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Managerial coaching: challenges, opportunities and training

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to provide insights into the growing practice of managerial coaching. Much of the coaching literature is set in the context of an external coach coming into an organisation. However managers are increasingly being expected to coach their employees, a change in role which can create tensions. Design/methodology/approach - This paper examines the literature on coaching managers. The paper also discusses practical implications for coach training. Findings - This paper identifies key differences in the issues faced by coaching managers and by internal/external coaches and recognises the importance of adequate training of managers in coaching skills as an important issue for organizations to tackle. Furthermore, the development of a supportive coaching culture should not be underestimated in facilitating managers to apply their coaching skills on a daily basis. Originality/value - The paper gives an overview of the challenges of the coaching managers, identifies areas for development/consideration of coaching training programs and offers practical suggestions for supporting managers in applying their coaching skills.

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Managerial Coaching: Challenges, Opportunities & Training

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ABSTRACT

Purpose:
The purpose of this paper is to provide insights into the growing practice of managerial coaching. Much of the coaching literature is set in the context of an external coach coming into an organisation. However managers are increasingly being expected to coach their employees, a change in role which can create tensions.

Approach: *This paper examines the literature on coaching managers. The paper also discusses practical implications for coach training.*

Findings:
This paper identifies key differences in the issues faced by coaching managers and by internal/external coaches. Recognises the importance of adequate training of managers in coaching skills as an important issue for organizations to tackle. Furthermore the development of a supportive coaching culture should not be underestimated in facilitating managers to apply their coaching skills on a daily basis.

Originality/value:
Gives an overview of the challenges of the coaching managers, identifies areas for development/consideration of coaching training programs and offers practical suggestions for supporting managers in applying their coaching skills.

Keywords: coaching, management competencies, leadership development, skills development, communication, trust

The popularity of coaching is increasing worldwide, both in industry and in academe (Bresser 2010; Lebihan 2011). In the UK, a huge 90% of respondents to the CIPD annual surveys claim coaching is taking place in their organisations, with line managers bearing the main responsibility for coaching in 37% of organisations (CIPD 2009). Companies increasingly state an expectation that managers will coach their employees, with research confirming positive correlations between coaching and employee satisfaction, individual performance and organisational goals (Ellinger et al. 2011; Wheeler 2011). Recent writing on leadership suggests that coaching is linked with effective management behaviours and offers a way for managers to implement leadership theories (Longenecker and

Neubert 2005; Anderson et al. 2009; Hagen 2010; Kinicki et al. 2011). Research has also identified specific coaching behaviours as desirable in leaders, e.g.:

- Using listening skills and communication to involve others, setting clear performance expectations, self-awareness, (Sparks and Gentry 2008)

- Subordinates having regular conversations with leaders or coaches where individual and organisational goals are discussed, leaders give constructive feedback, both positive and negative, and leaders reflect on their own leadership practices (Larsson and Vinberg 2010).

Coaching is clearly a feature of workplaces of the future. However, much of the research relating to coaching is in the context of the external coach who comes into an organisation to coach individual executives. Less is known about internal coaches, coaching employees who are not their direct reports, and even less of the coaching manager. Specifically more insight is required regarding the challenges that coaching managers face - this paper provides an overview of these challenges. Furthermore, these challenges and implications need to be translated directly into training material for coaching managers.

Coaching research is published in a broad range of disciplines, both in dedicated coaching journals and in general management, HR, training, learning and development journals, making it difficult for the coaching manager to get an overview. For the purpose of this study, the following databases were searched for peer reviewed full-text articles, without restriction on dates: Emerald, Business Source Complete, Proquest, Informit, Sage Journals, Sage Journals, Taylor & Francis, Science Direct, Wiley and Web of Science. The search terms used were: 'coaching manager', 'managerial coaching', 'manager as coach' and 'leader as coach'. Recent coaching monographs were also reviewed. The role of the coaching manager is, according to Cox et al.Bachkirova and Clutterbuck, 'the most difficult and controversial coaching role' (2010:3) and the most problematic according to Bresser (2011). The significance of this paper lies in its exploration of the challenges facing the coaching manager and the implications for training managers how to coach.

SCOPE

There are many different definitions of coaching, but as this paper relates to the context of coaching in organisations, it will use the definition of the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (2007): 'Business coaching is the process of engaging in meaningful communication with individuals in businesses, organizations, institutions or governments, with the goal of promoting success at all levels of the organization by affecting the actions of those individuals.'

Coaching managers are managers who coach their team members in a work context. The person being coached is referred to as the coachee. Effective coaching, according to Hunt and Weintraub, 'is much more powerful and useful than merely providing feedback to someone with a performance problem' (2002:2). They claim that the coaching manager promotes reflection and learning, encouraging employees to take ownership, to develop and to engage in the organisation for which they work. The coaching manager may conduct formal coaching sessions or take the opportunity for informal coaching on a daily basis (Hunt and Weintraub 2002; Ellinger et al. 2010; Wheeler 2011). Such coaching by managers is increasingly popular, with Clutterbuck (2009) reporting that a majority of organisations surveyed claimed that line managers could be effective or very effective coaches, while in his earlier paper, Clutterbuck (2008) suggested that the trend to equip all managers with coaching and mentoring skills was likely to accelerate, and indeed that some of those managers would develop sufficiently high levels of competence to enable them to provide support to other coaching managers. Although Bresser (2010) sees coaching skills as part of a line manager's normal leadership style, and a natural way of implementing an empowering style of leadership, he argues that line manager should not normally act as formal coaches. In contrast, Baker-Finch (2011) found that the small number of managers she surveyed were comfortable conducting formal coaching sessions with their staff for which they had prepared in advance, but lacked confidence or time to use their coaching skills in everyday conversations with their employees.

CHALLENGES OF THE COACHING MANAGER

Although there is a strong demand for coaching managers, managers may be reluctant or sceptical if they have not been coached themselves (Ladyshewsky 2010). However if managers have had a

positive experience of being coached, they are more likely to want their team members to experience coaching and to want to develop their own coaching skills (Knights and Poppleton 2007). While training in coaching skills is a good first step, it is not sufficient, according to Longenecker (2010). Similarly Lindbom (2007) says organisations need to create a culture supportive of coaching to ensure the on-going application and role modelling of coaching skills. The following discussion explores the areas where the coaching manager may face issues which differ from those facing external or internal coaches.

Relationship

Although the coaching manager lacks the independent perspective of an external coach, they have an advantage in that the context, jargon and performance of the coachees are familiar and they have existing relationships and credibility with the coachee. The coaching manager has an on-going opportunity to observe team members, motivate, challenge and develop them, and give feedback on a continuous basis (Frisch 2001). Given that the relationship between coach and the coachee is not just *a* critical success factor but *the* critical success factor in coaching (Bluckert 2005), the existence of a strong relationship enhances the prospect of success. Coaching in turn enhances the relationship between the coaching manager and their team members.

Listening

The authentic listening expected in coaching (Dubrin 2005) is likely to enhance the relationship between manager and team member, even if no formal coaching takes place. Scoular (2010) suggests that listening creates both trust and authenticity. Indeed Arnold (2009) states that for many coachees, listening is the best part of coaching, as their ideas are being heard and valued at a deep level. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) note that although listening is not entirely missing from the leadership literature, it does feature less frequently than one might expect. They claim that the topic being listened to is not important in itself, but that listening makes people feel engaged, interested, included and cared for. As most organisations now have a strong focus on employee engagement, it is important for managers to learn how to listen at a deep level. While managers may have received

some communication training, including active listening and body language, Tyler warns that such training has strayed from Rogers and Farson (1957)'s original conception of active listening:

> *Listening has instead been converted into a technique, a trick that disenchants people in organizations by providing a platform that, at its best, placates people into believing that they have been heard. At its worst, this co-opted listening is a tool for manipulating the speaker, rather than a pathway that can lead the listener into the world of the other*
> (Tyler 2011:155-6).

Failure to listen, according to Hunt and Weintraub (2002) results in a discussion where participants may become defensive, which reduces their potential to learn. By contrast, a coaching manager focuses on the coachee, in a non-judgemental and empathic way, to understand not only the facts but how the other person sees those facts and feels about them, noticing how things are said, as well as the speaker's body language and what is not said (Zeus and Skiffington 2000). In listening, the coaching manager gives the speaker the rare gift of time and attention, helping develop a positive relationship (Tyler 2011).

Questions

Coaching is generally described as non-directive (Cox et al. (2010). This can be a difficult approach to adopt for a manager used to providing solutions (Leimon 2005). However if coaching managers provide a solution before the speaker feels heard, they risk the solution being rejected. Moreover, an existing solution may not be as strong as one that emerges through dialogue. In addition, the person may keep coming back to the manager for solutions, so in the long run providing solutions may take more rather than less time. The coaching manager has to learn how to ask questions which will prompt the coachee to think, to reflect on their goals and assumptions, to become aware and to grow. Asking powerful questions is a characteristic of mature coaching, along with using ideas of team members and shared decision-making, whereas in earlier stages of developing their coaching skills, managers focus more on performance, feedback and goals, according to Anderson et al. (2009). Through listening to the answers to their questions, coaching managers understand the thinking and motivation of their team members far better than traditional managers (Whitmore 2009a). Questions

are also used by coaches to challenge and confront. However, Wheeler (2011) found coaching managers less willing to challenge and confront their team members.

Goal-setting

In many, although not all, coaching theories, there is a strong focus on goal-setting, according to Garvey et al. (2009). This fits well with the managerial role of setting clear expectations (Yukl 2010). However the coaching manager is unlikely to feel free to explore all the coachee's goals and more likely to feel constrained to focus on work-related goals. Rostron (2009) argues that unless managers' intrinsic drivers are aligned with their personal and professional goals, they will be unable to achieve their targets. Similarly Green and Grant (2003) say that the goals managers set, must fit with the inner needs and values of their team members. In practice however, Garvey et al. (2009) found that goals allowed external coaches to limit conversations to issues acceptable to the organisation paying for the coaching, and that internal coaches were even more controlled by the organisation. Although the goal itself may not be freely chosen, the coaching manager can help people gain clarity about their motivation, aspirations, and commitment to change (Riddle and Ting 2006). The coaching manager can also use coaching techniques to help team members to understand how their personal goals align or do not align with organisational goals, visualise and gain commitment to the set goal, generate options for achieving the goal, and give feedback on progress towards achieving it. A useful approach for coaching managers, according to Ellinger et al. (2010), is the solution-focused approach to coaching, because it is clearly goal-oriented. Furthermore this approach is sometimes more directive than other coaching approaches, with the coach sharing his mental models and possibly directing their clients towards solutions (Cavanagh and Grant 2010). Coaching managers however need to be careful that coachees are not buying into goals simply to please their manager (Riddle and Ting 2006).

Feedback

The pressures of the workplace can mean people get distracted from goals by issues which appear urgent (Longenecker and Neubert 2005). On-going coaching conversations help people differentiate to keep on track more effectively than through an annual or bi-annual performance review or periodic conversations with an external coach. For these coaching conversations to be useful, managers need to

be able to give feedback constructively. Managers who have themselves been coached, develop new mental models of how to give feedback effectively (Steelman et al. 2004). In fact, coaching often begins by helping people accept feedback, especially where there is a gap between how people see themselves and how other people see their actions (Folkman 2006). Research on the degree to which feedback contributes to performance has been mixed, however the improvement is more marked where feedback is followed up with goal setting through coaching McDowall and Millward (2010). While feedback on past performance is valuable, a future focus or so-called 'feedforward' is a useful way for managers to highlight the strengths of team members and indicate how they might improve in the future (Goldsmith 2006; McDowall and Millward 2010).

Coach Matching

The current popularity of coaching in organisations means that managers may be forced into coaching and their team members may have no choice but to be coached. If either party is unwilling, coaching cannot be successful. For the external coach, considerable effort is spent in matching coach and coachee. Wycherley and Cox (2008) suggest that while coach matching based on factors such as gender or culture may initially impact on rapport in the coaching relationship, such factors become less important as trust is developed. O'Broin and Palmer (2010) found wide support in the coaching and coaching psychology literature for the importance of trust in coaching. Ladyshewsky (2010) reiterates this in the context of the coaching manager. As managers have an existing relationship with their team members, trust may already be in place. If so, the question of coach matching may not be an issue. If trust is not in place, or if a team member does not want to be coached by their manager, then coaching cannot be effective (Ellinger et al. 2010).

Power

The issue of power in the coaching manager's relationship cannot be ignored. After all, the manager has influence over their team members' remuneration, recognition, and opportunities for development and hence the coachee may speak less freely than with a coach not in a line manager relationship (Bresser 2010; Whitmore 2009a). Coaching starts with an assumption of equality (Rostron 2009) which is not the case where a manager is coaching team members. The assumption of equality has been challenged by Welman and Bachkirova (2010) who argue that issues of power are always

present in a coaching relationship, whether or not the coach or the coachee is aware of them. Hawkins and Smith (2006) highlight the risk that in trying to facilitate change, coaches may force a coachee "to do or be something that is not 'them' "(p.6). Although the coaching manager cannot create conditions of equality where none exist, if employees have been properly selected and share some goals with the firm, then 'the coaching manager can share responsibility for development with the employee' (Hunt and Weintraub 2002:6). The relationship with coaching managers places less stress on the positional power or status of the manager and more on the manager's willingness to listen to and accept the ideas of the employee.

Confidentiality

A further issue for the coaching manager is that of confidentiality. In a formal coaching conversation, people may reveal more than they would in other conversations with their line manager. This is in response to the coach's enhanced listening skills, his/her ability to ask powerful questions and ability to create a safe place for the coachee to think out loud. The assumption of a safe place implies that whatever is said will not be used against the coachee, which may at times be difficult for the coaching manager (Riddle and Ting 2006). Confidentiality is fundamental to the success of coaching (Garvey et al. 2009) but it is unrealistic to expect the same level of confidentiality as in formal coaching relationships according to Anderson et al. (2009). Indeed, Connor and Pokora (2007) suggest that it would be unwise for coaches to give a guarantee of total confidentiality, instead the coach and coachee should agree the level of confidentiality to be provided. The coaching manager should explicitly discuss confidentiality with their team members in advance and pause a conversation to refer to that discussion, if they sense that the team member may later regret their openness. If the coaching manager hears about an issue which requires the involvement of someone else in the organisation, the coaching manager should agree with the coachee how best to proceed, preferably with the coachee taking responsibility for involving the other person, or if not, giving their permission for the coach to involve another person. Only where there is a legal obligation or duty of care, for example if the coachee were at risk of self-harm, can the duty of confidentiality be over-ridden.

Role Switching

Although coaching may be a manager's predominant approach, there may also be times when instead he/she adopts a role of teaching, training, mentoring or consulting, in other words, roles which require more giving of information, instruction and advice, unlike the non-directive role of coaching (Ellinger et al. 2010). All these roles have something in common in that all of them seek to help someone improve their performance by learning something new. Furthermore, they may draw on some of the same skills, so that the distinction relates more to where on the continuum the different activities fit, rather than the roles being complete opposites (Clutterbuck 2008; Lawton-Smith and Cox 2007). However in broad terms, we can position each as follows:

- Training is typically skills-based and has pre-defined answers.

- In mentoring, someone experienced in a particular role or situation gives advice.

- In consulting, the client is given solutions to their problem.

Both manager and team members need to know what role the manager is adopting at any given point in time. Riddle and Ting (2006) warn that coaching managers may experience role conflict as their relationship with the coachee will shift, depending on the role they are adopting at a particular time. Some authors e.g. Bresser (2010) and Hicks and McCracken (2010), suggest that managers should signal the shift between roles explicitly. Whitmore (2009a) argues that the choice of role depends on the situation, e.g. in a crisis or other situation where time is of the essence, a directive style may be best, while in other circumstances where the aim is to enhance quality and/or learning, the optimal approach is coaching. Further research is needed to identify the contexts in which coaching is most effective for both individuals and groups.

Team Coaching

While the commonest form of coaching for full-time coaches is one-on-one coaching, group coaching is increasing in popularity, partly because of a recognition that group coaching can be a powerful complement to one-on-one coaching (Brown and Grant 2010), and partly because of the benefits associated with coaching teams (Kets de Vries 2005). However Hawkins (2011) warns that there is a limit to what can be achieved through coaching individuals. Team coaching is the best way to develop social intelligence, according to Thornton (2010). Mathieu et al. (2008) suggest that coaching teams can have a positive effect on self-management, team empowerment and several other factors which

contribute to team effectiveness, but highlight the need for further research to explore whether in fact team leaders can be effective team coaches. One of the rare longitudinal studies of managers coaching teams (Shipper and Weer 2011) found that positive coaching enhanced commitment and reduced tensions, and led to increased team effectiveness. The next section looks at the implications for training in coaching for managers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING COACHING MANAGERS

Given the increasingly common expectation that managers can and will coach their employees, it is clear that managers need to be trained to do so. This is often not the case, according to Lindbom (2007). When managers do get some training in coaching, it is often in the same training programs that full-time coaches attend, with no consideration of the different applications of coaching by the coaching manager. These short courses typically train participants either in a proprietary model or a publicly available single coaching model like Grow (Goals, Reality, Options and Wrap Up), a model widely attributed to John Whitmore, although he has publicly stated that he was the first to publish it rather than its author (Whitmore 2009b). Reliance on a single coaching model has been criticised by Megginson and Clutterbuck (2009), who warn of dangers such as mechanistic coaching, missing critical clues to the client context, and manipulating the client to fit the coach's agenda. Connor and Pokora (2007) also stress that a coaching framework should not be used to limit exploration, but rather used to set a general direction and set aside where appropriate.

While novice coaches may find it useful to have a framework of some kind, if they are not sure where to go next in a conversation, an alternative approach is to listen to their coachee carefully, encouraging them to say more about the issue, which often generates new insights and actions. Training managers to focus on the person they are coaching, using coaching skills such as listening, asking questions, setting goals, observation, and giving feedback, may prove a more useful approach than training them in a coaching framework where they move in a strictly linear fashion, e.g. from goals, to reality, to options and implementation, without the mindset or skills to apply it. The emphasis in training managers to coach should be on the manager being authentic and genuine in their coaching, on reflection and self-awareness, and on developing a common understanding in their

organisation of the potential for dual role conflict and the ethical issues which may arise. Ladyshewsky (2010) adds that training must go beyond coaching skills to include emotional intelligence, building trust, understanding values, and exploring managers' perspectives on their role in the development of their staff. The new Australian guidelines on coaching in organisations stress that coaching requires a complex set of skills and that 'short manager as coach training courses' cannot impart these skills with the level of complexity and sophistication needed to provide an organization with a complete internal coaching capability' (SAI 2011 p.26). If managers are expected not only to coach individuals but also to coach their team as a whole, they need training in group dynamics and team coaching in order to fulfil this role effectively (Thornton 2010).

Purchasers of coach training in organisations need to be clear about their requirements and on the differences between training managers as coaches and training full-time coaches, and also on the difference between business coaching and life coaching. McCarthy (2010) explains how the Master of Business Coaching at the University of Wollongong is targeted at the application of coaching in a business context, while other coaching degrees focus more on coaching psychology and coaching skills for application in a broad range of contexts, including life coaching. In the emerging discipline of coaching and related education and training, it is just as much a case of 'buyer beware' as it is in the case of those purchasing coaching services (Coutu and Kaufmann 2009).

Companies also need to be aware that it takes time to embed coaching in the daily routine, and that support is needed during this phase (Grant 2010). Coaching has been found to greatly increase the application in the workplace of what is learned in a training program (Geissler 2009; Olivero et al. 1997). There is no reason to suppose this would be any different when the skills developed in the training program are themselves coaching skills. Companies should therefore have a strategy to ensure that managers will have the confidence and support to apply their skills when they return to work. Such strategies may include providing work-based learning opportunities and support, such as managers themselves being coached, mentored or having coaching supervision (Stewart and Palmer 2009). Scamardo and Harnden (2008) state that the benefits of such support groups for managerial coaches are more than sharing of ideas and approaches, they also help managers feel more confident,

less isolated, pride in helping others and provide role models and networks. As our understanding of coaching is still evolving, few companies yet have approaches in place to prevent line managers slipping back into their old non-coaching behaviours or provide supervision for internal coaches (Clutterbuck 2009). However, companies with more mature coaching cultures do provide a range of mechanisms such as communities of practice, peer supervision and support from human resources or learning development professionals (Ali et al. 2010; Grant 2010).

When developing a coaching culture, companies should ensure they start with creditable role models who have had positive coaching experiences themselves and who have received some training as coaches (Lindbom 2007). This group can be expanded over time both through identifying and training people in-house and by included coaching aptitude in recruitment and selection processes. Building up a cadre of internal coaches provides a strong in-house resource which can support managers in applying and improving their coaching skills (Ali et al. 2010) and reaping the putative benefits in terms of enhanced employee engagement, performance and key business outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Coaching skills are becoming part of a manager's toolkit. Through regular coaching conversations, the coaching manager can have considerable impact on developing trust, awareness, responsibility and learning and ultimately on engagement and performance. As previously mentioned, coaching has considerable potential as a way for managers to implement many of the demands made on their leadership. For this to happen, however, managers need training not only in coaching skills but in understanding how to use coaching in their role and in their organisation, and how to address the challenges listed above. These challenges should be taken thoroughly into account from a training perspective. For example, specific scenarios relating to dual role conflicts or ethical dilemmas could be discussed and practised in the form of role plays. On-going support, in the form of individual, group or peer coaching, mentoring, supervision and/or communities of practice, will help embed a coaching approach, contribute to the development of a supportive coaching culture, and ensure the investment in coaching training generates the desired return. The impact of the organisation´s culture on the successful implementation of managerial coaching should not be underestimated. A culture

supportive of coaching greatly facilitates the transition from training in skills to a daily application of these skills by managers.

It should be noted that some texts cited in this paper such as Arnold (2009) and Bresser (2010) are practitioner-oriented. Hence while they shed light on the issues discussed, more rigorous academic studies are needed. The academic research in this emerging discipline of coaching is also variable, with some papers based on participants in training programs (e.g. Grant 2010) or on limited samples (e.g. Haug 2011 was based on a team of five members, all male). Quality empirical research is needed by both academics and practitioners on the experience of coaching managers and their coachees, on how coaching impacts a manager's leadership style, when and how to modify generic coaching skills for use by coaching managers, and on which coaching skills and models are most effective for coaching managers. This evidence base can then underpin the further development of appropriate education, training and development for coaching managers.

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