

Contributor: Shirley Mitchell, Development Consultant

“Coaching takes a holistic view of the individual: work, corporate values, personal needs and career development are made to work in synergy, not against one another.” – British Journal of Administrative Management

One of the most rewarding things about my role as a Development Consultant is the opportunity I get to coach people. Spending time one-on-one with those who are committed to self-improvement is a privilege. Many times when you are in facilitation mode, you see those for whom the group environment just isn't enough; they have so many questions and are hungry to explore how their 'light bulb' moments can be maximised. Coaching not only benefits the coachee, it also provides tremendous benefit to the whole business because it can help that person be a better leader, team player and communicator. The advantages of coaching even a single person can sometimes ripple throughout an entire organisation.

There are of course, those for whom coaching is deemed a less than attractive option and I remember clearly one person saying at our first meeting 'you've got two hours to impress me and if you don't I'm off!' This was an illuminating start to our coaching sessions and one we laugh about to this day.

The relationships you grow through coaching are enriching and I often find myself learning as much as the people I coach. Of course, any good relationship also has to withstand some less comfortable realisations. Many of us have experienced that moment of clarity when we are challenged by others to look at things differently and have our deepest held perceptions questioned. So this is not about a cosy chat where everyone is being overly polite and that huge elephant stays in the room; it's about constructive and honest conversations where your own truths are explored and discussed and then you decide what you want to do (if anything) about them.



The coaching mind-set is one of 'curiosity' and it is this non-judgemental attitude that helps uncover those moments of brilliance and clarity that we all have within us. 'Asking' instead of 'telling' ensures the coachee has full responsibility and engagement in the learning process and importantly the control to decide what is and isn't an imperative. Sometimes just one very simple question can be enough to open up a whole new world of possibilities, such as 'what do you want to do?'. A huge benefit many describe is the time spent considering how to work 'on' the business instead of 'in' the business, which day to day many just don't prioritise.

It might be worth mentioning here that being coached is incredibly hard work for the coachee as it requires you to make all the decisions and answer some tough questions.

The hard work isn't only the province of the coachee though; the line manager or sponsor and the organisation should reflect carefully on their role in the success of any coaching intervention. Below are some starting point questions that I often use to understand how best I can provide coaching support.

Before the coaching sessions start

Meeting with line manager

If appropriate (e.g., CEO's may not have one), meet with the individual's line manager to understand key objectives for the coachee or what do they want to be different as a result of the coaching sessions.

Other key considerations and topics include:

- What does the business need from the coaching sessions? What are the key drivers?
- What feedback has already been given to the coachee? Indeed has any feedback been given?
- What previous support has been provided to the coachee? (Including training/mentoring)
- What is the coachee's knowledge, understanding and attitude towards coaching support?
- What's the organisational culture?

This is also an opportunity to discuss levels of confidentiality – on occasion some line managers believe because they're paying for the service they have access to all conversations.

Initial meeting with coachee

During the first meeting with a coachee, formulate a contract – an agreement on how the coach and coachee will work together. This includes:

1. **Time frames** – how often to meet and duration, venue on or off-site
2. **Responsibility for writing up action plans** – encourage coachees to do this as their own words have more power and meaning
3. **Confidentiality** – this is critical in order that full trust in me can be obtained. Often, line managers will ask the coach to divulge details of coaching conversations and the response should always be the same: No!
4. **Permission to challenge** – as previously mentioned, this is a fundamental part of the coaching relationship and without it the chances of success are greatly reduced. We can all find someone to merely agree with us!

5. **Get out of jail free card** – this is to allow the coachee and coach to withdraw from the relationship should it be more advantageous to do so. The coachee should have absolute freedom of choice if they believe the coaching relationship isn't working for them
6. **Questions to enable** – agreement that the coach will in general only ask questions; sometimes suggestions are offered but are then explored fully. The premise is to – in the words of Sir John Whitmore – “unlock a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them learn rather than teaching them”
7. **Agreement on desired outcomes/ purpose of sessions**



Meetings thereafter

Every subsequent meeting between coach and coachee will be different, but there are a few factors that should be a part of each of these meetings:

- Follow up on actions agreed to explore what worked and what didn't
- Reassess the priorities
- Discuss what feedback has been solicited and/or received
- Agree next steps

Coaching people and creating a coaching culture

Creating a coaching culture

A coaching culture can be for many organisations a clear win-win, as the business gets to utilise the skills of coaching to support, challenge and develop others to achieve the goals necessary for success. 'Coach the coach' development programmes offer a comprehensive approach to ensuring a number of success criteria are met including:

- Motivated coaches and coachees
- Real business challenges are met (which are very often people related)
- Quality time is spent exploring problems and creating realistic solutions that are fully owned
- People feel emotionally and/or practically supported vs. left to cope (or not!)

Coaching programmes often offer a number of classroom-based modules where knowledge is gained on the fundamentals and then a variety of methodologies are used to embed and assess the very practical skills required to be a successful coach. These often end with observation and assessment of 'live' peer to peer coaching in action. It should be noted that not all get the pass grade, as standards are set high and the quality rather than quantity of coaches developed is an absolute priority.

One of the challenges internal coaches face is how to assure others of absolute confidentiality when often they work either within L&D or HR departments. Another is the perceived level of credibility when coaching more senior members of the organisation. Often, external coaches are used to overcome these obstacles, so if you're looking to create a coaching culture, consider which option would suit your business and coachees.

Conclusion

Coaching is a great vehicle for encouraging self-reflection and reassessing how you do things through honest conversations that culminate in specific actions. Personal breakthroughs often lead to business breakthroughs, and it can have a profound effect on the individual and the whole organisation. Through coaching you can bounce ideas and be 'challenged' whilst keeping relationships intact, all without the risk of limiting your career. So consider coaching for yourself and others in your organisation ... expect some hard work because it won't always be easy, but it's worth it!

About the contributor

Shirley Mitchell, Director of Mitchell Anderson Ltd and Insights Licensed Practitioner

Shirley has over 15 years' experience in providing consultative training and development within a wide range sectors for clients worldwide. Before becoming an Independent Consultant in 2005, Shirley worked for a top training consultancy where she was involved in the research, design and implementation of interventions to many blue chip clients worldwide.

Her drive and enthusiastic commitment to development has led her to design and deliver successful programmes for companies such as, Airbus (France, Germany & Bristol), 3M, The Royal British Legion, Croda, Emirates NBD (Dubai), Commercial Bank (Qatar).

Shirley is also an experienced executive coach, providing one-on-one mentoring to individuals, challenging them to improve their leadership capabilities and enabling them to reach their full potential. Her absolute passion is developing people to achieve tangible business benefits for clients.