

## **Learning from experience**

Andrew Lambert and Anne Scoular give a progress report on the state of coaching today

In 2001, the Corporate Research Forum (CRF), which has over 100 large international employers as members representing several million employees, carried out what was then the most extensive report of its kind into how executive coaching and mentoring was being managed within large organisations.

CRF recently held a follow-up symposium with speakers including Verity Lewis, Head of Human Resources at Württembergische Insurance UK Ltd, Sam Humphrey, formerly Head of Global Coaching at Unilever, Carol Braddick, a leading executive coach and OD consultant, and Dr Alex Linley, Director of the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP). Some of the findings on the state of coaching today are discussed below.

There are now signs that coaching is undergoing a significant transformation - mostly for the good. When the Corporate Research Forum conducted its 2001 research, coaching was already widely used at senior level within large organisations.

However, CRF found that the linkage between coaching investment and business purpose was noticeably weak in many organisations. The report highlighted confusion regarding the specific role of coaching, a focus on individual rather than organisational needs, a lack of strategic context, difficulties in evaluation, and concern over a lack of standards. And this at a time of vastly expanded demand for and supply of external coaches, and thus levels of spend.

So what has changed over the ensuing five years? Some insights are provided by a pre-symposium survey of 40 CRF member organisations, which confirmed that coaching is now well established as a development tool within large organisations.

Most organisations responding to the survey had used external coaches for at least four years, and used less than ten external coaches. Three-quarters used them for the top executive team, over half for high potentials, and many also used coaching for the wider senior manager cadre. Nearly all used coaching for general development and rarely for remedial purposes, and most rated executive coaches as average or good value-for-money. Most organisations now use coaching as part of management development programmes, not just as stand-alone interventions for individuals.

On the downside, relatively few indicated much sophistication in evaluating spend and results. This compares with more mature in-company activities, such as IT projects or management consultancy services, where it would be unheard of not to have evaluation and measurement mechanisms in place.

So, what improvements are observable? First generation coaching tends to be relatively ad hoc - a kind of perk for senior executives, and sometimes a remedial tool to alleviate boardroom conflict. It is also primarily focused on the individual.

Second generation coaching, however, comes with a new set of ground rules. It should be aligned with a company's business needs and strategy, be properly managed and, while still being very personal, should operate within institutional boundaries.

Understanding and providing good quality coaching is no longer sufficient. As with any other investment, coaching now needs to be managed as a strategic activity where organisation-wide performance is just as important as individual performance.

There appears now to be a better understanding of what coaching can do (helping employees take on new roles, manage stress and their work/life balance, improve selfawareness and creativity etc) and what it can't do (substitute for basic management practices, developing unwilling participants and dealing with psychopaths and bullies).

There is also better understanding of the different facets of coaching and when they are most appropriate, for example, the difference between directive and nondirective coaching. The former is a push or telling process, focused on imparting knowledge and thus closer to training, whereas the latter seeks to tap into the capacity that people have within themselves.

Today, there is a much clearer logical framework within which coaching operates and which distinguishes it from mentoring, which typically involves passing on experience (as in Homer's Iliad where Odysseus entrusted the education of his son to his friend Mentor) - whether in a directive or non-directive way - and counselling, which addresses more deep-seated psychological needs and requires clinical psychology skills.

Additionally, organisations are getting to grips with three types of coaching provision - which have significant differences in what they can do, how they should be managed, and how outcomes should be evaluated. There are three different ways to provide coaching:

- Using external coaches
- Training and developing internal coaches
- Developing line managers' coaching skills, and developing a 'coaching culture'

External coaches are best able, in principle, to provide an independent, confidential service - although buyers still need to ensure that the quality is right and that there is a fit with an individual coachee's needs.

In the last five years the number and use of internal coaches has grown - HR or line managers who have undergone specialist training in coaching skills, offer an alternative to relatively expensive external coaches. However, internal power relationships and confidentiality requirements impose limits on their use, for example in 'peer coaching'. Internal coaches can best replicate the non-directive methods of professional external

coaches only where they have no managerial relationship with the coachee, even indirect.

Line managers are likely to be more comfortable with directive coaching, where they are able to pass on their skills and knowledge. However, some are better than others at learning how to be non-directive, and to encourage rather than command the best out of their people.

Coaching needs to be seen like any other investment in capability - it takes time, costs money, and its effectiveness depends on how well it is managed and achieves results. There is no point in a business paying for coaching if the results are largely personal, and do not help improve business performance.

Thus coaching's links with the organisation's purpose, directions and goals must be articulated, as should protocols, standards and accountabilities - just like any other management development process.

A needs-based approach should be adopted, with HR facilitating agreement on who is eligible and why. For example, usage at other than top level may be valuable - it is no longer a privilege of status.

Selecting coaches is becoming more sophisticated - not based simply on the whim of a senior manager, but a methodical, procurement process fitted to identified needs. At Unilever, for example, a strict assessment process takes place before coaches are included in a global preferred supplier list.

Obstacles still remain. For example, there are, as yet, no agreed professional standards, no single accreditation body, no mandatory qualifications, and indeed no strict barriers to entry.

If deciding whether to opt for an internal or external coach, cost often favours the internal coach - but this may not be the most effective route

A supervisory and quality assurance structure should be created. At Unilever each coach is expected to have a meeting with a supervisor after every four coaching sessions. The rigour of quality assurance should always be checked at the contract stage.

As a development tool, coaching is best viewed as a short-term intervention with defined objectives to be achieved within a set time - ideally six months or less - rather than an ongoing, open-ended process. A longerterm relationship may be useful, but should be constructed as a mentoring arrangement, and evaluated and managed accordingly.

Thorough evaluation is essential for coaching to prove its worth and return on investment. However, as yet few providers of coaching offer evaluation as a service.

Nor is it well established that clear objectives should be agreed for both individuals and the organisation.

Furthermore, the different variables associated with coaching as well as the difficulties of proving a direct link between coaching and the bottom line requires some sophistication in measurement approach. A proper organisation-wide evaluation should also not just assess the coach and coachee relationship, but also take into account line manager behaviour and organisational culture.

Evaluation should be pre-planned at the outset of any coaching assignment, with learning and development objectives stated and regularly assessed. Any resulting behavioural change should then be tracked and outcomes linked to organisational objectives.

Hitherto coaching has been influenced by the medical model, whereby the coach is 'well' and the coachee 'less well', and the focus of the coaching is to overcome an executive's weakness. 'Positive psychology', however, is becoming influential, seeing the coachee as 'whole' and 'skilled', and the coach's role as a catalyst to help the client access and develop inherent strengths.

Through the positive psychology approach, the coach's job is to pull as much relevant material as possible from the client and others in the organisation, using interview techniques, psychometrics, personality instruments and business data. The coach and coachee can then work together as co-researchers and decide how best to harness this information and put it to use.

So what of the current status of coaching today? If writing a school report, one would have to say that, while good progress has been made, there is still much to do in managing it effectively. What is clear, however, is that coaching is continuing to evolve and become more mainstream and 'managed'.

Andrew Lambert is co-founder of the Corporate Research Forum and Anne Scoular is co-founder of leading research-based coaching consultancy, Meyler Campbell.

For further information from the Corporate Research Forum Tel: +44 (0) 20 7470 7104 or email: [andrew@crforum.co.uk](mailto:andrew@crforum.co.uk); or for Meyler Campbell Tel: +44(0)20 8460 4790 or email:[annescoular@meylercampbell.com](mailto:annescoular@meylercampbell.com) .

<http://www.venturemagazine.co.uk/article-page.php?contentid=202&issueid=15>