

CREATING A COACHING CULTURE

'CREATING A COACHING CULTURE' IS A POPULAR TERM IN BUSINESS COACHING TODAY, BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN, AND WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE? SAM HUMPHREY AND ANNE SCOULAR, FACULTY MEMBERS AT BUSINESS COACHING SPECIALIST, MEYLER CAMPBELL, GIVE AN EXPLANATION.

It's not difficult to detect when a coaching culture is alive in an organisation and when it isn't. We have experienced both.

Take a meeting we observed a few weeks ago. There were over a dozen people around the table with a long and complex agenda but they got through it, and thoroughly, in 90 minutes. This was not because the Easter Bank holiday was upon them – it was because 14 people were absolutely clear about what the outcomes of the meeting needed to be, were listening acutely and fully engaged.

It was a coaching culture at work. Leaders, managers and colleagues together, using as the norm basic coaching skills which many others have lost in the hassle and complexity of modern organisational life - real listening, empathising, bringing real clarity to what they were doing, and drawing the best out in each other.

Coaching can also flush out truths that are at first glance unpalatable.

In a coaching culture, people tackle the 'elephant in the room' – the things others avoid dealing with. It might be a leader with personality issues affecting morale, or unsustainable structural issues. In such cases – even if it's not what the organisation wants to hear – coaching skills make it possible for the hitherto undiscussable to come onto the table, and get sorted.

The flip side of the coin is the many examples of organisations where a coaching culture is manifestly not present. Particularly in the City, behind gleaming exteriors, a command and control culture often still reigns. Asked to carry impossible loads, or shouted at, people just disengage.

“the antithesis of a coaching culture”

Too many city firms also have hero leaders who lead by example, literally doing everyone's job for them, giving answers instead of exploiting learning opportunities, showing no weaknesses, asking 'trick' questions instead of curious, explorative and expanding ones and having no balance in their lives. This style of leadership is the antithesis of a coaching culture.

Lack of employee engagement is one reason why we are seeing such a huge surge in top-quality people leaving senior posts in business to go freelance. Those who come to Meyler Campbell to train as business coaches sometimes say they have had enough of the company politics, interminable meetings, or those situations where they had to work through the night because others hadn't planned ahead – or cared.

In their new lives they are energised, have flexibility and the satisfaction of doing fulfilling work with very tangible results.

But why do they have to leave to get that; why aren't organisations better at establishing this type of culture? One of the key reasons more organisations aren't successful in this is that the coaching culture isn't modelled from the top. A second mistake is going down the non-voluntary route. HR directors know effective culture change is a long-term, challenging process where one of the most critical tasks is gaining and sustaining internal buy-in.

It is therefore astonishing how many companies opt for coaching 'sheep dips'. While you may be able to push hundreds of sheep through the same vat of dirty liquid (Anne grew up in New Zealand so please excuse the analogy!), you certainly can't force all employees in an organisation to adopt coaching. One large accountancy firm in the late 1990s decided all 400 staff in one division had to go through the same coaching programme. Result: failure. Behaviour change: nil. Cost: high.

“the 'viral' approach”

The solution to this is the 'viral' approach: support a volunteer group or division to build their coaching culture, then wait for others to peer over the fence and want it.

A coaching culture can only be built in an organisation when there is authentic support from senior management, line management, colleagues and, of course, the individuals being coached. Never waste money on people who are determined not to be coached.

There is the beginning of an urban myth against establishing a coaching culture, on the basis that the impact of coaching can't be measured. This is completely untrue.

The ROI of coaching is as measurable as any other HR intervention; one study found an ROI of 5.7 times investment. To give just one example, US coached estate agents average \$2,430 sales commission compared with \$871 for non-coached.

So, what does the modern coaching-led organisation look like in 2007?

It is role modelled from the top. Coaching behaviour is visible and everywhere and the results are measured. But the most important evidence is the people walking round the building - engaged, focused and planning to stay.



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