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The Case for Coaching.

Ross Roxburgh, Niagara Institute and Sandra Oliver, Impact Coaches



Coaching is one of the fastest-growing areas within the field of leadership and organizational development. It is increasingly used as an important lever of effectiveness especially when integrated with broader strategic goals of the organization. We have both been very active over the past years with coaching clients across a range of sectors. Based on our collective experience, there are several questions that invariably arise. For purposes of this article, we have chosen to deal with three of these: the most common pitfalls that can arise when working with an external coach; the strategic use of coaching; and what we see as the evolution of coaching as we look ahead.

Pitfalls in Working with an External Coach

Bar none, the most common pitfall we see is hiring a coach for the wrong reasons, and the wrong people. Coaching is designed for people whom the organization wishes to develop, and invest in, over the long term. Coaching becomes prohibitively time consuming and financially untenable when applied as a last ditch effort after all other strategies have been exhausted. Probability of success in these cases is often low. True remedial work seldom yields positive results, either for the person being coached or for the organization.

We also counsel against engaging one coach for multiple needs across the organization. Coaches have different styles and expertise. They should be matched to client needs, style, and objectives. Matching coaches purely on personal fit is not enough. Coaches need to have the right background and experience to help different clients meet their varied objectives. In addition, there can be conflict of interest issues when a coach works with both a superior and a subordinate.

While we see growing momentum to make HR more strategic, delegating the management of the coaching process to an entry-level HR professional may hold risk. Senior leaders will not approach young professionals for coaching assistance, which means they will likely hire their own coaches and not get the benefit of HR support. In addition, this practice of using more junior HR staff limits the ability to manage coaching strategically and limits the ability to really manage the process effectively. The people who manage the coaching process must be involved with senior leaders and strategy so they can effectively provide guidance to the coaches and assist with difficult political situations. The understanding of the organization is a critical need if

the coaching is to be as closely integrated with organizational priorities as it must be.

It is common for HR practitioners to obtain coaching certifications and to offer their services as an internal coach. The challenge with this can again be conflicts. HR will be put in situations that will make it difficult to maintain client confidentiality. HR has a role to play that at times puts the department at odds with what the employee needs. Where we have seen these internal coaches work well is when there is a completely separate internal coaching organization that does not also have HR responsibilities. Usually the person who oversees the external coaches would also oversee this group.

Coaches who are unable or unwilling to challenge their clients, provide targeted advice as appropriate¹, or consider the bigger organizational picture in their coaching can pose a risk. Coaching is about developing people in a targeted and customized way. The solutions for people do always lie in the coachee. Sometimes coaches need to instruct, sometimes they need to be very direct, and sometimes they need to help the coachee by interacting with the broader environment. There is no single approach for every situation or every client.

The coaching relationship at its most effective is anchored in trust and straight-talk. There is implicit, and sometimes explicit, permission for the coach to provide observations and focused challenge in the service of the coachee's clarity. The work of the coach is to support the development of options, the self-challenge and identification of 'blind spots', and the thoughtful choice of courses of action. Without these pre-conditions, our experience is that at best there is a sub-optimal result for the individual and the organization.

Using Coaching Strategically

Gone are the days when coaching was solely used to fix problems or to correct poor behaviour. More and more, organizations are building coaching into their development processes.

Coaching can be used to improve skills such as ability to delegate, decision-making, ability to focus, and improved strategic skills.²

In our opinion, the skills above scratch the surface. Coaching is a tool that can develop an exceptionally broad range of business skills and competencies. It can do more than deal with personal style issues; coaching can develop everything from sales ability to financial acumen to strategic thinking skills. Of course, not all coaches can help with all of these needs. Coach background and skills must be relevant to client needs.

Coaching is an experiential and targeted form of development. Coaches focus on specific skill development and behaviour change outlined by the employee and usually their superior. The best coaching happens when the coaching conversations are grounded in solving what is actually happening in the workplace. Key is the ability to connect the coaching work to the different or new or enhanced impact that the individual or team has on the organization.

Forward looking organizations see coaching as an effective method for development. Below are some examples that we have seen with our clients:

Developing a large group of high potentials using a mix of internal mentors, external coaches, and peer group coaching;
Assigning external coaches to new leaders to help them adapt to, and excel in, their new roles, especially the talented person being promoted early to a new level in an area where the organization requires an accelerated result;

- Assigning leaders to executives who are managing major change efforts to help them manage these large initiatives as effectively as possible;
- Using external coaches and internal mentors to provide support to diverse employees and to achieve organizational diversity objectives;
- Using one-on-one coaching to develop new leaders, high potentials, and to increase skill levels broadly across a group of employees; and,
- Launching leader roundtables that are facilitated by coaches and focused on building a defined set of competencies.

The Future of Coaching

There has already been a great deal of change in the profession and there will be more. Currently, coaching is growing exponentially. It is estimated that coaching is a \$2 billion industry in the US.³ We think that growth in coaching will continue. We have seen that coaching is an effective development tool but remains underutilized.⁴ There is room to use coaching, and do so more strategically in organizations. For business leaders, running a unit or a department is a very complex task and that complexity is increasing. Business leaders will more routinely use coaches to help them lead through that complexity.

Increasingly, coaching is being offered in many different formats; including team coaching, facilitated peer coaching (or pod coaching), and reverse mentoring. These newer approaches will continue and still others will be developed. Again, newer forms will be technology driven and less structured. Coaching is already offered virtually through phone and through online technologies. We encourage an in-person meeting at the outset; however, in order to clarify objectives for the work, meet the individual in the work setting to ensure that there is a full understanding of respective roles in the coaching process. That said, coaching will become more virtual, making better use of social media and technology to be offered in a more 'on demand' way.

A most interesting concrete example of how coaching supports and complements the strategic goals of organizations is that of client organizations engaged in such complex issues as the development of shared leadership models. A system-wide approach can often be supported by specific coaching work with individuals and teams when required in order to have the necessary impact on culture and the generation of tangible and visible results.

Coaching is increasingly being used to supplement formal training courses. This trend will continue and as clients have related, the coaching is often the critical factor in linking new knowledge to individual strengths and their application to real challenges. As organizations design specific projects or create task groups for focused purposes, coaching resources may be brought to support leaders and teams in realizing results which are of high quality and sustainable over the longer term.

Younger generations have different learning needs and expectations. In many ways, the way they learn is better suited to coaching than to formal training courses. We are already seeing more and more young people ask for coaching support. This trend will continue and it will become normal course of business for coaching to be offered to staff at all levels in the organization.

Coaching in a more general sense will continue to grow in all organizations. There will be increasing pressure on managers to coach and increasing coaching training for managers. There will also be more internal coaches trained to work on coaching staff and assisting managers. These groups will be separate from HR and aligned to corporate objectives. Coaching service providers are consolidating and will continue to do so. More and more organizations will manage coaching strategically and will want to work with coaching organizations who have a team of coaches available to meet their needs.

Finally, we think that coaches themselves will be further pushed to sharpen their skills and to specialize more. Clients will hire coaches with backgrounds that best match their objectives and industry/sector –specific understanding may well become a key differentiator. For many organizations, coaching has become an established and proven approach to support the learning, development, and impact of leaders. Those who still hold to the notion of coaching being a ‘fad’ are fewer in number than they were even five years ago and a growing body of research points to the clear business results that connect directly to successful coaching relationships.

That said, there is still a gap between the proven effectiveness of coaching and its actual level of use in organizations. Part of the answer is most certainly linked to the question of whether it is viewed as strategic to the growth plans of organizations and therefore a significant lever in achieving that growth. As well, the pace and magnitude of change facing organizations makes the use of time by busy leaders all the more critical. Linking strategic positioning more closely with business results is one significant response to narrowing the gap between proven effectiveness and actual application.

When we think about the future of coaching, it seems that several key opportunities exist to create even greater impact on organizational success through the thoughtful integration of coaching:

- Coaching can address the inter-generational challenges of organizations such that there is better integration and sharing of ideas and approaches from all groups in dealing with complex issues; beyond that, coaching may become more central to ensuring that the benefits of diversity have direct impact on the organization’s success;
- Organizations can work more effectively across all levels of a system i.e., the individual, the team, the business unit or division, and the whole organization;
- Culture change can become part of a mindset and the

leaders are much more prepared to position and manage change in their organizations; and,

- Coaching can ensure greater effectiveness from the outset with new hires at all levels as well as existing employees who are given new assignments of a functional, geographic or other changed nature.

Coaching is a profession that is growing and changing. It is already recognized as an effective development tool. In the future, coaching will be used more broadly, have a wider range of applications, and will be linked to the strategic goals of the organization. And in that strategic linkage lies its major potential for contributing to organization effectiveness and the impact leaders need to have in an increasingly challenging and often-uncertain environment.

ROSS ROXBURGH has worked in the fields of organizational change and change management for more than 35 years. Prior to joining Deloitte & Touche LLP, he worked in human resource management roles in the university sector as well as the transit and telecommunications industries. With Deloitte, Ross helped to build strong Human Capital practices in Ottawa and Toronto. Ross was a Deloitte Partner for fourteen years, leaving the Firm in 2000 to establish his own practice. Prior to becoming an Associate of the Niagara Institute, Ross served as the Interim Executive Director.

SANDRA OLIVER is a business coach and owner of Impact-Coaches Inc., a global coaching firm that specializes in helping organizations take the performance of their leaders, teams, individual employees and business to the next level.

Coaching is our key differentiator

The Niagara Institute’s consultative approach creates a trusting, effective partnership to meet leadership development priorities.

Committed to the highest level of coaching ethics and standards, we provide quality customized coaching programs and supports for individuals, teams, and organizations.

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