Creating a coaching culture: ten success factors for bringing it to life

There are key success factors which should form part of the planning process, and which can be used as a framework for organisations about to embark on the implementation of a coaching culture.

Coaching is subject to much media attention, and the use of coaching within organisations has increased significantly in Europe. The recent 2004 Training and Development Survey from the CIPD indicated that 78 per cent of its UK survey respondents reported using coaching as part of their learning and development strategy. The survey indicated that 78 per cent of its UK survey respondents reported using coaching as part of their learning and development strategy. In absolute terms, at first sight it may indeed be cheaper to send executives on yet another training programme. If you think coaching is expensive, try incompetence. The costs of coaching have to be put into perspective in relation to the outcome. Measures of return on investment and ROI become critical to ensure support from the top and future allocation of a budget for executive coaching. These have to be carefully prepared, and it is essential to be precise about the goal of the coaching programme for the organisation and the goals for each individual coaching programme. Only if the organisation and coaches adhere to good practice can good evaluation strategies be developed.

The introduction of a coaching culture to any organisation raises the same challenges as other culture change programmes. It is not sufficient merely to announce it, provide information and assume that the change will take place. Planning is essential to introduce any new initiative. It is important to examine all the costs and benefits and to anticipate and plan for resistance.

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Reference
1 The 2004 Training and Development Survey report is available to download from the CIPD website at www.cipd.co.uk/surveys. See also Eric Parsloe and Jessica Rolph, ‘Coaching: Survey Respondents have their Say,’ Training Journal, pp. 36-38, June 2004.

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Success factor: develop evaluation strategies
We have come across a lack of clarity about desired outcomes for coaching. This leads to organisations being unclear about how to evaluate coaches and the outcome of specific coaching programmes. Some are content with ‘happy sheets’ – simple feedback about the coaching relationship which provides little more than a statement that the coachee enjoyed the coaching. Others like to have a statement of what to extent the goals set at the beginning were met. Very few have started to implement measures of ROI for coaching. For example, at present there is still a preconception in some organisations that coaching is too expensive. In absolute terms, at first sight it may indeed be cheaper to send executives on yet another training programme. The question should be, “Expensive in relation to what?” It triggers us to adapt the old management saying, “If you think coaching is expensive, try incompetence.” The costs of coaching have to be put into perspective in relation to the outcome. Measures of return on investment and ROI become critical to ensure support from the top and future allocation of a budget for executive coaching. These have to be carefully prepared, and it is essential to be precise about the goal of the coaching programme for the organisation and the goals for each individual coaching programme. Only if the organisation and coaches adhere to good practice can good evaluation strategies be developed.

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Within organisations there may be preconceptions about coaching

Success factor: start offering coaching at the top
All too often, coaching is regarded as a method of fixing something that is broken. In our experience, this is particularly so within the German-speaking world – where coaching may be introduced to improve the performance of under-performing executives or as a precursor to beginning capability proceedings. When used in this way, coaching has a problem orientation rather than a solution orientation. In the UK and USA the view is more balanced, and organisations have started to realise the benefit of utilising executive coaches for the development of the human potential of their top talents. Starting at the top sends a strong signal to the organisation and helps to address preconceptions. In addition, it has another significant benefit: top executives and those with high potential become role models and essential multipliers of good practice, which may eliminate coaching requirements at middle-management level.

Success factor: define quality criteria and standards for selection
This is a major topic that could fill a whole module in itself. The market is supplied with an enormous number of coaches. In Germany, for example, it is estimated that there are about 30,000 to 50,000 individuals who call themselves a coach. Each year more coaches stream out into the market from the many coaching courses in existence. Of course, not all target themselves at the corporate market; many prefer to work with individuals on personal issues as life coaches. However, the corporate sector is viewed as the most lucrative to enter, and hence many new coaches will be heading straight for the major corporations on graduation from their courses. There are a variety of criteria and quality standards that organisations have defined as needing to be met by coaches. The most common ones we have identified are listed below:
- **FEE** - does the person fit into the organisation?
- **Educational and professional background** - has the coach skills and experience of business which will complement their coaching?
- **Coach training** - where was the coach trained? Has the coach been through a respected training programme? Training programmes are not yet standardised and there is a major discussion about standards for coaching training. There are benefits here - the trainer will know the

organisational and individual executive expectations. Be very clear about the intended outcomes of coaching - for example, is it 'nice to have' additional support for executives which could be withdrawn at short notice, or is it part of a wider cultural change? The outcomes can, and should, define the nature of the coaches you choose.

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major international coaching organisations have defined criteria and also operate a professional code of ethics. Has the coach completed just one coach training, or have they been through several programmes?
- **Description of a coaching concept** - does the coach have a coherent and proven coaching concept which they utilise in assignments?
- **Continuous education** - does the coach invest on a continuous basis in their own personal development? What exactly does the coach do to keep their knowledge and performance up to date?
- **Supervision** - does the coach have supervision?
- **Experience as an executive coach** - who does the coach work for? At what level?
- **References** - there are organisations that are satisfied with a reference list, but many choose to speak directly to the reference organisations before entering into a contract.
- **Adherence to ethical standards** - does the coach belong to a well-respected coaching organisation such as the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), and adhere to its ethical and professional standards? Several organisations and individuals have set out to establish a professional code of ethics. Has the coach completed just one coach training, or have they been through several programmes?

Success factor: create a coach pool
Once coaches have met the criteria, they are entered into a coach pool. We have found that many organisations prefer to operate a pool arrangement so that individual executives have a choice of coach. In addition, should an initial coaching relationship not work for any reason, there are then other coaches who can be brought in without having to seek out new individuals. To ensure efficiency of the operation of a coach pool, it is useful to define a standard for a coach profile. Each individual coach will have to fill in and submit a standard form back to the organisation. When the HR department receives a request for a coach, it is then possible to complete some pre-selection on the basis of the profiles. A selection of profiles is then sent to the interested executive. The next step is to arrange a ‘get to know each other’ meeting. Ultimately, which coach is selected is the decision of the individual executive. A good coach pool database contains information about, for example, whom the coach has met for a ‘get to know each other’ interview, conversion rate, and feedback received from the executives. Coaches with a good standing within the database are likely to be more actively promoted, while those who do not receive assignments may be stood down from the list.

Success factor: active communication with the coach pool
Organisations who are serious about developing a performance/coaching culture seek active dialogue with their coach pool. Regular meetings are arranged two to three times a year, at which representatives from the organisation talk about recent developments. These may include new strategic directions, demands and expectations conveyed to executives, current initiatives (for example, management audits), and the key take-aways for the organisation, plans for measuring the return on investment (ROI) for executive coaching and so on. Coaches share the latest developments in their community and best-practice examples. In this way a joint learning culture is created and communication is enhanced and maintained.

Success factor: ensure strict confidentiality
It is pivotal for the coaching relationship that the content of coaching sessions is subject to strict confidentiality between coach and coachee. Those who initiate coaching on the HR side can be informed about the process and general progress, but the content is not revealed. If it is known that information about content is leaking through the organisation, trust in the instrument is broken. It would be an extreme challenge to rebuild it. The only time when a confidence may be legitimately broken is in a situation where the coachee reveals illegal activity. The ground rules concerning confidentiality need to be underlined when establishing the initial coaching contract – both with the organisation and with the individual.

Success factor: develop an integrated communication plan
Once the organisation has decided to offer coaching to the executives, it needs to be communicated actively within the organisation. How coaching and its benefits can be communicated is a matter of creativity. We have come across various practices, ranging from displaying the offer of external executive coaching on the organisation’s intranet (including a short video from the sponsor in the organisation, in which he stated how beneficial coaching was for him and the impact it had on his personal corporate career), to clear information in the annual education programme and a slot in the agenda of important company events such as a quarterly meeting (where a coach and a coachee talked about their work).