What is management coaching?

Roderic Gray

In the world of competitive sport a coach is someone who helps an athlete to improve his or her performance. The word has been adopted into the management vocabulary with pretty much the same meaning; coaching is a form of help which is intended to lead to improvements in a manager's performance. Just as even the very best athletes make use of coaches, so even the most competent manager can benefit from coaching.

First, we should be clear about definitions. It's noticeable that in the literature on the subject the term *coaching* is used with a variety of meanings. The word *mentoring* also occurs very frequently and often seems to be used to mean much the same thing. Despite this, it is possible to detect trends in the usage of the two terms which suggest a tendency towards distinct meanings.

In Greek legend, Mentor was the trusted friend to whom king Odysseus assigned the care and upbringing of the young prince Telemachus whilst the king was away at the Trojan wars and, as it turned out, for a very long time afterwards. Applied to the modern organisational setting, this seems this gives the term *mentor* a kind of parental, authoritative status; a giver of advice and instruction, a teacher and guardian. Mentors are typically senior figures in the same organisation who help their protégés with advice and guidance, and perhaps "open doors" to facilitate the development of their careers.

Coaching, as we're using the term here, is something rather different. Coaches are usually people from outside the organisation who provide a service on a professional (ie, commercial) basis. They work on a strictly one-to-one basis, in confidence, and their essential task is to help their client develop greater self-knowledge, which is the foundation on which improvement can be built. The coach is therefore "someone to learn WITH" [1], who will help the manager by identifying and then challenging his or her existing mental frameworks, assumptions and perspectives and "self-limiting mindsets" [2]; something it is very hard, if not impossible, to do for ourselves.

This may well involve jointly identifying skill deficiencies, because management is always

more about what you can do than just what you know, but coaching is definitely not training. Training needs often emerge from the coaching process but they should be addressed elsewhere, despite the tendency for some trainers and consultants to rebrand "their existing interpersonal skills programmes as coaching" [3].

Coaches don't generally give advice, they ask questions. They provide a safe, confidential sounding-board for their client. They create a "psychological space, which allows the executive to stand back from the workplace, and then [provide] a supportive, yet challenging, relationship and dialogue in which the executive can gain perspective" [4]. A recurring metaphor throughout the coaching literature is the idea of "holding a mirror up" to their clients, enabling them to understand things about themselves and their behaviours that would otherwise remain hidden and therefore not available for examination and change. The Johari Window model shown on the right ~ adapted from Joseph Luft's 1963 original [5] ~ illustrates this.
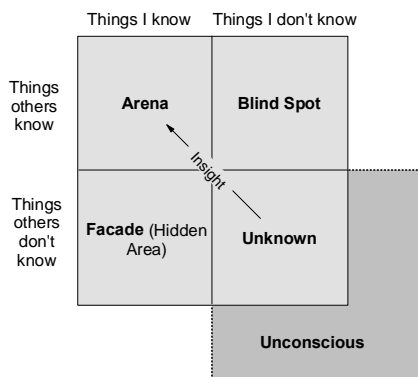
As this model shows, there are some things that we know about ourselves and that other people also know about us. These things are in the "Arena". There are also things which we know about ourselves but other people don't know. These are in the area labelled "Façade". Since we already know about these things we don't really need any help in identifying them and we could, if we chose, try to make changes.

For all of us, there will be things other people know about us but of which we ourselves are unaware. In Robert Burns' words: "*O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us to see oursels as others see us! It wad frae mony a blunder free us*" [6]. The Johari window labels this area our "Blind spot". Knowing more of the things that are plain to other people but hidden from ourselves could certainly free us from the odd blunder and open up possibilities

for beneficial change. Finally, there are things about us which are unknown both to ourselves and to others.

One key outcome of coaching is that the "Blind spot" is very much reduced in size. Clients learn things about themselves of which they were previously unaware. This empowers them to change the perceptions that other people have of them in a variety of positive ways. They are also very likely to identify things which were previously in the "Unknown" sector, which gives them the choice of keeping the new knowledge to themselves ~ ie, retaining it in the "Façade" area ~ or making it available to other people too.

The coach is the catalyst for this increase in self-knowledge and empowerment. To this extent coaching has something in common with counselling:. "Counselling is a way of helping people to help themselves. Its four main aims are to help someone: see their present situation more clearly; understand how they feel about it; determine what, if anything, they want to do about it; and make realistic plans for achieving what they want" [7].

Coaching will do all this, but its primary aim, unlike counselling, is not therapeutic. Coaching doesn't start from the premise that there's something wrong; it assumes that there's plenty that's right and sets out to help and support the client in making it even better.

A study sponsored by the (then) Institute of Personnel and Development in 1998 [8] examined variations in profitability and found that an emphasis on quality could account for about 1% of the variations, strategy for about 2%, and research and development activity for 6%, but up to 20% could be attributed to various human factors. Optimising the contributions of employees, and of managers in particular, may perhaps offer the greatest potential for improving competitive advantage that is available to any organisation.

Coaching aims to enhance the capability of individual managers to contribute to the effectiveness of their organisations. It does this in a variety of ways, but principally by developing the client's self-awareness so that he or she can evaluate their own performance in particular situations; "unconscious factors always have some impact on the performance of managers" [9]. The "mirror" that coaching holds up enables clients to see their own behaviours more objectively than would otherwise be possible. This self-knowledge is the first step in a process of identifying specific areas

where change or development will be likely to lead to improved overall performance.

Clear, specific actions are then defined; perhaps more knowledge about certain subjects, or skills training, or changes in the way the client interacts with colleagues, subordinates or superiors. The coach then works with the client to prioritise needs and give support and feedback as the client implements the agreed actions, and, crucially, helping to build the client's own capacity for self-evaluation.

There is nothing vague or even particularly soft about this. Clear objectives are defined in just the same way as they are for any other area of performance, and results are monitored, but they are not normally made public. Achieving each objective is a step towards greater personal effectiveness at work and it is the consequences of this development process which will be seen in the client's workplace performance. The feedback the coach provides is confidential, safe and completely client-focused.

Of course, providing hard evidence that coaching is effective can be problematic, but only in the same way that the benefits of management education or soft skills training are difficult to evaluate. If a company invests in specific skills training for one of its employees, it's usually fairly easy to see how effective the training has been. A person who previously couldn't wire-up a circuit now can, and the results are there to see. Or someone who didn't know how to manage kitchen hygiene returns from the training course and passes all subsequent inspections with flying colours. The employer knows that the money has been well spent and can evaluate the benefits. The benefits claimed for coaching are to do with personal effectiveness, and this is bound to be harder to evaluate in the short term than any improvements in specific skills but that doesn't make them less valuable ~ in any terms including hard cash.

An approach to this issue which seems to work is to suggest that a coaching proposal should be costed in the same way as any project proposal or training needs assessment. None of these can be done for nothing and the outcome may be a decision that the project isn't viable or training is unnecessary or unlikely to be worthwhile. This doesn't mean that the cost of the evaluation exercise has been wasted; rather, it has provided a firm basis on which a sound decision can be made.

Coaching can be approached in the same way. Specific improvement targets can be defined and the individual's performance can be monitored ~ as it should be anyway ~ to see whether the specified changes have taken or are taking place. If so, it is reasonable to assume that coaching is proving "effective".

Of course, in all human behaviour it's most unlikely that a particular outcome can be attributed to a single cause. In fact, "the case can be thoughtfully made ... that causality is not a workable concept when it comes to human behaviour" [10], so coaching is likely to be only one factor in any observed improvement. However, it may well be a very important factor indeed, because the personal focus on performance which is prompted and strongly encouraged by engaging in a coaching relationship can have positive effects on virtually all aspects of a manager's professional life.

The close interpersonal relationship between coach and client raises some ethical issues. These can be simplified, but not completely eliminated, if the coach is clear about the underlying philosophy on which his or her coaching practice is based. One approach to personal coaching is rooted in the "person-centred" approaches originally developed during the middle decades of the twentieth century by Carl Rogers and others. This leads to a belief that an individual's personal growth and development are driven from within, and that the role of a coach is to facilitate those positive trends in non-directive, supportive and honest ways by providing feedback, asking questions and sometimes challenging words and behaviours.

Everything the coach says or does must be for the client's benefit, to help him or her to become more effective in whatever terms are meaningful for that individual. The underlying purpose of coaching is to create improved client performance through creating self-reliance rather than dependency and the coach's actions will be aimed at facilitating this development.

The duty of confidentiality requires the coach to refuse to disclose anything said during coaching sessions, which may lead to conflicts where the client's employer, rather than the client him- or herself, is paying for the coaching. It's important top make the terms and conditions of coaching clear to all parties at the outset.

Over many years, managers at all levels have found coaching to be a

very effective form of support in the development of their own skills and abilities. Unthreatening and confidential, coaching offers a safe but rigorous way for individual managers to identify their own personal routes to improved performance.

Author profile:

Dr Roderic Gray is a consultant, writer and management coach, with a particular interest in the relationships between individuals and their organisations. He has published a number of papers and articles on management topics. His books How People Work (2004) and A Climate of Success (2007) are in university and public libraries around the world.

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