Embedding coaching skills in the workplace:

Essential Elements of a Successful Organizational Coaching Skills Program

This Research Briefing summarises the 2013 article by Grant and Hartley on practical strategies that organizations can use to more effectively embed and sustain leadership coaching skills in the workplace following participation by executives and managers in a coaching skills development program.

Summary

Many organizations are looking to increase the coaching skills of their senior leaders. Such an approach makes development an organizational issue, rather than the sole purview of the HR department. Research shows that coaching can increase work-related goal attainment, enhance solution-focused thinking, and develop greater change readiness and leadership resilience (Grant 2009). In the project presently summarised, the authors worked with the fifth largest bank in the world (with over 52,000 employees), where more than 3000 leaders completed the 'Leader as Coach' program.

The authors found eight key organizational factors that increase the likelihood of embedding coaching skills in the workplace. The authors generated a more positive culture, a 40 per cent increase in coachees goal progression and a 70 per cent increase in the coaches' confidence in being able to deal with the presenting issue.

Background

Teaching technical skills, such as the use of computer applications or customer service systems, is difficult enough. The transfer of highly-personal thinking habits needed for coaching, such as knowing when to challenge the coachee instead of telling the answer, how to re-create trust, or how to expose unspoken concerns or hopes, can look insurmountable. Coaching skills are not superficial techniques which can be simply wedged into any conversation. Students need time to integrate the skills and required presence seamlessly into their own style with repeated, live practice and patience from the organizational perspective.

The authors propose that organizational coaching skills programs will be more effectively entrenched with participants when as many as possible of the following are implemented.

1. **Evidenced based design and support**

   a) Are theoretically grounded and extremely practical: A theoretical framework can be an attractor but participants need to see positive results immediately so that pragmatic and experiential learners are also fully engaged in the learning process.

   b) Use varied settings to diversify practice conditions: Coaching skills are applied in a range of settings by arranging a set number of documented coaching sessions in the weeks immediately following the training.

   c) Provide group support: Training is followed up with regular peer groups, which afford built-in workplace practice and live coaching situations for and between students.

   d) Supply supervision: Scheduled sessions where students can discuss coaching related issues with an experienced coaching supervisor.

2. **Program content includes skills, performance and developmental coaching**

   Much professional coaching training today is aimed at developing skills for formal coaching situations. Formal coaching sessions with explicit goals and a clear beginning and end are rare compared to the more likely in-the-moment coaching opportunities seized in the midst of a busy project. The program must also address the important distinctions between skills coaching (task), performance coaching (strategic approach to the work itself, over time), and developmental coaching (personal growth such as emotional and social competencies and effective relationships with team members).

3. **Ensure that the program is culturally relevant**

   For a coaching program to be integrated, the authors found that the program should align explicitly with the specific needs, values, language (Carmeli, Gelbard, & Gefen, 2010) of the organization and use the unique situations and challenges faced by the organization.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

1: Role model leadership coaching skills

A leader's behaviour has a significant impact on others. If a leader displays dismissive or rude behaviours, those around them either copy or dismiss the organization's commitment to coaching. Good leaders role model the coaching behaviours they wish others to adopt even when under pressure. As a leader, how can I better role model positive coaching behaviours?

2: Pay attention to the way that you listen

The way that we listen determines what we hear and how people perceive us. We rarely think about our listening styles. How do you listen? Do you listen for meaning, listening for clues and picking up what isn't said? Do you go to judging while listening? What effect does your listening style have on your relationships at work?

Today I will pay attention to the way that I listen to others, and adjust my listening style in order to become a better listener and coach.

3: Recognise the personal strengths of others at work

People work best when they are aware of and utilise their personal strengths in their work. Yet all too frequently leaders, caught up in the rush of work demands and deadlines do not take the time to acknowledge the personal strengths of others, and this is particularly important in coaching conversations.

Today I will make time to recognise and acknowledge the personal strengths of others at work.

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4. **Use respected figures internal to the organization as champions**

    The role modelling of desired attitude and behaviours by leaders is one of the most powerful influencers when driving innovation and organizational change (Jung, Chow, & Wu, 2003). Enthusiastic support for coaching initiatives with clear and consistent messaging about the importance of the program from respected internal figures (such as the CEO and senior personalities) send an important signal that the organization is serious about developing a positive and supportive culture.

5. **Attract rather than require**

    While the temptation is to mandate participation, the authors found that fostering attraction rather than compelling attendance is a more successful strategy in the long run. Develop enthusiastic, influential early adopters in the initial stages and help them carry their message and experiences to the workforce. It will not take long for others to want to participate.

6. **Monitor, evaluate and embed: the Personal Case Study approach**

    The Personal Case Study approach (Grant, 2013) has the participants write about a leadership issue they are facing, then rate how close they are to their goal of solving it and their level of confidence in dealing with the issue. Participants rate themselves at the end providing data which will answer "Is the program actually working?" The authors found a 40 per cent increase in goal progression and a 70 per cent increase in confidence in being able to deal with the issue when this monitoring and self-evaluation took place(Grant, 2013).

7. **Mobilize a competent HR team**

    Program success and longevity depend on the HR team's professionalism and ability to champion this work (Hailey, Farndale, & Truss, 2005). Most importantly, the HR team should be seen as 'in-house' experts and have the ability to marshal support for the program from key organizational stake holders.

8. **Remind participants to use their new skills**

    Reminders such as emailing tips to leaders on a weekly basis refresh memories of specific coaching techniques. They also prompt participants to apply coaching skills on a day-to-day basis both with others and, just as importantly, with themselves. Coupled with peer coaching and follow-up coach-the-coach sessions, participants are more likely to seamlessly internalise and embed the coaching skills needed to be a truly effective leader.

Final Thoughts

Strengthening the coaching skills of a leadership team must be viewed as a process. A well-designed workshop is a good start and, with continuous practice, leaders can deliberately strengthen their

coaching skills over time. While adoption of new behaviours is a slow process, HR decision makers need to look closely at the list of elements above and identify what gaps need to be closed in order to effect a positive shift in culture and leadership effectiveness.

Not all coaching programs can deliver (measured) results, and not all organizations are ready to embrace a leadership culture which includes a coach approach. The processes listed in this paper normalise and deepen effective leadership competencies (coaching specifically), and strengthen connection, engagement and loyalty to the workplace.

This research briefing is a service from BC HRMA's research group. Our aim is to make it easier and quicker for HR professionals to find and apply the latest and best people management insight to their challenges and projects.

This article is based on the following research paper:

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