

The Coaching Manager

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This paper explores the concept of workplace based coaching, particularly focusing on instances where the manager acts as a coach. In examining elements of the coaching relationship, several questions are raised as to the positioning of the manager as a coach arising from a potential role dichotomy. Solution Focused (SF) coaching is introduced as a potential alternative to some of the more traditional approaches to coaching in order to avoid a number of the more frequently experienced issues, especially where the environment supports and favours a highly directive style of management.

Defining 'Coaching'

Life Coaching

"*Get a life or get a coach*" commented Paul Brown (2006), writing in the *New York Times*. In this piece Brown describes life coaching as a "*growth industry [which is] becoming trendy*" and, no doubt, a lucrative activity, with weekly telephone sessions costing between \$200 and \$500. Life coaching is cynically presented as a popular alternative to "*study[ing] hard in school ... work[ing] diligently and learn[ing] as much as possible at your first real job*".

Three months later, the *New York Times* carried further coverage in the form of an article by Mireya Navarro (2006) entitled "*And I'd Like to Thank My Coach*". Quantifying the growth of the coaching industry, Navarro cites a doubling in membership of the International Coach Federation since 2001 and describes how an increasing number of celebrities are turning towards life coaching to help them through both short term challenges and more 'deep rooted' issues. Navarro acknowledges a certain level of criticism aimed at life coaching, quoting the author of 'Encyclopaedia Neurotica' who, perhaps somewhat unfairly, describes coaching as the "*ultimate overindulgence ... for people with too much money*".

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Executive Coaching

Hall, Otazo and Hollenbeck (1999) explore another popular application by asking “*what really happens in executive coaching?*” In their paper, the role of the coach is defined as providing executives with “*important feedback that they would normally never get about personal, performance, career and organisational issues*”. Their literature review concludes that “*executive coaching is a fairly short-term activity aimed at improving specific managerial competencies or solving specific problems*”.

Hall et al. (1999) provide an overview of what they see as some of the key characteristics in the executive coaching relationship, placing particular emphasis on the coach requiring:

- a wide range of experience to reflect upon
- political and historical awareness of the organisation
- the ability to provide honest constructive feedback
- the ability to provide pointers and ideas for action.

Towards a Definition

Whilst there are some common elements in these two examples of coaching, it is difficult to define the term precisely due to its wide range of applications, including activities such as performance coaching, skills coaching, career coaching and business coaching. Many mainstream references to coaching have a sporting context and it is generally acknowledged that the concept originated in this field. Whitmore (1992) and Downey (1999) are frequently cited as describing coaching in terms of facilitation or “*unlocking a person’s potential to maximise their own performance*” (Whitmore). Meanwhile, Parsloe (1995) is often quoted as offering an alternative view which focuses on an instructional approach “*directly concerned with the immediate improvement of performance and development of skills by a form of tutoring or instruction*”.

Watt (2004) describes coaching as being most effective “*in response to a performance issue . . . or when there is a need for a more holistic personal development as opposed to the learning of specific tasks and skills*”. A proponent of the facilitative view of coaching espoused by Whitmore (1992) and Downey (1999), Watt suggests that the coach should “*provide the necessary opportunities and tools that can enable them [the ‘coachee’] to develop themselves*”. She clearly differentiates between coaching and the “*learning of specific tasks or skills*” described by Parsloe (1995), which is perhaps more closely analogous to the role of the sports coach.

Accompanying the growth of the coaching ‘industry’, a number of membership and accreditation bodies have emerged, all having a common aim of developing professionalism. The European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC, 2009) lay down a set of standards for coaches to adhere to at four levels (Foundation, Practitioner, Senior Practitioner and Master Practitioner) in eight competence categories. Similarly, the International Coach Federation (ICF, 2008) propose a competency framework which covers four elements of the coaching process:

- Setting the foundation
- Co-creating the relationship
- Communicating effectively
- Facilitating learning and results.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2008) acknowledge a lack of agreement over precisely what constitutes coaching, partially due to the apparent confusion between how this differs from activities such as counselling or mentoring, with the three terms often being used interchangeably. Their report attempts to clarify the differences between these three activities and proposes a number of characteristics which they suggest most coaching professionals would subscribe to. In conclusion, a meta-definition is offered whereby coaching is defined as

“developing a person’s skills and knowledge so that their job performance improves, hopefully leading to the achievement of organisational objectives”.

The Manager as a Coach?

Orth, Wilkinson and Benfari (1987) propose three elements of the manager’s role:

- 1) As a ‘manager’ their responsibilities include formulating and agreeing goals.
- 2) As an ‘evaluator’, performance is reviewed against these goals.
- 3) As a ‘coach’ their job is a *“day-by-day, ‘hands on’ process of helping employees recognise opportunities to improve their performance and capabilities”.*

The third element takes a facilitative view of coaching, defining this as *“... a way of helping employees, over time, improve their performance to outstanding levels or at least to the highest level of which they are capable.”* (Orth et al., 1987)

Evered and Selman (2001) also recognise a multitude of roles which the manager fulfils, including that of coach, suggesting that *“good coaching is the essential feature of really effective management which, in turn, generates the context for good coaching”.* They propose a departure from the popular ‘bolt on’ application of coaching by recommending a radical paradigm shift such that coaching is at the heart of all managerial activities: *“coaching is a way of relating and communicating that transcends all sports and performing arts, not merely something transported from one arena to another ... it is not a technique!”* (original emphasis).

Coaching as a Management Paradigm

Evered and Selman (2001) present a stark contrast between the traditional managerial *“control-order-prescription”* (COP)

approach with that of “*acknowledge-create-empower*” (ACE). In COP, the manager is ‘in charge’ and responsible for controlling the actions of others by telling them what to do, and how to do it, whilst dealing with any non compliances. The behaviour and actions of the manager are often justified as “*implementing the owner’s orders*”. Compare and contrast this approach with ACE, where the manager is responsible for “*enabling the people in a group or team to generate results and to be empowered by the results they generate*”.

The suggestion is made by Evered and Selman that coaching may be useful when making the transition from COP to ACE. Furthermore, they propose coaching as being a central element of management within the ACE paradigm and base their definition of coaching on this philosophy, highlighting the differences which exist between this and other sports related definitions. Their paper concludes with a powerful justification for such a strong conviction by accusing the prevalent COP management paradigm of failing to deliver results through its attempt to control employees.

Potential Challenges

Whilst widely acknowledging the benefits of coaching by the manager, Orth et al. (1987) identify a number of aspects which limit its application. Primarily, they cite a lack of reward for developing employees, which generates a shortfall of role models, preventing managers from understanding the benefits of coaching. Furthermore, there is often a lack of time and resources dedicated to initially developing coaching skills and eventually incorporating these into the manager’s repertoire, and the previously identified confusion surrounding the activity of coaching may introduce a further barrier.

There are many documented examples of difficulties being encountered when managers attempt to act as coaches in the workplace, and Booth (1996) provides a useful illustration. Whilst her case study-based paper focuses on mentoring rather than coaching, it describes some interesting differences between the roles of manager and mentor:

“A mentor is somebody who is intimately concerned with your well-being beyond your professional life [and] wants to see you develop as a person as well as through your career” whereas “a manager . . . is more focused on tasks at hand [and] from time to time will be willing to go outside the lines of formal responsibility but there is no compelling reason to do it.” (Booth, 1996)

Booth goes on to describe the risk of obscuring the relationship (in this case of the manager/mentor) and possible complications which may be encountered in terms of performance management. This, and many similar examples, can perhaps be better understood by reflecting upon the discussion provided by Evered and Selman (2001), particularly focusing on the distinctions identified between the two management paradigms.

If a significant gap is to be acknowledged between Evered and Selman’s ‘acknowledge-create-empower’ utopia and the style of management prevalent in most organisations, then questions might be raised as to the validity of coaching in such an environment. In particular, how can the manager attempt to achieve any level of congruence between the facilitative, developmental nature of coaching and their highly directive ‘control/order/prescription’ behaviour, which may simply be a case of them mirroring the prevailing management culture? A potential explanation may be provided by Parsloe’s (1995) earlier definition of coaching which, more akin to the directive nature of the sports coach, focuses on the transfer of skills from the ‘expert’ coach to the ‘coachee’. Do the directive managers believe themselves to be ‘coaching’ when they are overtly instructing subordinates through a task or telling them how to solve a particular problem and, if so, what effects might this behaviour be having?

Exploring this issue further raises more questions, especially in terms of accountability. Is coaching simply viewed as a means for the organisation to attain control over its highly directive managers by forcing them to change their behaviour? Who is really benefiting from coaching if this is the case? Whilst managers may use the label of ‘coaching’ to

legitimise their overly directive behaviour, is this any less problematic than an organisation introducing coaching as a means of making its staff take more responsibility without having to provide any additional support or, with a more positive spin, 'self leadership'.

These questions go some way to demonstrating the importance of not taking it for granted that any initiative labelled as 'coaching' is necessarily positive for all those involved. Motives and outcomes must be questioned from the viewpoint of multiple stakeholders.

Albeit in a different domain, Carkhuff (1993) places great emphasis on the counsellor needing to demonstrate an appropriate level of effectiveness in his own life in order to facilitate change. A comparison may be made with the coaching manager, but this exposes an implicit assumption that may go some way to presenting the case that the manager's highly directive approach cannot even begin to be considered as 'coaching'. By functioning in this way, the manager's actions are having the effect of repressing the level of functioning, restricting interpersonal involvement and stifling learning opportunities. Whilst the task may be successfully completed or the problem solved effectively, this is not necessarily sustainable or repeatable. The manager has effectively created a dependency, with all future instances of a similar nature requiring his input to achieve a similarly satisfactory outcome.

A Redefinition of 'Coaching'

At this stage it is perhaps useful to reconsider the definition of 'coaching'. Swan (2006) describes this as a being located within a therapeutic culture insofar that it draws upon "*ways of thinking about and intervening in the self*", with the 'self' "*[acting] as the main resource for providing potential solutions to problems*". In an earlier paper with Cwerner (2006), the coach is described as an expert but this is in terms of "*behavioural, psychological and business techniques*", which is somewhat different to the 'expert' sports coach. Acknowled-

edging both similarities and differences between coaching and therapy, Swan and Cwerner reflect on Salerno's (2005) view that 'therapy' might be seen as something of a taboo within organisations, whilst 'coaching' is perceived as perfectly acceptable. They conclude that coaching is *not* therapy, but rather that this draws upon practices which may be considered as being therapeutic in nature.

Expectations of a Therapeutic Approach

When describing the effects of abusive power, Carroll (2006) might be viewed as painting a picture of those at the mercy of the highly directive manager:

- Being made speechless
- No capacity to make sense of events and a lack of resources to reflect
- Locked into a single meaning or interpretation

Carroll develops a model which describes positive (and negative) characteristics of four types of power:

- Power *over* – security (domination)
- Power *with* – sharing (collusion)
- Power *through* – efficacy (bureaucracy)
- Power *within* – creativity (narcissism).

Carroll proposes that coaches and mentors should choose the type of power to match the particular situation. For example, whilst power 'over' may result in humiliation and a lack of learning ('punitive' power), it may also provide safety and security during times of massive upheaval ('benign' power). In this example, Carroll places the emphasis on recognising when survival mode is no longer in effect and modifying the style of power appropriately, otherwise power 'over' becomes debilitating.

In his conclusion, Carroll demonstrates how the four forms of power are inextricably linked but, somewhat

frustratingly, stops short of describing how to make a transition between them:

“Power over provides the container. Power with brings people together to work on common goals, resulting in power through which gets things done. This sets the stage for the power of the individual (within).” (Carroll, 2006)

In an environment which supports and encourages Evered and Selman’s (2001) ‘control-order-prescription’ approach, how can the manager even begin to move away from a dominating power ‘over’ form of coaching? How can workplace-based coaching break away from this paradigm and embrace other types of power? ***Can the manager ever provide coaching in a manner which may be considered even mildly therapeutic? How sustainable can the effects be expected to be?***

The following section explores how the possibilities offered by a particular approach to coaching might provide solutions to some of these issues.

SF Coaching

SF coaching owes much to the development of SF therapy in the mid 1980s, which is generally recognised as coming about as a result of the work of Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg and their colleagues at the Brief Family Therapy Centre in Milwaukee (de Shazer et al., 1986). One of the key texts on SF coaching was written by Berg and Szabó (2005) and provides a detailed guide from one of the originators of SF therapy.

SF coaching builds upon a number of principles (Pember-ton, 2006), aiming to concentrate more on finding answers than exploring problems:

- It is not necessary to understand the cause of a problem in order help someone to find a solution
- Focusing on the future solution creates more useful energy than focusing on past problems

- Every problem has exceptions
- If something works then do more of it
- If something doesn't work then stop it or try something different
- Change results from small steps rather than giant goals
- People are amazingly resourceful when you allow them to be.

It is this subtle shift in emphasis which differentiates SF from other forms of coaching. Taking this concept further, an SF approach to coaching may “*enable people to access and use the wealth of experience, skills, expertise and intuition that we all have... to find individual and creative solutions to the situations they find themselves in*” (Greene and Grant, 2003).

Cauffman (2003) describes the SF coaching approach in the form of a flexible model, likening this to a well choreographed dance:

- **Socialising** – Building a positive working relationship
- **Clarifying the Context** – Determining the context in which the problem occurs in order to avoid an overly simplistic solution
- **Goal Setting** – Development of achievable and useful short term goals that provide progress towards the final goal
- **Exceptions** – Exploring times when the problem isn't so much of an issue
- **Hunting for Resources** – Based on the assumption that the coachee already has resources to solve the problem, the role of the coach is to help (re)discover them
- **Giving Compliments** – Maintaining the positive relationship, increasing self confidence and ensuring a focus on solutions
- **Offering Differentiation** – Moving away from a traditional ‘black and white’ view of problems towards a scale of progress using small step improvements
- **Future Orientation** – Turning away from the problem to look at possible solutions and what things would be

like if the problem went away overnight. Questions might focus on what would be done differently and how people would know that the problem had gone away.

Addressing the Challenges: Who is the Expert?

Many approaches demand a level of expertise within the coach, often in the form of knowledge about the coachee's problem, but SF coaching places a different emphasis on expertise. Congruent with Swan's (2006) therapeutic view, it is the coachee who is seen as the 'expert' in themselves, with coach 'expertise' being required in the form of effective questioning and listening skills. Working from this position, the aim of the coaching process is more likely to be the coachees attaining their goals rather than attempting to get them to move in a direction dictated by the coach.

SF coaching attempts to discover a way forward by identifying elements of the 'best future' which are already present. Once these are identified, the role of the coach is to determine what was being done when these elements were identified. At all times, the role of the coach is to help facilitate a process of discovery.

Jackson (2004) acknowledges that the manager often has less functional or technical knowledge than his reports, but provides further support for the proposal that his expertise in coaching is more important than an understanding of the task or topic. On the occasions where the manager possesses a greater level of functional expertise, he suggests that an SF approach allows this to be transferred to the coachees without simply telling them what to do. An example is provided whereby the manager shares a story relating to a particular topic and encourages the coachees to "*extract useful elements for themselves*".

Addressing the Challenges: Accountability and Power

In acknowledging that SF coaching is non-directive, George (2005) differentiates this from its directionality:

“The Solution Focused process is markedly directional, with the coach having clear ideas about the sort of questions that she should be offering . . . these are questions that are associated with the client starting the coaching process, identifying the desired changes and leaving the process having achieved those changes . . . they are questions that invite the client into a process of change, but in themselves are content neutral.” George (2005).

This does, however, pose a certain dilemma for the manager as coach. Coach accountability has traditionally always been something of a ‘grey’ area: is the coach accountable to the organisation or the individual? Some coaches see their role as delivering an increased level of employee effectiveness whilst others focus on the individual as a “*target of corporate change effects*” (George, 2005). In both of these cases the aim is to change the individual to fit the organisation, so there is a clear line of accountability to the organisation as a ‘client’. Alternatively, coaches may view themselves as being accountable to the individual, effectively isolating themselves from the organisation.

Whilst SF coaching is generally considered to be accountable to the individual (George, 2005), the approach provides a certain degree of flexibility in allowing the coach to ask questions which invite consideration of the wider context by the individual. When a manager acts as a coach, it is recognised that he will have a legitimate personal agenda but this must be balanced against the coachee’s agenda, which should always come first. As such, I suggest that the adoption of an SF approach to coaching encourages the manager to use his knowledge in a facilitative rather than manipulative manner.

Iveson (2005) provides two examples which may be considered in terms of Carroll’s power characteristics. Firstly, he offers an example of a team member seeking more

autonomy. In this instance, the coach may be able to help the coachee develop autonomy in a way that directly supports and benefits the organisation – potentially increasing *security* for the individual (power *over*). A second example is provided where a manager is seeking to improve the morale of a team in a way that adds to its productivity – aiming to *share* an increase in morale in the second team (power *with*).

By encouraging the individual to reflect on his environment, SF coaching allows accountability to be maintained whilst encouraging a level of focus on the wider organisation. In a similar manner, an SF management development activity (Greer, 2006) provides an organisational focus to an individual activity by asking:

- *What changes will other people see when you develop a greater strength in this competency?*
- *How will these changes help you in your current or potential future role?*

Addressing the Challenges: Sustainability

A frequently cited justification for the SF approach explains this in terms of sustainability. George (2005) concludes that solutions determined by the coach are likely to be “*impositional*”, whilst those discovered by the coachee are more likely to match his needs:

“Pragmatically it might be assumed that if the solution is imposed, it is less likely to persist than a solution discovered by the individual herself.” (George, 2005).

Exploring the aspect of sustainability assumes that the manager has been able to break away from a directive paradigm and deliver coaching in an SF manner. This, in turn, requires the manager to understand and apply SF principles in his work, and there is an expanding body of evidence which documents such cases. One such example is provided by Glass (2007) whereby she describes how, after just four

coaching sessions, a business manager within a large UK financial organisation was able to change the morale of a whole division. On a wider scale, Jackson (2004) provides a useful account of how SF principles were used as the basis for introducing a coaching programme which aimed to transform all the managers in an organisation into better coaches.

Conclusion

Having adopted a critical view of the growth of coaching, particularly in an organisational setting, an attempt has been made to explore some apparent assumptions about this.

Throughout this paper, references have been made to a highly directive management style, identifying a number of potential limitations which this may bring. This paper has not attempted to describe what a 'good' manager might look like, but rather to present SF coaching as a possible alternative to what might be considered to be such a controlling regime.

Whilst this paper does not assume that SF coaching will change the highly directive manager into a therapeutic version of his former self, it is suggested that this approach may offer benefits for those struggling against a 'control-order-prescription' paradigm.

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