all?

Crucially, evaluation must look at what's appropriate for an organisation (or for the particular needs of individuals or groups within the wider organisation), as well as examining the impacts which coaching has delivered. The latter has proved to be all the more difficult to assess, given that coaching often takes place behind closed doors, with both coach and coachee understandably reluctant to reveal what they have discussed and what has resulted from their conversations. Coaching goals are often set by the coachee and have personal relevance, may not necessarily be solely rooted in an organisational context or obviously translate into some meaningful "business" measure like operating performance.



What's more, "coaching" means different things to different people. There is of course a definitive meaning which most people would recognise when talking about the kind of "coaching" which an ideal world would allow, in which dedicated, non directional, relationships between individuals and coaches who are independent from coachees' line management structures are involved.

However, "coaching" is also used as a term to describe a management style, and is also often practised on a one-to-one basis in a more limited fashion than coaching purists might wish to see. In any organisation, time dedicated to coaching -- whatever form it takes -- must be justified. There isn't therefore a "one size fits all" approach to point out what is right. Neither is it the case that if "best" coaching practice is being followed, that maximum benefits will necessarily result for the organisation. Sometimes a compromise is more expedient.

Evaluation should explore another possibility too - not that the current "model" is necessarily wrong, but whether it is as effective as it could be? Taking this perspective opens up a range of further questions, for example: *Is adequate support and supervision being provided for in-house coaches? Are the rates being charged by external coaches fair? Are existing processes for matching coach and coachee appropriate? Which individuals require coaching, and which require mentoring, training, or some other form of support? Is coaching being used in a narrow way, for example, only to help "high-fliers" careers?, Is the utilisation of coaches relative to their cost and coachee's availability appropriate? Are coaching relationships being brought to a close when it is right to do so, either because they have reached a natural end (in other words, the original purpose for creating the coaching relationship has been achieved, or in some cases, because*



they are not delivering what was expected)? Can external coaches be paid on a value-led rather than fixed fee basis?

Taking sides

There are several factors normally favouring the sourcing of coaches externally rather than internally and *vice versa*. In many organisations, a mix of external and in-house coaches make sense. However, knowing what the ratio between these should be these not always obvious.

External coaches bring true independence, strong coaching credentials (or at least credentials which can be verified), and by virtue of the fact that they operate outside of the organisation, are often preferred by senior executives who may be otherwise reluctant to disclose their perspectives to peers or others employed by the organisation.

In-house coaches may bring a better understanding of the contexts and challenges facing the organisation, can help support the development of a coaching culture outside of their dedicated coaching relationships, and offer more flexibility in terms of the way in which they are contracted.

Typically, the cost of developing in-house coaches is likely to be less than the cost of engaging external coaches, however, the pressure to maintain regular coaching practice, undergo supervision, and be supported in their continuous professional development as coaches by the organisation is no less important for internal coaches over extra ones.

Much more than foundation training needs to be costed when considering the investment involved in bringing coaching in-house, including a recognition that not all coaches who are trained and supported may stay the course. Nevertheless, in-house coaching programmes can be ramped up quite quickly, especially if care is taken to ensure that only committed and suitable individuals are recruited into coaching roles at the outset.

The experience now gained with a consulting model-based approach to evaluation, previously referred to in this series of articles, has clearly demonstrated its relevance for evaluating coaching.

This uses a well-known method in consultancy circles for analysing, explaining and correlating a collection of seemingly isolated comments, perceptions and of course hard financial and/or performance data. The specific impacts of coaching can be isolated from other influences on an individual's change in mindset, self knowledge, skill or behaviour, and (if relevant) can also be directly related to key business drivers and Performance Indicators in a balanced scorecard.

Undoubtedly significant savings can be made by reviewing existing coaching arrangements, however, organisations must be careful to avoid throwing the baby out with the bath water. Assessing the value of coaching is not just a matter of weighing up costs and savings (or revenue returns), but also needs to take account of the soft and sometimes longer term benefits which can arise from coaching conversations; for example, the essential need to develop and retain talent. The way in which coaching is being used -- its main purposes for being brought into an organisation -- need to be kept in context with the organisations needs. At a time of rapid change, it is especially timely coaching to be put under the spotlight ♦

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