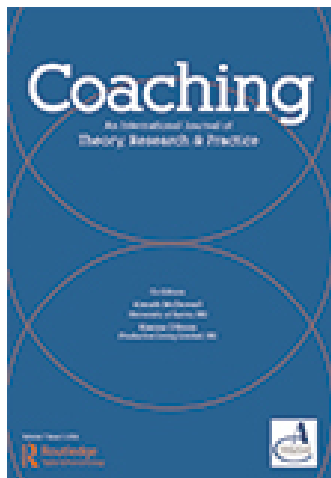


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Publisher: Routledge

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Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcoa20>

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Published online: 09 Feb 2015.



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To cite this article: Paul Lawrence (2015): Building a coaching culture in a small Australian multinational organisation, *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, DOI: [10.1080/17521882.2015.1006649](https://doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2015.1006649)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2015.1006649>

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Building a coaching culture in a small Australian multinational organisation

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(Received 30 October 2014; accepted 6 January 2015)

This case study charts the progress of a two-year programme to build a coaching culture at a small Australian multinational organisation. The intervention consisted of executive coaching and coaching skills workshops aimed principally at potential successors to the senior leadership team. Over the course of the programme the organisation went through many changes, including an organisational restructure and a change in CEO. The outcome of the intervention is discussed with reference to previously published models for implementing a coaching culture and to work on complex adaptive systems.

Keywords: coaching; coach training; coaching culture; systemic; complex adaptive systems

Practice points

- The findings are relevant to those seeking to build coaching cultures in organisations and to those considering implementing coach training programmes.
- This paper provides practitioners with a more systemic perspective on the implementation of change programmes, including culture change.
- The implementation of executive coaching and coaching skills programmes by themselves, or together, is unlikely to be sufficient in facilitating a move to a 'coaching culture'. Focusing on patterns of dialogue within and across organisations will enable the practitioner to design a more effective intervention. Acknowledging that change is constant will help the practitioner focus on creating sustainable forums for dialogue in service of building an organisation that recognises the ongoing role coaching has to play in contributing to organisational effectiveness.

Introduction

This case study reports the progress of a two-year programme to implement a coaching culture in a small multinational organisation with offices in Australia, the USA and Asia. The intervention was conceived by the then organisational development (OD) manager in response to a request by the CEO to come up with a programme to accelerate the development of potential successors to the senior leadership team. The company was growing quickly and foresaw further rapid growth across its global markets. The OD manager designed an intervention comprising executive coaching and coaching skills

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workshops in support of implementing a coaching culture. I personally played four roles in the programme of work: as relationship manager on behalf of the coaching organisation, executive coach to three members of the organisation, designer and lead facilitator of the coaching skills workshops, and designer and implementer of an ongoing evaluation process. In setting up the programme, a colleague and I attended several meetings with the OD manager and the CEO in order to better understand the purpose of the intervention. Through those conversations it became clear that the primary objective of the programme from the CEO's perspective was to accelerate the individual development of potential successors to the senior leadership team. He appeared less engaged with the broader goal of developing coaching culture and less clear as to the purpose of the coaching skills programmes. Nevertheless he sanctioned investment in the wider piece of work on the recommendation of the OD manager.

Approach

Executive coaching

Nine people, all direct reports to the senior leadership team, were initially selected by the OD manager in consultation with the CEO. The CEO also asked one of the senior leadership team to participate in order to assess the suitability of coaching for other executives. The OD manager defined an overarching purpose of the coaching programme which she communicated to the coaching organisation and coachees as being 'to cultivate the constructive behaviours required to deliver long term sustained performance at [name of organisation]'. The language used to define the overarching purpose reflected the inclusion of the Life Styles Inventory (LSI) assessment tool as part of the coaching process. Each assignment consisted of an initial two-hour coaching session and debrief followed by six 60-minute sessions. The third and last sessions included three way meetings with the coachee's line manager, affording the organisation the opportunity to provide input to goals and to review outcomes. Over the course of the two years, five further assignments were commissioned. These assignments did not include the LSI assessment and were based on a needs-analysis agreed between the OD manager and CEO. The five new coachees included the new CEO, another member of the senior leadership team and three more direct reports to that team. Nine different coaches coached the 15 coachees, who worked in five different locations. The coaches all conformed to recruiting criteria applied by the coaching organisation; namely they all had (1) senior management experience, (2) formal coaching qualifications and (3) a qualification in behavioural science. All the coaches ascribed to evidence-based practice and deployed a solutions-based approach to facilitating goal setting (O'Connell & Palmer, 2007). In my role as relationship manager, I spoke to coaches on a regular basis to monitor the progress of assignments, and the OD manager spoke to coachees and line managers to track progress from an organisational perspective. I met with the OD manager (and sometimes also the CEO) on a formal basis once a quarter to review the progress of assignments, as well as talking informally when required. The first coaching assignments commenced in April 2013.

Coaching skills workshops

Coaching skill workshops comprised four modules delivered as two one-day workshops. The two workshops were scheduled 4–6 weeks apart. Six to 10 participants were invited

to each workshop, the numbers deliberately restricted to enable people to engage in a rich and open dialogue with each other and with the facilitators. The content was experiential and evidence-based, with skills defined with reference to the Standards Australia Handbook of Coaching in Organisations (Standards Australia, 2010). The four modules covered listening, asking questions and giving feedback, a coaching process (GROW) and managing emotions and resistance. I acted as lead facilitator on the first three workshops, each of which was held in Australia. The OD manager attended each of these workshops in service both of bringing the company perspective into the room, and in becoming accredited herself to deliver further workshops in the USA and Hong Kong. This approach was felt to be appropriate given that the OD manager was a graduate of the University of Sydney masters programme in organisational coaching. The OD manager also conducted one-day workshops for more junior managers in Australia, such that a total of 50 people attended a workshop. The first pilot workshop was held in December 2012 and all workshops were completed by August 2013. The OD manager scheduled a series of three teleconferences with each cohort of participants, scheduled at six-week intervals after the end of a programme.

Outcomes

Executive coaching

Of the 15 coaching assignments:

- Ten continued to completion, and three were extended into further assignments.
- One was terminated early, after the coachee said that they were not finding the process useful.
- One was terminated as part of a coaching review process requested by the new incoming CEO.
- Two were terminated in 2014 after the coachees were made redundant as part of an organisational restructure.
- Three assignments, including two extended assignments, still continue.

The first formal review was conducted three months into the programme at which the OD manager and CEO concluded that whilst the coaching appeared to be adding value overall, they recognised the nominations process needed to be improved. Specifically, they recognised the need to check whether employees aspired to a role on the senior leadership team or not, to establish whether or not they were interested in being coached, and to consider whether coaching was the most appropriate intervention. Later reviews further refined the coachee selection process with reference to the importance of an individual's role in delivering on performance and strategy.

Coaching skills workshops

The immediate feedback from participants was very positive. Participants reported enjoying the experiential design of the programme and the opportunity to work with colleagues from other parts of the business in small groups. Suggestions for improvement were adopted into an ongoing review of the workshop design. Through her interaction with participants in the six weekly teleconferences, the OD manager further concluded that:

- (1) Participants appeared to value the skills workshops at least as highly as the individual coaching, because of the opportunity to work with peers and gain direct access to tools;
- (2) Participants struggled to make time to apply learnings immediately after the end of a programme. For most people learnings appeared to 'click' six weeks after the end of the course, a process facilitated by the post-workshop telecons;
- (3) Learnings around core skills, such as listening and giving feedback, appeared to have a longer lasting impact than learnings around the coaching process (GROW).

Systemic evaluation

We were keen to understand the wider impact of the overall intervention on the organisation as a whole. The OD manager selected a semi-random population of 25 people for interview, ensuring a mix of seniority, function and geography. The 25 people chosen included the CEO, 5 members of the senior executive team, 10 of the senior executive team's direct reports and 9 people further down the organisation. I interviewed people three times, at six-month intervals, beginning in May 2013. By the time of the third round of interviews 4 of the 25 people had left the organisation.

The first round of interviews was conducted shortly after three coaching assignments had begun and a pilot skills workshop had been conducted. Key findings from this round of interviews were:

- (1) Respondents generally agreed that the purpose of coaching was to help people develop at a time when the company was seeking to grow rapidly.
- (2) Most people defined coaching in terms of telling people what they needed to do and giving advice.
- (3) About 50% of those interviewed said their line manager coached them. This appeared to include any kind of developmental conversation, rather than coaching per se.

In response to the findings the CEO and HRD committed to engage the senior executive team in defining coaching and engaging more deeply with the programme. In the event the topic failed to make the agenda of a senior executive team meeting before the next round of interviews. By the second round of interviews, 18 out of the 23 of interviewees had been coached or attended a skills workshop, the rollout of which was complete. Key findings from this round of interviews included:

- (1) Only 8% of respondents said they thought that people across the organisation defined coaching in the same way.
- (2) The emergence of a new definition of coaching among those who had attended skills workshops, as a means by which to help others work out solutions for themselves.
- (3) People who were being coached but had not attended a workshop were still likely to define coaching in terms of advice giving.
- (4) About 57% of people now said they were being coached. This included 80% of the senior executive, 50% of their direct reports and 57% of team members. Senior executive direct reports often distinguished between intrinsic and

extrinsic definitions of coaching and noted that whilst their managers gave them advice and guidance, they did not feel 'coached'.

Soon after the second round of interviews commenced, the OD manager and the CEO resigned and left the organisation. The acting HRD manager was replaced by a consultant, who became my main point of contact.

By April 2014, the coaching skills workshops and the majority of coaching assignments were finished, with five assignments still under way. Key findings from this round of interviews included:

- (1) Sixty-four per cent of people now defined coaching in terms of intrinsic motivation. This included 100% of people who had attended a workshop, but not been coached; 30% of people who had been coached but not attended a workshop; 80% of those who had attended a workshop and been coached; and 20% of those who had neither been coached nor attended a workshop.
- (2) In terms of seniority, 40% of the senior executive team defined coaching terms of intrinsic motivation as did 89% of their direct reports and 50% of team members.
- (3) There were differences in terms of geography. In the USA and Asia, where the local senior executive defined coaching in extrinsic terms, 50% of people defined coaching in intrinsic terms, compared to 70% of staff based in Australia.
- (4) About 71% of people now said they were coached, including 100% of the senior executive, 55% of their direct reports and 86% of team members.
- (5) People observed that those who had been coached or attended a skills workshop appeared to be more self-aware, more reflective, more likely to listen and give feedback, and more likely to frame issues with reference to a big picture.

Though these are positive results, people lamented the departure of the OD manager and remarked that the impact of skills workshops appeared to be diminishing without her support. With the CEO also having left the organisation more than 40% of interviewees were no longer sure who was sponsoring the coaching intervention.

Conclusions

'Just coaching' is not sufficient

Coaching by itself did not appear to play a significant role in changing people's perception of coaching over the period studied. Talking to the coaches I learned that several coachees brought to coaching a pre-existing definition of what coaching was, and so initially expected to be given advice and told what to do. These coachees were likely to place most value upon the coach's willingness to share ideas and tools. Coach skills training appeared more effective. Participants valued the explicit focus on skills and methodologies and appreciated the opportunity to make sense of the materials with their peers. However, this meaning-making process did not extend automatically into the wider organisation, and indeed required being supported for up to six months after the end of a workshop in order for learnings to be fully appreciated and for new behaviours to manifest themselves. This would all suggest that 'just coach' models (e.g. Bock & Conlinn, 2011), that imply a coaching culture can be achieved just by coaching people, are unlikely to lead to succeed. Coaching skills programmes, while also potentially useful, are also unlikely by themselves to facilitate a transition into such a culture (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2005; Cooper, 2011).

Traditional change models are not sufficient

Wilson (2011) and Jones and Gorell (2014), for example, suggest 10-step methodologies for implementing a coaching culture, approaches that bear comparison to generic change methodologies such as Kotter's (1995) eight-step change process. These linear methodologies usually start with the establishment of a vision before proceeding to implementation and then the 'maintaining of momentum'. The problem with these models is that they are essentially top-down, and imply the backdrop to culture change is static and unchanging. The application of such models rarely leads to predictable outcomes (Rumelt, 1991), nor should we expect them to if considered from a complex adaptive systems (CAS) perspective (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2013). Stacey (2012) defines a CAS as one in which a large population of agents interact with each according to local rules of interaction. There is no centralised direction of the pattern of behaviours as a whole such that change is emergent and unpredictable. In this case study a linear approach is unlikely to have succeeded given the directive behaviour of the CEO, the functioning of the executive team, the turbulent trading environment and the coming and going of key staff. Given the complexity of organisations and their environments, it seems unlikely that many initiatives will get off the ground if we rigidly apply a linear model. Working in complex environments, organisation's strategies are always likely to be in state of flux. If the implementation of a coaching culture programme is only likely to work if its purpose is aligned with strategy (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2005; Evans, 2011; Hawkins, 2012; Jones & Gorell, 2014), then a linear methodology will have us forever returning to the beginning.

Dialogue

At the beginning of this intervention, most leaders in the organisation believed that a key aspect of their role was to know all the answers and advise others how to do their role more effectively. To change the organisation's culture is in essence an attempt to change the identity of its collective leadership (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). The principal mechanism through which to facilitate a collective shift in organisational identity is dialogue (Lawrence, 2014). We saw this happening in this organisation at the coaching skills workshops, enabled by small class sizes and the time provided for discussion. Elsewhere in the organisation there were few such opportunities for people to interact in this way. People in different functions and geographies found it difficult to collaborate effectively. Once the workshops were completed, and in the absence of a high-performing senior leadership team, the OD manager was effectively playing the role of conduit for dialogue across functions and geographies. Which is why, after she left, the newly formed HR team chose to focus their energies on re-creating new forums for dialogue and seeking to engage the senior executive team in those dialogues.

Success and failure

How do we decide if an intervention has been successful? On the face of it this intervention may be said to have been successful in that of those people interviewed, the number of people defining coaching in intrinsic terms went from less than 10% to 64%, and the number of people saying they were being coached rose from 50% to 71%. However, I leave the organisation with the sense that the culture of this company is no more 'stable' than it has been at any stage so far in the journey. If the organisation's

environment keeps changing, which it will, then so will the culture need to evolve and adapt. This means we can only talk to the success or failure of an intervention at a particular point in time. This does not appear to be adequately reflected in linear change models where an end-point is implied. Building a coaching culture is therefore a never-ending journey. Rather than ask has this particular intervention been a success, with reference to historic visions and objectives, the more pertinent question may be – has the organisation got the right dialogic processes in place to ensure that culture and strategy remain aligned as they work through their current set of challenges?

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor



Paul Lawrence is a Director of the Centre for Systemic Change and heads up a research practice on behalf of WhyteCo based in Sydney, Australia. Paul has been working as an executive coach since 2007 and he consults in leadership and organisational development. He has a first degree and doctorate in Psychology, an MBA and a Graduate Diploma in Counselling & Psychotherapy. After obtaining his Ph.D. from University College London in 1989 he embarked on a corporate career with BP plc. He led teams and businesses in the UK, Spain, Portugal, Australia and Japan, specialising in start-ups and turnarounds. His experiences in leading people through complexity and change inspired him to move into a group organisational development role in 2002. In 2004 Paul immigrated to Australia, and worked for St George Bank for several years, where he led the development of a new group leadership development strategy.

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