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Training for the leader as coach in the Australian context

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Abstract

This paper looks at how Australian managers perceive the training they receive from their organisations in order to meet increasing expectations that they coach their employees. 580 managers in Australian organisations provided information regarding their coaching training experiences, and that which they would ideally like to obtain, from their organisation. The level of coaching training varied widely from coaching-specific training to no preparation at all. Any training provided was generic coaching training. From our findings we see a distinct need for tailored and more detailed training opportunities for managers, a more structured and coordinated approach to within-organisation coaching initiatives.

Keywords

training, context, australian, leader, coach

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Training for the Leader as Coach in the Australian context

Milner, J. and McCarthy, G

**Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management Annual Conference, Sydney,
December 2014.**

***Abstract:** This paper looks at how Australian managers perceive the training they receive from their organisations in order to meet increasing expectations that they coach their employees. 580 managers in Australian organisations provided information regarding their coaching training experiences, and that which they would ideally like to obtain, from their organisation. The level of coaching training varied widely from coaching-specific training to no preparation at all. Any training provided was generic coaching training. From our findings we see a distinct need for tailored and more detailed training opportunities for managers, a more structured and coordinated approach to within-organisation coaching initiatives.*

‘Manager as Coaches’ as well as ‘Coaching cultures’ are increasingly popular concepts in industry.

From a research perspective, however, we need to know more about both areas (Beattie et al., 2014, p. 185; Gormley & van Nieuwerburgh, 2014, p. 10; Hagen, 2012, p. 17; Kim, 2014, p. 78). Hence research studies which explore these phenomena are timely in order to address the challenges posed for organisations and ensure managers have the impact expected both by their organisations and by their employees.

This research paper explores the following research question:

What coaching training have Australian managers undertaken to be prepared for the coaching role expected of them?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Coaching involves a coach and one or more coachees (those who are being coached). Coaching accentuates collaboration between coach and coachee and aims to amplify the potential of the coachee (Standards-Australia, 2011, p. 9). Formal studies of coaching and its effectiveness are however complicated by the fact that there are many types of coaching, both formal and informal (D’Abate, Eddy, & Tannenbaum, 2003, p. 361). For example, practitioners as well as academics

sometimes use the term 'coaching' in a vague sense which stands in contrast to more formal usages such as; "career coaching" or "executive and leadership coaching"(Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2010). It behoves researchers therefore to make clear the type of coaching under investigation.

Also complicating studies of coaching are the varied avenues by which coaching is delivered, for example through either an internal or external coach (Arney, 2006, p. 51; Frisch, 2001, p. 241). This then has flow-on effects for the type of coaching that will take place. For example, if an organisation uses external coaches, what follows are often formal coaching sessions. If a coach internal to the organisation is used, this can often be via someone for whom coaching forms part of their job responsibilities, but who also has other duties within the organisation (Frisch, 2001, p. 241; Rock & Donde, 2008, p. 15) or alternatively someone employed specifically to carry out this role with employees for whom they do not have line management responsibility. Managers within organisations are also increasingly being called upon to use coaching skills with their employees (Dawe, 2003, p. 8; Ellinger, Beattie, & Hamlin, 2014, p. 257). This so-called "managerial coaching" (Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999) or "manager as coach" concept (Ellinger, 2013, p. 311) can occur via formal coaching sessions with a dedicated time being set aside to have a coaching conversation, but also informally where coaching is delivered on an ad hoc basis (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010, p. 62).

Ellinger et al. (2014, p. 258) define the manager as coach as a "a manager or supervisor serving as a coach or facilitator of learning in the workplace setting, in which he or she enacts specific behaviours that enable his/her employee (coachee) to learn and develop". Managers often use key coaching skills such as listening, questioning, feedback and goal setting (Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999, p. 758; McCarthy & Milner, 2013, pp. 770-772). In using these skills, managers try to support staff members to generate their own answers to an issue instead of the managers themselves providing solutions to the staff concerned (Grant & O'Connor, 2010). Therefore a managerial coaching approach can be considered as an approach which leads to empowerment of the coachee (Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999, p. 758). Studies have shown that a managerial coaching approach can be linked to improved employee performance (Kim, 2014; Kim, Egan, Kim, & Kim, 2013; Pousa & Mathieu, 2014). For example,

Pousa and Mathieu (2014, p. 74) point out that if managers role-model coaching behaviours that are based on trust and respect, it is more likely that employees mirror those behaviours when engaging with customers, leading to a more positive client- relationship. Furthermore if employees feel empowered to solve issues they encounter themselves, this can lead to higher performance (Pousa & Mathieu, 2014, p. 74).

There can however be difficulties with enacting a collaborative coaching approach (Field, 1998, pp. 82-83) where there is a difference in workplace status between a (superior) coaching manager and a (subordinate) staff member, for example when it comes to aspects such as remuneration or promotion (McCarthy & Milner, 2013, p. 772; Rock & Donde, 2008, p. 17). Other challenges are inherent in the multiple roles of a manager (Beattie et al., 2014, p. 185; McCarthy & Milner, 2013, p. 773; Standards-Australia, 2011, p. 25), for example, when giving direction on a problem compared to coaching staff members to come up with their own solution.

Whilst managers are often expected to apply coaching principles at work (Tonhäuser, 2010), they are not always equipped for this (Lindbom, 2007, p. 101). Furthermore, coaching training courses often focus on generic coaching skills rather than those skills specific to the managerial coaching situation (McCarthy & Milner, 2013, p. 774). In addition to covering basic coaching skills, there is also a need to look at other topics such as aligning goals and establishing trust with a coachee (Ladyshevsky, 2010, p. 303) or specific competencies for the (managerial) team coaching context (Clutterbuck, 2013; Hagen & Gavrilova Aguilar, 2012).

In this study, in order to learn more about the prevalence and features of managerial coaching we asked managers in Australia about the level of training for coaching offered by their organisation. In this way we hoped to determine the directions and strategies organisations could take in an effort to maximise the impact of managerial coaching.

METHODOLOGY

The research design comprised an online survey of 8834 HR managers and general managers focusing on Australian organisations with 200+ employees, to which we received 580 responses. In this paper we specifically explore the nature of training offered to coaching managers.

The choice of an online survey was due to its feasibility and appropriateness for addressing the research questions. An online survey, which can be included in the group of written questionnaire techniques (Diekmann, 2008, pp. 521-522) allowed us to reach a larger number of potential participants compared to often time-intensive interviews which then only allow a smaller number of participants due to feasibility considerations (Friedrich, 1990, p. 225) .

One of the disadvantages of an online survey is that people are frequently invited to take part in such surveys which might reduce their willingness to participate (Couper, 2000, p. 465). This could also explain the low response rate of 6.6% to our survey. A further possible disadvantage is that participants may interpret questions differently and indeed we did see variation for example in how directive or non-directive coaching was perceived.

The open questions were analysed by using thematic analysis (Mayring, 2004, 2010). After reading the responses to one open question, categories were formed by prescribing a word or phrase that best described the response of each participant. If a new response matched with an existing category, it was coded accordingly. If a comment from a participant did not fit with an existing category a new one was created (Mayring, 2004, 2010). Categories were reviewed by both researchers and combined where appropriate.

RESULTS

This section first reports the quantitative data related to the length of training received and then the responses related to managers being self-taught, receiving informal training and on the job training.

Training

As can be seen in Table 1, informal and short training courses predominated the responses

Insert Table 1 about here.

Self-training and informal training seem to play an important role for managerial coaches.

Almost 40% had trained themselves, for example via books. Furthermore approximately one quarter received informal training in coaching by a colleague or supervisor.

Whilst some participants had received in-house or external coaching training, such training was usually brief with, for example, 22 % undertaking less than one day in-house coaching training and 12.7 % less than one day of external coaching training. Others (32.3%) stated that they took part in in-house training or external coaching training programs (33.7 %) with a duration of more than one day. There was little evidence of more advanced training, with a mere ten respondents taking a full undergraduate coaching subject, eight participants taking an undergraduate coaching program and ten taking a postgraduate coaching subject. It was more common for respondents to take a certificate IV coaching qualification (21 responses) or for coaching to be covered as part of a postgraduate subject (36 responses).

Coaching specific training

Both in-house and external coaching programs were attended by participants. Some of the coaching training was targeted to the workplace context, for example leadership coach programs, whereas others focused on areas such as life coaching.

The content of coaching specific training programs typically included basic coaching skills such as listening and feedback.

“Over the years our company has had numerous different systems of training in place all driving the same style of coaching process. Active Listening, Feedback, Empathy etc.”

Other relevant training

Other training programs with a perceived relationship to coaching were also identified by the participants, for example; mentoring, leadership, counseling, education, workplace training and sport.

“Training was in mentoring rather than coaching...”

“Trained as a Lifeline telephone counsellor”

Leadership and workplace training had been completed by some managers. Coaching was also commented on as being part of their formal leadership program.

“I have several postgraduate management certificates and grad dips in management and leadership. Coaching is covered to some extent in those. (...)

Several participants reported receiving training in the area of sports coaching which they found transferrable to managerial coaching.

“Sports, a lot of the time sports and business can have similar attributes; each staff member has different levels of willingness, aptitude, desire, strengths and weaknesses. I will not coach/train all staff members the same.”

Self-taught and learning on the job

Several managers pointed out that they were self-taught or had learned coaching skills on the job.

“I have been in Learning and Development and Organisational Development for over 15 years and through that time I had had many opportunities to develop my coaching skills, I learned on the job.”

Learning happened for example via videos or observing others who displayed what they thought were appropriate coaching skills.

“Close observation of other managers and leaders who are effective at coaching”

Participants also stated that having their own coach helped them learn more about coaching.

“I was mentored by a professional coach for two hours a week for three months. The most rewarding and empowering experience of my life. It has changed my life.

Others commented on observing or experiencing their own managers' coaching:

“My manager also coaches and I can learn from that.”

More and better training programs

In terms of the training participants would like to receive, some participants wanted more formalised, specific coaching training on an ongoing basis with follow-up opportunities.

“A formal coaching program to become aware of and utilise other coaching techniques would be useful.”

Whilst some managers receive some training support, they feel they need far more, particularly with regards its duration and intensity depth.

“Longer more intensive coaching programs, I feel like I 'fly by the seat of my pants' a lot and use my intuition, but am aware that strategies I use are just the tip of the iceberg.”

The emphasis is on ongoing training opportunities which would not only help participants who have already been through coaching programs to keep up with new developments, but also for people who are coming into the organisation to have an opportunity to learn how to coach.

“Regular updates and short training programs to develop and maintain skills.”

“Regular coaching training, especially for the less experienced and newer managers. It should be done annually not once every 3-4 years, often new managers and supervisors are hired and they haven't completed coaching training and it may take years before they do.”

In terms of specific topics for further coaching training, the wish was expressed to know more about coaching itself, its associated benefits, boundaries and limitations, as well as options when faced with challenging situations.

“Sessions on what coaching can and should not involve would be useful.”

“More assistance with how to 'coach the 'uncoachable'.”

Training opportunities should ideally include regular follow-ups. This again demonstrates a desire for a long term, ongoing approach and not simply a one-off training event.

“More intense focus on coaching as a fundamental management skill, backed by a robust development and reinforcement process.”

Furthermore, managers would like to receive feedback on the effectiveness of their coaching skills within the workplace.

“(…) someone to sit with me and direct / feedback on my attempts at coaching my staff.”

Regarding training support, it was also mentioned that it would be helpful to have opportunities to exchange experiences with other manager- coaches and to learn from them.

“Sharing ideas that have helped coach/coachee in the workplace (…)”

Structure Process and coordinated approach

Another theme that came out of the analysis of the free text responses was that coaching initiatives should be made part of a more structured process across the organisation.

“Coordinated approach across the whole organisation to improve coaching.”

This way, coaching endeavours could be bundled and aligned consistently across the organisation.

“Commitment to an ongoing organisation wide scheme that is properly resourced.”

However, one participant stated that not explicitly naming one’s approach as coaching was preferable.

“Sometimes not naming the process is better so maybe not putting pressure of emphasis on it and making it part of the whole management package.”

Role models

Participants want their direct managers as well as people at the top of the organisation to demonstrate coaching skills and to act as coaching role models.

“I am poorly coached by senior management, I would like to see them set a good example.”

Furthermore, active encouragement of their coaching by senior managers was desired by participants in order to promote the use of coaching skills across the organisation.

“Other managers need to be more encouraged by senior management to coach (as opposed to a more hard-edged approach to driving performance (...).”

Others point out that any endeavour in changing an organisation’s prevalent leadership style, can be challenging.

“It is difficult. It is a bit like all HR. People need to be ready to adapt and change and in some respects I think coaching needs to be centred around the individual to be effective so best done on a one on one basis.(...).”

DISCUSSION

This study looked at managerial coaching in the context of the coaching training which managers currently receive and the training they would ideally like to receive.

We found that training is an important cornerstone of equipping managers with coaching skills. Coaching behaviours such as listening and questioning might seem at a first glance quite straightforward, however participants pointed out that managers often do not possess these skills, suggesting that training in coaching might be highly desirable. Our results therefore suggest that training workshops should not only cover key skills and behaviours necessary for coaching, but also the benefits derived from, and challenges contained within, the coaching approach specifically when applied by managers. Further, training should provide managers with appropriate strategies to overcome the challenges associated with leaders adopting a coaching role.

The question becomes: how can organisations ensure that their coaching training program is effective?

A starting place for an attempt to answer this question might be to consider firstly what generally constitutes an effective non-manager specific workplace-training program. One important component

of the training process is needs analysis (Tovey, 1997, p. 65). Another is the context in which the organisation operates, which is important for the setting of holistic learning needs (Figgis et al., 2001, p. 52). Also, considering a given business's drivers and strategy can help organisations to define their training goals (Dawe, 2003, p. 7; Noe, 1999, p. 44). Post-delivery, it is necessary to evaluate the training program to determine its effectiveness in achieving its goals (Bartram & Gibson, 1999, p. 13).

These principles, important to the generic training situation, are a starting point for considering the final shape of a manager-coaching program, whether formal or ad hoc. Given the wide variety of commercial and non-commercial organisations within the community, clearly the above "bare bones" coaching model will need to be tailored to the precise strategy being implemented by an organisation and the specific challenges being faced by managers.

One barrier to learning is time pressure (Dickie, 1999, p. 20) and formal workshops often mean that managers have to sacrifice time from their working schedules. Furthermore, coaching itself demands time and resources (Pettinger, 2002, p. 136).

Formal training courses might appear to offer the most appealing approach, but in reality these are only one way of achieving learning outcomes in participants. Lombardo and Eichinger (1996) propose a hybrid approach, the 70-20-10 model of learning and training, where 70 % occurs through 'on the job' learning, 20 % via feedback and 10 % via formal training courses or reading. This suggests that organisations and training providers need to consider initiatives that go beyond 'classroom' training (Figgis et al., 2001, p. 52). Previous research has found that supplementing training with coaching in the workplace increases the transfer of learning from the classroom to the work context, e.g. Olivero et al. (1997) found that training by itself increased productivity by 22.4% whereas training combined with coaching increased productivity by 88% - almost a four fold increase.

Besides the opportunity for would-be manager-coaches to participate in training courses, there also needs to be assistance for managers as they try to implement their new skills into their workplace (Grant, 2010, pp. 73-74). For example, it has been suggested that coaches need to receive feedback on

their coaching skills and have the opportunity for follow-up after their training (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2006, pp. 59-61). Training of managers could be accompanied by coaching or peer mentoring sessions for the participants to ensure that managers receive feedback on how they are transferring their learning from the workshop to the workplace (Grant, 2010, p. 74; Olivero et al., 1997, p. 461). In our study participants were specifically asking for support in terms of sharing ideas and coaching strategies with other managers. Peer support in the form of peer coaching can assist managers learning from and with colleagues (Emil Berg & Terje Karlsen, 2012), however the challenges and limitations of such an approach have to be taken into consideration. Parker et al. (2013, p. 378) point out potential risk factors on the individual (e.g. lack of peer coaching skills), relational (e.g. overdependence) and contextual level (e.g. mismatching of participants).

However, even if training is offered to managers, this does not automatically lead to managers being motivated to participate in programs (Dickie, 1999, p. 20). Thus, participants in our study pointed out that it needs to be clearly explained why a coaching leadership style is beneficial in order to convince managers to let go of old habits and adopt newer ones.

Managers would also like coaching initiatives to be coordinated within, and aligned across, the organisation. It also became evident in our study that generic coaching training needs to be tailored to the managerial coaching specific context, in ways that take the challenges and dual role of the leader as manager and coach into consideration as distinct from that of the internal or the external coach. Ellinger et al (2011, p. 81) caution that training programs need to help managers to understand the appropriate amount and situation of coaching as too much coaching might not be effective. This confirms findings from our studies with managers pointing out that they would like to know when to use coaching and when not.

Limitations and future research

We had a low response rate for the online questionnaire. This may have introduced a sampling bias within our results as those with positive experiences of coaching were more likely to reply. This

possibility must therefore temper our conclusions. Furthermore, participants may have had different conceptions of coaching and this too may have impacted their answers, and therefore, the strengths of our conclusions. Future studies might therefore seek data from more representative samples of Australian managers, perhaps providing definitions regarding coaching to participants in advance. Future research could also examine the relationship between the commitment level of individual managers and the resultant impact, if any, on employee engagement and, in turn, any long-term benefits to the organisation. Future studies could also explore the specific coaching supervision processes which might best support managers with any role conflicts that might occur as they deploy their coaching skills.

CONCLUSION

Managerial coaching has entered the lexicon of Australian business management, but our study suggests it may be progressing in a slow and piecemeal manner. Previous studies have linked managerial coaching to improved employee performance which makes it worthwhile for organisations to consider how to best support their managers in acquiring coaching skills. If organisations are interested in their managers using coaching skills then companies also need to provide access to appropriate training opportunities.

We identified a need for specific, longer and ongoing training opportunities in this area and in particular, ones which are tailored to the needs of managers rather than generic one-size-fits-all coaching courses. Managers need to understand in those training sessions which situations are conducive to coaching and which ones are not as well as considering issues identified as distinctive in the managerial coaching context, such as confidentiality, dual role, and power issues.

Further studies are required to confirm this, and ultimately, studies are also required to determine what sort of coaching works best in different contexts.

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Table 1: Number of Responses for the different types of training received

What training have you had in coaching?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
In-house coaching training program ≤1 day	22.0%	64
In-house coaching training program > 1 day	32.3%	94
Part of another training program	29.9%	87
External coaching training program ≤1 day	12.7%	37
External coaching training program > 1 day	33.7%	98
Certificate IV level training in coaching	7.2%	21
Undergraduate coaching subject	3.4%	10
Undergraduate coaching program	2.7%	8
Part of a postgraduate subject	12.4%	36
Postgraduate subject in coaching	3.4%	10
Graduate Certificate in Coaching	0.7%	2
Masters in Coaching	1.4%	4
Informal training by colleague or supervisor	23.7%	69
Self-training via books etc.	38.8%	113
Other (please specify)		55