

Successful Implementation of Company Wide Coaching Programmes

5 Essential Steps

In 1994 I was fortunate enough to be heavily involved in the implementation of a company wide coaching programme, both as an employee who was to receive coaching but also as a manager and coach who was expected to regular coach my reports and my peers to enable them to achieve their objectives. I say, fortunate enough, because I found that when I was coached effectively I became really motivated and focused, and when I finally became a proficient coach, I again found it motivational in that I was able to support and enable my direct reports to achieve more.

There were though many pitfalls along the way to achieving total acceptance of coaching as a skill that not only motivated but also enabled employees to become more capable and productive. In this short article I will outline the necessary steps I feel an organisation must take in order to ensure that they implement a coaching programme effectively. When we implemented the programme, I felt that although we made great progress we also made some mistakes which I would encourage organisations to be aware of when deciding to go down the 'coaching' route.

1. Ensure coaching starts at the top and is supported by the 'top'!

Many organisations are recognising that coaching is a skill that all managers of people and teams must possess. However, many organisations only concentrate on ensuring that 1st and perhaps 2nd line managers are trained in the skill. Suddenly middle or junior managers become skilled in coaching but never experience the power of coaching from their own senior management. In relation to ensuring that everyone who will be involved in the coaching programme 'buys -in' to the coaching philosophy they need to hear that the 'top' executives are committed to coaching both in terms of promoting the skill but also to be seen to utilise the skill themselves in that they are coached and that they coach their own direct reports. In other words everybody has to 'walk the talk'.

In my last organisation before going self-employed this was not the case. A few senior members of the Board and a couple of key HR personnel promoted the skill of coaching well and 'practiced what they preached'. Unfortunately some very senior managers did not and continued to use very directive behaviours towards their staff whilst communicating that coaching was a 'fad' that would soon pass! This caused confusion at middle management levels with the result that a number of managers did not take their coaching training very seriously. Fortunately other managers did and their teams eventually experienced the benefit.

2. Will everybody understand what coaching is and what it can do them?

This was one of the first hurdles that we had to overcome. Simply, people did not understand why the organisation was implementing such a programme and also people did not fully understand what coaching was exactly. Some believed it was training and that all it meant was that you told people what to do and showed them how to do it. After all that was what their sports coach did! Others thought it was

more about counselling and you only used coaching when there was a deep problem causing under-performance. All in all not everyone had a good understanding of what coaching was and how it differed from the likes of training, mentoring and counselling. Also many people because they had not been exposed to effective coaching had no experience or idea of why coaching could be a benefit for them; either as the coach or as someone being coached. Before employees can move on and take part in a coaching programme they must be fully aware of what the skill of coaching entails and what it can do for them.

3. Those who are going to act as coaches must be trained effectively.

Most companies will take on the services of a training provider or consultant to support them to implement the coaching programme. Beware. Make sure you do your homework! There are numerous coaching schools, training companies and consultancies who now offer 'coach training'. Some will be excellent; some not so hot. We had some major problems with the group that we used in that not all their trainers/coaches had the necessary skill and experience with the result that not everyone in the organisation received the same quality of training and coaching. I was extremely lucky in that I had an excellent coach who was also a fantastic trainer.

What should you look for when selecting a coaching training company or consultancy?

The most important thing to look for in selecting a provider company is to ensure that you are comfortable that you can form a powerful and productive partnership with them. There are a number of questions you should be asking in order to ascertain this.

- What is their experience of supporting coaching programmes? (Years of experience, types of situations, companies worked with, references)
- What is the experience of the individual consultants? Business backgrounds? Coaching experience? Coaching Qualifications? Any experts within the ranks? (There are a lot of 'life coaches' now offering corporate manager-coach training and many do not come from a corporate background. Although this does not mean they won't be good coaches, it may mean that their credibility in the eyes of the trainees/coachees might not be all it could be, and this could present problems)
- What coaching models does the provider use? Do they stick to one model or are they able to utilise a number of coaching models which they can fit to the purchasing company?
- How flexible is the provider? It is all very well putting together a coaching programme to satisfy an initial proposal but are they able to flex this programme as befits the needs of the organisation as they go through the programme? Flexibility is key in any coaching programme as not everything will go to plan and not everybody will progress at the same pace!

- Does the provider offer variety of interventions within the programme? A good provider will ensure that the programme is varied with it being a mix of classroom theory, role-play and other experiential practices together with assignments, action plans, review days not forgetting 1:1, group and telephone coaching support.
- Are they prepared to ensure that they measure their success and agree with you what exactly success looks like? If they are not then forget them!
- Are they affordable? Some companies and consultancies charge very high rates and deliver excellence and are value for money. Some are the opposite-expensive but do not deliver! And some charge very reasonable rates and are also excellent. The main point is that you should also do your sums and make sure you can afford the programme because it could last a fairly long time, particularly if you are a large organisation.

Coach training takes time and although there are some very good two –three day courses available the real secret to establishing and reinforcing coaching skills is to ensure that once the basic theory is learned, these skills are immediately put into practice. A good coach training provider will always offer follow up support either in the form of review days, 1:1 coaching, group coaching (action learning sets) and telephone coaching support. Having said all this in many instances it will depend on the budget available but whatever the situation please ensure that you do your homework on the outfits that you have singled out in your tendering process. If your managers and coaches do not get the required and proper training then the whole coaching programme could collapse before your very eyes.

4. Ensure that those who are doing the coaching have some form of measure.

Firstly it was my experience that although everyone went through the coach training not everyone was prepared to go away and start coaching! Reasons for this were varied. Some cited too much pressure of work and not enough time; others simply outlined that they didn't believe coaching would work for their reports; some stated that they were already coaching, whilst others decided that they needed to coach more because they now believed that this was the way to motivated and up skill their staff. The end result was that although some managers had a strong motivator to coach, others did not. How did we get round this challenge? Well we got half way there, in that in every manager's measures of performance there was an objective around how much time would have to be spent on a one to one basis with individuals in their teams. This at least got people to make sure they put time in their diaries in order for this to happen. However this was only half the battle as it was no guarantee that within this dedicated time, the manager would actually do any coaching! What I believe should have happened (and what I now believe is happening) is that the manager on a regular basis now asks for feedback on their coaching skills from the people they are coaching. Each coachee will have a list of the competencies and behaviours that an excellent coach should exhibit and every so often the manager will ask the coachee for feedback on these. Only by taking both the objectives and feedback approach will you ensure that coaching is taken seriously.

5. Regularly review progress against agreed measurement and success criteria.

Finally the success of the coaching programme overall should be measured. As with any training intervention it is not always that easy to measure how successful the intervention has been. Sure, the feedback following the course was great and the trainer/coach was superb, but did any lasting change happen and did this result in improved behaviours and subsequent improvement in productivity?

Organisations should look to both qualitative and quantitative measures where possible. Qualitative measures include written feedback about how the coachee or employee feels about the coaching – do they feel more focused, more motivated, has morale improved, do they look forward to their coaching sessions etc. Qualitative measures though do not always satisfy senior management who, in many respects, do not respect ‘happy sheet’ feedback. What they want is hard evidence based on data and results. If they do not get this then suspicion about how effective the interventions often occurs and future investment in such ‘soft skill’ ventures can be difficult to access.

Where possible if you are looking to demonstrate a return on the investment then you should look to measuring outputs such as sales or production; look at sickness rates, employee retention rates together with improvements in individual competency ratings where possible. We were constantly being pressured and challenged to prove a return on the huge investment that the company had made and although we struggled in the early days to prove that coaching worked we eventually gathered together enough quantitative data to prove our case.

In Summary, in order to support your organisation to successfully implement a coaching programme at all levels the do the following:

- 1. Get ‘Buy-In’ from the top and ensure they are committed to the skill of coaching and that they lead by example. Others will follow.**
- 2. Make sure everyone involved understands why coaching is being implemented, what coaching is and how they as individuals will benefit not only as a coach but as someone being coached.**
- 3. Choose your coach training providers very carefully. Are they experienced coaches? Can they train effectively? Do they have a list of satisfied clients? Do they provide ongoing follow-up support?**
- 4. Are there enough motivators in place for managers to coach? Is coaching part of their specific objectives and are they being measured on these objectives? Are they asking for feedback on their skills?**
- 5. Make sure you put both qualitative and quantitative measures in place and that you review these regularly, always remembering to communicate these to senior stakeholders.**

Another important point is that all this takes time. If you think you can implement a coaching programme in a matter of weeks then think again. You will need time to get the support of senior management; time to put a training plan together and then time to implement that training plan. Then there should be a re-inforcement and sustainability period when the newly found skills are being implemented and

developed through feedback. Time should also be put aside to ensure feedback is collected and measurement against the success criteria is monitored and communicated. Give at least six months to a year for your implementation and then be prepared to continually assess and develop the skills on an ongoing basis.

Coaching programmes are lengthy and can be exhausting given the continual training, monitoring and influencing of stakeholders, but ultimately they are very worthwhile as the organisation and its people grow as a result.

About the submitter:

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