
Why coaching?

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ABSTRACT *This paper describes a piece of academic research that explores the experiences of a group of managers taking part in an externally-provided coaching programme. It describes the background to the programme, outlines the benefits identified by participants and offers a model arising from the research. Data from individual managers on the perceived benefits of coaching were gathered through semi-structured questionnaires. This provided the basis for the creation of the 'Inner and Outer Model of Development' that describes how the internal qualities of self-awareness and confidence enable and stimulate the five external competencies of management, assertiveness, understanding difference, stress management and work/life balance. Acting as the conduit and mediator between these two groups are communication skills. The research concludes that coaching substantially increases the effectiveness of the links between self-development, management development and organisational effectiveness.*

When is coaching the best choice for management development and what are the developmental areas that it targets most effectively? Coaching is a practice that has become widely adopted, variously applied and generally accepted in the management community. It is a reasonable assumption, therefore, that it meets some felt need and has some benefits and pragmatic justification. Before investing in such a service, however, the client needs to feel confident that it will produce the kind of changes that they are looking for. Within an ever-increasing range of management development tools, why choose coaching? What results does it achieve?

To understand the kind of development or change that might be

achieved through coaching a piece of qualitative research was carried out. It aimed to examine the phenomenon of coaching and understand how it is experienced by its recipients.

THE STUDY GROUP

The study took place in a major UK clearing bank that had recently been restructured into five separate businesses. The Head of the Sales and Marketing department invited the author to provide a coaching programme for him and 15 of his managers.

His vision for this new company was to break away from the monolithic, traditional bank structure, with a move from a 'command and control' hierarchy

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Table 1 Key benefits from coaching

<i>Internal development</i>	<i>Mediated through</i>	<i>External development</i>
— Self-awareness — Confidence	— Communication skills	— Leadership and management — Assertiveness — Understanding difference — Stress management — Work/life balance

to one of consultation and empowerment. The brief was to provide coaching and support to managers during this transition, encourage the acquisition of a new paradigm of management skills, develop effective teams, and assist the managers in developing behaviours and strategies to deal more effectively with their boss.

Each manager received one hour's coaching every fortnight. This was used as a development tool individually tailored to each individual's learning needs and focused on their own goals and objectives. All the respondents had been in the programme for over a year when the study took place.

THE RESEARCH

A phenomenological approach was taken as the author was predominantly interested in exploring and recording individual people's different views and experiences of mentoring.

A self-report questionnaire was devised and sent to each manager. The questions were based on the six fundamental levels of learning and change which impact on the individual or the system (Dilts, 1996). These address: the *environment* or context within which the work takes place — the opportunities and constraints; the individuals' *behaviours*; their *beliefs and values*; their *capabilities*; their *role* and their *vision and purpose*.

The resulting data were analysed in two stages: first the material was sorted

for words, phrases or themes which had connections, importance or meaning; then formed into groups from which the data could be quantified. These were subsequently sorted into categories which emerged naturally out of the process.

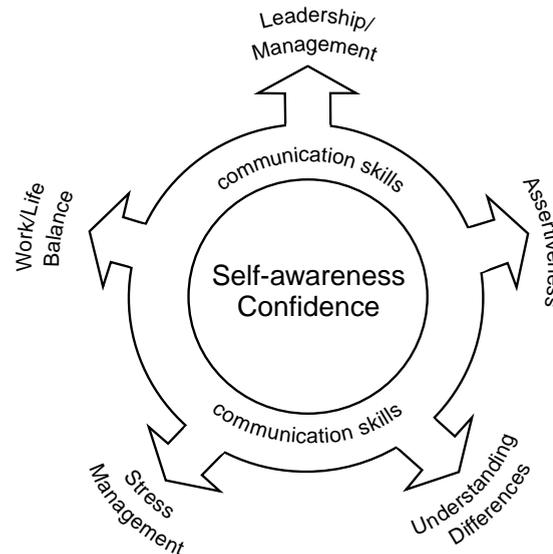
A vast amount of data was in response to the questionnaires, and a number of key benefits were identified which fell into three core groups: the internal, the external and mediating. The identified benefits are self-awareness, confidence, leadership and management, assertiveness, understanding difference, stress management, work/life balance and communication skills.

These core groups created a pattern: self-awareness and confidence are *internal* processes essential to ongoing growth and development. They enable and stimulate the five *external* categories of management, assertiveness, understanding difference, stress management and work/life balance.

Developing an individual's *internal qualities* provides support for the manifestation of their *external competencies*. *Communication* is the skill that acts as the bridge and mediator between internal development and its external implementation. The use of high-quality communication skills facilitates the effective delivery and receipt of ideas, concepts, knowledge and vision into the behaviours and competencies of leadership and management (Table 1).

These groups are conceptualised into

Figure 1 Internal and external model of development



the ‘Internal and external model of development’ (Figure 1). This model creates a structure for, and provides a way of making sense of, both the experience and benefits of coaching. It also forms a useful framework for HR managers to assess the appropriateness of a coaching intervention to address particular development needs.

THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT

It is vital for leaders and managers to develop an understanding of their internal processes. It is only through knowing one’s own internal psychological processes that a person comes to understand and interact effectively with the external social processes that surround them.

Internal qualities

Self-awareness

Self-awareness is fundamental to personal development; it enables individuals to choose their responses to feelings and reframe their actions to make them more

congruent with what they are attempting to do. Self-awareness alone, without its link into the wider social context, is incomplete. Without it, managers will be insufficiently aware of why they act in a particular way or why they respond to situations in certain ways. A manager who is unaware of his internal processes may behave inappropriately or act aggressively while intending to be assertive or authoritative. They may be insensitive to, or intolerant of, other’s emotions.

As a person’s self-awareness grows, they improve their understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, needs and internal drivers. They become more aware of how their feelings affect them and how this might influence their motivation and desire, their behaviour, their work, their impact on other people and ultimately their success.

One respondent described how increased self-awareness had enabled him to make choices in his behaviours:

‘By being more self-aware I understand how some of my beliefs and values can influence my behaviour and responses, but I have a choice, and can utilise my positive beliefs.

This use of my positive beliefs provides a strong base and gives me conviction in my discussions.'

Self-awareness appears to consist of four elements: the ability to understand one's past and learn from it; openness to one's own and other's feelings; the ability to reflect on situations before moving to action; and the ability to make appropriate choices.

— *Past-present awareness*: Becoming aware of the past and understanding its influence on one's present attitudes, mindsets, behaviours and feelings enables one to reframe them within the current context. For example, through coaching, one manager began to understand how his father's lack of appreciation of his achievements had left him with a feeling of 'never being good enough'. He was able to link these past experiences and feelings to his current feelings and behaviours, and recognise ways in which he was replaying old unhelpful patterns from his relationship with his father, with his boss. He was able to use and transfer self-awareness of the past into his social perception and achieve a marked improvement in his relationship with his boss.

— *Openness to feelings*: Self-awareness facilitates the process of being more aware about one's own feelings. Acknowledgement and acceptance of feelings can help reframe one's actions and behaviours to make them more congruent with what one is attempting to do. How often do mistakes and misunderstandings occur because thoughts and feelings have not been communicated well enough to others or have been misinterpreted?

Coaching can help individuals become clearer about the part their feelings play in their interactions. It

facilitates the raising to awareness of inconsistencies between what one says and does, and what one thinks and feels (Argyris, 1990). Respondents claimed that that coaching had helped them to understand and be more honest about their own feelings and more sensitive to other people's feelings. They felt they were able to be more open and direct.

— *Reflection*: The ability to examine experiences, reflect on situations, formulate hypotheses and develop new approaches enables individuals to improve and develop their management style (Kolb, 1984). One respondent described how the ability to reflect had helped him: 'I am more self aware than I have ever been, I reflect on issues and consider different approaches before acting. I focus on the most important areas and leave the rest for other people to manage.'

— *Choice*: Another respondent described how increased self-awareness provided him with choices around his behaviours and added conviction to his beliefs: 'By being more self-aware I understand how some of my beliefs and values can influence my behaviour and responses, but I have a choice, and can utilise my positive beliefs. This provides a strong base and gives me conviction in my discussions.' Managers reported a deeper understanding of their problem and concerns, an improved ability to deal with 'emotional baggage' and more rational, adult behaviour.

Many of the respondents commented on how their self-awareness had led to a greater acceptance of themselves.

Confidence

HR managers are frequently presented with the problem of how to increase a person's confidence. The traditional

method has been to send them on an ‘Assertiveness’ course but these courses rarely produce a sustained increase in confidence. Participants learn new ways of communicating which may improve confidence in the short-term but, unless the external behavioural change is accompanied by changes in the internal processes, it is unlikely to be maintained.

All the managers in this study, however, commented on the increase in their own self-confidence and/or self-esteem. Comments such as ‘My manager has noticed my developing confidence, heightened belief and stronger impact at meetings and more interest in my colleagues’ suggest that coaching not only increases confidence in oneself but also increase a person’s interest in others. This was supported by another manager who said that he had a greater desire to help colleagues, and another who said he was kinder.

‘I’m considering the “direction” of my life, both in terms of career/work, personal and family issues. Coaching has given me opportunity and courage to consider what is truly important to me now and look ahead, 10, 20, 30 years, with the choice to make changes now that will affect my future contentment.’

Increased self-confidence also enables managers to bring more of themselves into the workplace. ‘I’m much surer of what I stand for and how this “fits” for both me and organisation.’ Managers reported feeling stronger and more rounded, being more able to link their beliefs and values into their work and to make ‘tough’ decisions.

External competencies

Leadership and management

The roles of leadership and management are key to driving and managing

successful change initiatives. Enabling change in others must start with understanding and managing change in oneself. This factor is frequently overlooked or not even recognised or understood. Effective coaching addresses external change and development concurrently with internal change and development. Coaching develops the external aspects of leadership and management, while encouraging the internal support qualities of *self-awareness* and *confidence*.

The managers described changes made across three areas: individual presence and purpose, relationship with the team, and achievement of the goals and tasks they set for themselves and others.

- *Individual*: Managers report that they developed a wider perspective and organisational overview and improved their leadership skills; they command greater respect and are valued more by others. Respondents said that identifying their personal vision had led to greater clarity and motivation in their role.
- *Team*: Three-quarters of respondents stated that coaching had improved their understanding of team dynamics and team development. They said they were more open and honest with those around them. They ran more effective meetings and had a greater awareness of ‘process’ and ‘content’. They were more open to other’s points of view, felt a greater desire to help colleagues and were more able to adapt their approach to others to get positive results.
- *Task*: The primary focus of management is often seen as the speedy and effective completion of the task. Many coaches, however, understand that concentrating the focus on developing an individual’s clarity of purpose and sense of ‘self

improves their ability to lead; work with uncertainty and paradox; interact effectively with those around them and achieve the goal or task.

Managers reported improved motivation, objective setting and leadership skills, increased business performance, greater acceptance of self and a greater ability to understand systems and analyse situations.

Coaching is currently used as a management development tool in a number of different situations. It might form an intervention in its own right to support individual or organisational change. It might be the process chosen to improve meetings or Board interactions. It can also be highly effective following a training programme or management competencies assessment, providing the confidential support needed to develop new competencies and enhance existing ones.

Assertiveness

'Assertiveness' is used in this context as meaning the ability to understand and describe one's needs, skilfully express one's opinions and stand up for one's beliefs. Additionally, it is the ability to challenge situations that are incongruent with one's own beliefs and values and conversely to accept challenge and the expression of different opinions from others.

Assertiveness is supported by the internal qualities of self-awareness and confidence; as these two internal processes develop so does the ability to be assertive and challenge appropriately. The effective use of assertiveness as an external competency is also synergistically interdependent with 'understanding difference'.

Following coaching, managers reported

feeling that they had a firmer base from which to address situations: 'I am more able to challenge my boss when I disagree or I feel uncomfortable with business practices', 'I'm not afraid to speak out' and 'I handle conflict/confrontation better'.

During the coaching programme, some of the respondents had been required to carry out difficult performance reviews, challenge underperformers and, in some cases, issue official warnings. Feedback showed that managers felt more confident to approach difficult situations and achieve mutually satisfactory outcomes.

Understanding difference

The capacity to allow, accept and work with differing ideas and opinions is fundamental to cognitive development (Piaget, 1936). As well as encouraging mental flexibility and creativity, understanding different views, different styles and different ethnicities engenders a more supportive environment. The understanding of difference, paradox and ambiguity is an imperative for today's managers.

Respondents reported 'a wider appreciation of other's contributions' and 'a greater desire to help colleagues'.

Stress management

The ever increasing pace of business today requires managers to adapt to diverse and demanding roles and negotiate the pressures of increasingly complex work environments. This can lead to stress and anxiety. The coaching relationship provides a safe and supportive environment within which to express and explore fears and anxieties, to identify coping skills and strategies and test out new behaviours. Additionally, some coaches encourage practical

discussions around identifying and understanding causes of stress, time management, lifestyle, healthy eating and exercise, stress-reducing relaxation and meditation techniques.

Many of the managers in the study were newly appointed into their roles; those that had been in post some time were facing a new boss, new peers and a new way of working. This required not just new technical and interpersonal skills, but also new identities.

When the coaching programme started, many of the people were experiencing high levels of stress. Following coaching, however, managers described themselves as 'a lot calmer' with 'more tolerance', 'no longer getting as angry with people and events as previously' and 'feeling more capable of understanding and dealing with the pressures the job/personal life put on me'.

Work/life balance

The balance between work and home has become an area of increasing importance to managers. The stress created by the long hours many managers work is compounded by feeling guilty about neglecting the needs of the family and friends in their lives. Managers can end up resenting work itself because they have so little time for themselves or quality time with their families.

Managers in this study described having taken more ownership of decisions affecting both themselves and close relations, and being able to make decisions that they had previously found difficult. They became more proactive in the management of the various roles in their lives.

This research showed that change and development made in one field are consistent and complementary with those

achieved in another field. It confirmed the transferability of change and learning from one part of an individual's life to another. This points to an 'added value' in coaching. If a person's work life is improved through coaching, then he is likely to feel more confident generally and better able to deal effectively with issues both at work and at home. This highlights the importance of working with the 'whole' person during coaching sessions.

Communication skills –Mediating between internal and external

Effective communication is a vital component in all human interactions; it is also the channel for interactions between inner and outer development. For example, it provides the conduit for internal awareness to be externalised into social competence and for external experiences and developments to be translated back into internal confidence and self-awareness.

The development of internal qualities and external competencies are interdependent. As internal qualities such as self-confidence and self-awareness grow and develop, so external competencies are strengthened, enhanced and supported in their manifestation. Conversely, external developments such as behavioural change reinforce internal development and build confidence. These inner/outer changes and interactions are supported and facilitated by effective communication processes. Communication therefore, provides both the channel and the language for describing internal and external experiences, and the means of translating human experiences into learning and development.

All managers in the programme described significant improvements in their communication skills.

CONCLUSION

- 1 Coaching is an invaluable tool for developing managers across a wide range of needs.
- 2 Coaching provides a space for profound personal development; it enables managers to understand how to translate personal insights into improved effectiveness and ultimately organisational development.
- 3 Coaching can be used to support other organisational or training initiatives (translating learned skills into competencies), or as stand-alone development.
- 4 It makes managers feel valued and improves staff retention.
- 5 The quality of the relationship is crucial to the outcome, providing the container, stimulus and support for the changes that result from coaching.

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