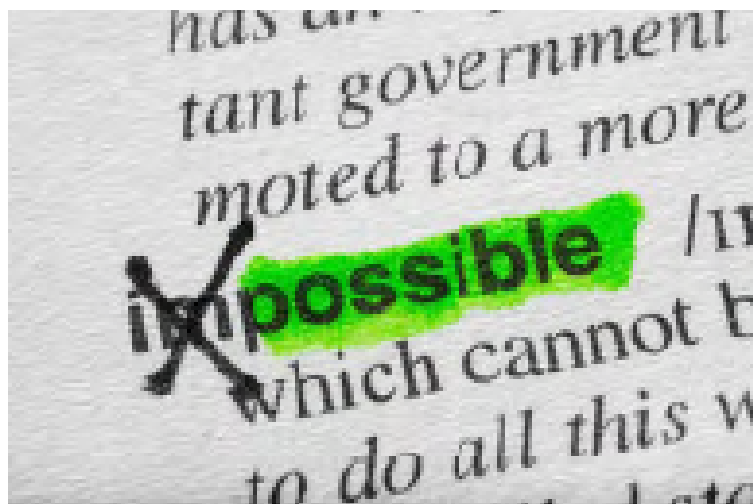




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# Coaching as Organisational Development



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# Can line managers ever be effective coaches?

Jeff Matthews



*In this article, we explore the difference between being a coach external to an organisation and being a coach as a manager, internal to the organisation. We contrast two types of coaching contracts that emerge, one for developmental or 'executive' coaching (often provided by an external coach) and the other 'performance coaching' as provided by a manager responsible for practical implementation of the OD agenda. We suggest that much of the training provided for internal coaches has not dealt with the particular challenges that managers face in the corporate environment, in particular the power imbalance, a vested interest in the outcome of the coaching and strong pressures to be directive in a*

*coaching conversation. We propose a definition and methodology for 'performance' coaching which we have found to be successful in addressing these issues for internal managers wishing to develop a coaching practice to support their team, particularly during the challenges of reducing expenditure and head count. We offer a practical skill and toolset to the OD manager tasked with the challenge of embedding a carefully considered OD strategy into the day to day operation of an already stretched organisation and pressed management team.*

## Keywords

Coaching, organisational development, distributed leadership, performance coaching, manager as coach, performance management, balanced scorecard, solutions focus

## The Growing Appeal of Coaching

One of the intriguing phenomena in organisational life over the past 20 years has been the emergence of the 'industry' of coaching. From humble beginnings that saw a small number of sports psychologists and coaches in the late 1980s, noticing that their skills in engaging athletic motivation had applications in the competitive world of business, the profession has expanded to draw in professionals from counselling, therapy and other eclectic disciplines to become a 'profession' of its own. Witness the development of Professional bodies, qualifications to PhD level, Professors of Coaching Psychology and an explosion of literature and dedicated consultancies, some turning over millions in revenue.

For those of us involved for more than the past 20 years, the proliferation has been interesting and even bewildering to observe. As with any maturing profession, as it

becomes more developed the different aspects and applications begin to emerge as practices become more sophisticated.

In recent years, a growing number of independent professionals have established themselves as 'executive' coaches, intervening in organisations in a one to one basis, usually with senior managers to resolve particular and contracted issues. Based on these positive experiences of engaging with one another in 'motivating coaching conversations', the idea that managers should become 'coaches' to their staff is one that has become firmly established, and one that we would suggest is very seductive to Chief Executives and Heads of Organisational Development. To that end, a number of organisations have purchased development programmes wishing to create 'a coaching culture'. This is frequently defined as one where managers are seen to 'coach' staff by engaging them in meaningful and motivating conversations. Managers are encouraged to engage both the 'hearts and minds' of the people they employ, joining in co-creating meaningful work that is fulfilling both to them and to the organisation. In return for the investment, an organisation gets a workforce "aligned to its corporate objectives", "signed up to its mission" and behaving just as the carefully devised competence framework says they should. How is coaching able to achieve this impressive list of OD benefits?

A quick scan of the claimed benefits of coaching as a skill, reveal why this method of developing staff has become so attractive. In particular, it has been suggested that coaching is beneficial for:

- Creating motivated and engaged members of staff.
- Addressing areas of poor performance.
- Achieving meaningful annual reviews.
- Personal and professional development plans.
- Conflict resolution and solving relationship issues.
- 'Unsticking' stuck careers.
- Creating personal and professional development plans that add value to the organisation and fulfil the individual.

It is an impressive list and when you have claims from coaching consultancies that "coaching is the single most powerful process ever devised for releasing individual human potential", we seem as coaches to be making some grand claims for what we do. Easy to sell? Perhaps even easier to oversell?

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The list of benefits is one that we, as independent practitioners, external to the organisation, can and do deliver. Yet in our consulting practice, we find that most managers are struggling to implement what can seem a time consuming and long winded process. When asked why this is so often the case, exasperated HR managers mention the fact that many of their line managers:

- Are used to being called upon to solve problems by 'telling'. It is difficult to adjust to a process that seems to focus on asking questions at the expense of offering advice and being directive in solutions and actions.
- Labour under the impression that the only intervention they can use as a 'coach', is a question, and that 'telling' is somehow forbidden, punishable by the 'Coaching Police'. This seems to be particularly the case when the coaching programme is accredited.
- Feel exhorted to enter the coaching conversation with 'an open mind' and 'no pre-conceived ideas'. They find that as the coach they have a vested interest in the solution, have frequently performed the coachee's role before, or know the person they are coaching very well indeed, sometimes having spent more time with them than they have their partner!
- Come to realise that there is an inherent power imbalance in the relationship. Both players are in the power system of the organisation. How objective can the coach be?
- Feel that the whole conversation takes place under significant pressure created by the economic challenge. As a consequence, a shortage of time, resources, money and patience means effective coaching can be difficult.

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Faced with these feelings, thoughts and impressions, it is easy to see how 'coaching', with its emphasis on questions, is dropped in favour of 'route one' instruction. So, many line managers struggle on. In fact, when we scratch beneath the initial veneer often presented in the training room, where managers are invited to practise coaching skills in artificial role playing exercises, it is clear that very few of these newly acquired skills and ideas are really making their way back into the day to day practise of the trainee coaches. There is rampant use of questions that begin "have you thought about..." or "don't you think that..." – questions that of course are often devices to present a disguised instruction. So the poor team member is left trying to discern the real intent of the manager.

However, it is also clear that being overly directive causes team members to not take responsibility for their performance. One of the phenomena that good coaching is meant to break is that of the dependant relationship, where the manager takes responsibility, often unconsciously, for solving many of the individual's and team's problems. We have heard of teams waiting for a manager to return off leave in order to order a light bulb which needed replacing.

The danger of 'tell' is that it encourages the habit of 'upward delegation', thereby reducing the leadership and management capacity of the organisation. Possibly the most attractive benefit of implementing a coaching culture is the way it encourages a model of distributed leadership, a holy grail of many OD Managers, where individuals take responsibility for their performance and the manager's intervention is regular one-to-one coaching sessions, designed to develop the

capability, confidence and capacity of the individual to perform. If head counts are to be reduced, particularly amongst managers as a result of cuts brought on by belt tightening, then the need for staff to take more responsibility and therefore less supervision is key.

*How can the coaching profession support managers ...?*

How can the coaching profession support managers in navigating their way through this dilemma? Whilst the skill of asking effective questions is prioritised in coach training, what are the skills of 'tell' and how do they feature? How is it that some managers leave coaching training with the distinct impression that it is not OK to 'tell', when there are clearly occasions and opportunities where it is the required intervention?

### **Vested Interest in the Coaching Conversation: A Show Stopper?**

Even more fundamental than the dilemma over 'tell' in the coaching conversation is the challenge of whether managers can ever be effective coaches to their team members, where they have a clear stake in the outcome of the conversation. Indeed, if their own performance appraisal and success in their role is directly influenced by the effectiveness and outcome of the session, how does that affect the dynamics of the conversation? A manager will always be seen as the representative of the "big powers", as directly presenting the OD agenda. Intelligent, free thinking members of staff (often recruited for those qualities) will see through the manipulation of a conversation to "push the corporate agenda". And that's what managers are required to do. Their own performance will be judged, in some degree, by their ability to get their team and themselves aligned to the corporate objective. Values statements, competence sets, 360 appraisals, performance objectives are all processes and tools for aligning individuals and teams to the corporate good, all ways in which the organisation seeks to grow and develop through mechanisms of "tell". To the cynical employee, coaching can appear as just a more sophisticated tool in "making me do what you want me to", an elaborate manipulation.

Using internal managers as coaches appears nice in theory, but in the face of these kinds of pressures can a manager ever truly be an effective coach to their team?

*In most coaching processes, there is clearly a power relationship at play*

In most coaching processes, there is clearly a power relationship at play. It is not a conversation between equals. The manager will enjoy, at the very least, positional power given by the organisation. He or she will have a vested interest in the outcome of the coaching conversation. Frequently, the manager may well have performed the role of the coachee before and know from experience what needs to be done. Hence, there is a risk for the manager to decide in advance what the coachee needs to do. Add in the pressures of time, money and personal reputation and not just as a coach but also as a leader and manager in the organisation, and it is easy to see how 'coaching' loses out to 'route one' instruction.

For all these reasons, the argument for using external coaches is very compelling, especially in the current economic environment, where there is increased pressure on managers to improve financial performance, and trust relationships between managers and their teams are stretched to the limit. An external 'executive' coach, brought from the outside into an organisation can enjoy the 'luxury' of independent detachment. Outside the system - and therefore the power structure at play on a day-to-day basis in the organisation - but hopefully aware and sensitive to it, external coaches can be disinterested in the outcome of the conversation. Without that 'vested interest', they can ask the challenging questions, remain in a position of 'not knowing' and encourage the ownership of the action developed by the coachee, whilst staying out of offering direct advice unless clearly contracted for this purpose. This is a position that the practising manager, engaged in coaching a member of their staff, can never be in.

Many external coaches, when training coaching skills in organisations, seem to ignore this dynamic, training instead the skills from the independent perspective they enjoy rather than the complex and enmeshed relationship experienced by most internal coaches with the people they are coaching. The result can be an OD disaster. We know of an organisation that invested many thousands of pounds in developing a cadre of highly qualified coaches, only to find that the skills were not usable in the demanding performance environment they found themselves in and were reserved for the high days and holidays of a mentoring programme for junior members of staff. In consequence the OD impact of the programme was virtually nil. It was only when some of the tools and techniques identified in this article were deployed did the full investment in the attitudes and skills of the coaching training they had bought become fully realised.

Much coaching training we have seen and experienced is silent on this issue. It assumes that there is only one type of coaching conversation, one that we might style as 'developmental coaching', where the coach is a disinterested outsider and there exists an 'equal' or even 'one-down' in the power relationship. Contrast this with 'performance coaching', where the subject of the conversation is frequently the effectiveness of the individual within their role and the coach is often their line manager.

So can an internal manager ever be an effective coach? In our experience, the coaching profession has not, as yet, provided adequate answers to this question. Until it does, it can be accused of overselling the notion of creating a 'coaching culture', where all employees can engage in supportive conversations in some kind of coaching 'never - never' land. There are very few organisational cultures living the values needed to support this kind of programme. We need to design an industrial strength intervention that can withstand the pressures present in many

***Much coaching training ... assumes that there is only one type of coaching conversation***

organisations made even more toxic by the worsening external economic climate.

### **A New Definition and Model for Internal Coaches**

This model is something that we have been working with for a number of years, stung by prospective clients demanding to know if it 'really works' and 'can everyone be a coach?'

When challenged, we are careful, initially, to define our terms. There are an increasing number of definitions of what is meant by 'coaching'. Aware that this is a semantic minefield and that there are a number of vested interests in defining the term coaching, we have developed the following definition. This simply (but not simplistically) states that: ***Coaching is any conversation in which we support another in making progress towards a preferred future.***

We adhere to this definition for a number of reasons:

- It places an emphasis on 'supporting another' (not 'helping'), and so implicitly keeps the agenda and action with the coachee or member of staff.
- It is future-oriented. In 'making progress toward a preferred future', we are proposing a process that favours a conversation focused on creating a better future, not in analysing the mistakes of the past. As coaches, we see ourselves as being in the business of selling hope.
- It is positive. By putting emphasis on 'making progress' we see each coaching conversation culminating in agreement on a small step, no matter how small, to be taken in the next 72 hours. That step is contracted for and followed up. This simple action can give the manager a very effective early warning system if things are not progressing as planned.
- It clearly states that coaching is 'a conversation' (not a monologue or a manipulation), albeit one with a very distinctive purpose. If you have the skills of conversation, you can be a coach. We stay out of the trap of making 'coaching' something special for 'special occasions', or an elitist skill to be carried out by a chosen few.

In developing our coaching practise, we have found the future-oriented, strength and resource based approach called 'solution focussed' to be very effective. Based up on the significant work of Steve DeShazer and Insoo Kim Berg, this way of engaging in one-to-one conversations emerged in the 1980s from the Brief Family Therapy Centre in Milwaukee. Their view that "what got you into a situation is not necessarily going to help you get out" is refreshing as it breaks the need to over-analyse problems, which we find creates a sense of being 'stuck' and a negativity that is not helpful in creating change. Instead, the past is a rich area for skills, strengths and resource that can be brought to bear on making progress (rather than of analysis, deficit and blame). Closely allied to the field of positive psychology, we

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find this approach generates naturally high levels of energy and engagement along with a very practical toolset, which we will consider in a moment. Our definition of coaching is underpinned by the values and tools implicit in 'solution-focused' methodology.

This use of a solution-focused approach is one that can be applied to either 'developmental' or 'performance' coaching, as we have defined them, where the coach may or may not have an interest in the outcome of the conversation. Why? The key is in our definition of coaching as making progress 'toward a preferred future'. When we put the definition up on a presentation slide, the sceptics in the training room all chorus, "whose preferred future are we talking about?" In developmental coaching, influenced as it is by a person-centred, non-directive approach pioneered by Carl Rogers and others, our focus is clearly the preferred future of the performer. It is the performer's agenda that sits centre stage and that is how ownership and commitment are generated and maintained in this approach. The coach is a catalyst in the process, remaining unchanged and unaffected.

Contrast that position with that of the line manager in performance coaching as we have described. Here the 'preferred future' is potentially far more complex. Firstly, it is a future that is shared by both coach and performer and may look rather different from their positions in the system, and as such we see this as a future that will require negotiation. If the conversation is taking place within the context of an organisation, there will be a number of other parties with a stake in that future, including customers, shareholders, government institutions, etc. The OD agenda will loom large here: the need to create a clear connection between the individual's performance, that of the team, through to division and on to the corporate level objectives.

### **What Happens When there is a Crisis?**

What is the manager's responsibility in keeping the coachee engaged in a programme that he or she does not feel fully committed to or obligated to follow? What happens when the future that the organisation wishes to create is not shared fully by the coachee, when they don't buy into the OD agenda? Also, if performance coaching for line managers puts a premium on both 'telling' and 'asking' as equal core skills in 'performance' coaching as we have described it here, where does the conversation start? Which comes first – do you 'tell', laying out the overt OD agenda, or 'ask' how they are doing?

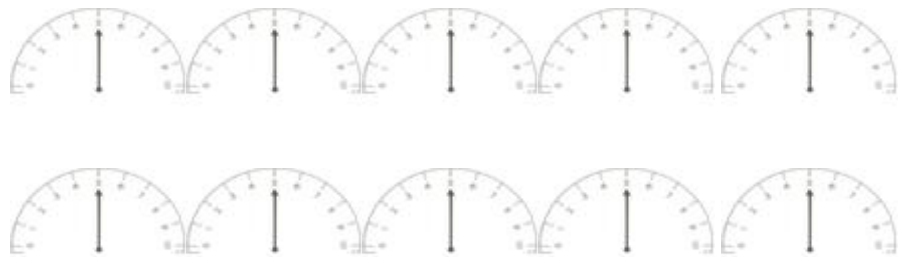
Our experience is that it is possible for a manager to sustain the constructive relationship of the coaching conversation in such 'difficult situations'. To make this work a number of things need to be in place and paid attention to:

- The manager's and the organisation's agenda needs to be overt – not disguised in the form of leading or manipulative questions. That means



needing to be clear about what each party wants from the conversation, which should be clearly contracted forat the outset.

- Both parties must have a prioritised overview of what is important. In our coaching practice, we achieve this by creating a simple way of representing a personalised balanced scorecard using the visual metaphor of a dashboard. We draw on the imagery of old-fashioned analogue flight cockpits, where the pilot is faced with an apparent riot of dials. To avoid information overload, these dials are grouped and pilots are required to keep their eye on only 10 things at once. Also, dials are calibrated so that when things are performing well, the pointer is straight up. This means that the pilot flies the plane 'by exception', with their eye drawn toward what needs paying attention to. Similarly, in prioritising what is important during the coaching dialogue, the personal targets of the coachee are represented as 10 dials. By doing this the agenda for the performance coaching conversation becomes self evident.



- Managers need to establish a clear performance agenda at the start of the planning cycle. In this way the manager's and the organisation's agenda is overt and negotiated up front. The test is to be able to answer the question: "How will we know you are being successful?" It alarms us just how many people within organisations, at all levels, cannot answer that question.
- Coach and coachee need to be clear about what they are trying to achieve. What are the individual's performance goals for the coming year, in the context of the team's goals and those of the organisation, and can they make the connection? In developing this thread of linked goals, we find it helpful to think in terms of three different types of goals – dream goal (what you are trying to achieve) performance goal (what that means in measurable terms) and process goals (things that will contribute towards success). A clear articulation of these three goals provides the individual with the sense of where they fit – where their piece, no matter how small, fits in the success of the whole. This helps individuals find the meaning within their role and helps break down the "I'm only a..." mindset which limits people's ability to contribute to their full potential and make a difference to the organisation's and their own success. We find this part of the process to be the most effective in delivering the OD goals of a

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*Everyone needs and sets their own targets*

coaching intervention, supporting people in feeling they are part of something significant and worthwhile.

- Everyone needs and sets their own targets. In our coaching sessions, we go as far as setting targets for every individual in the organisation, clearly aligned to the goals of the organisation, created in a coaching dialogue between the team member and the manager.
- Targets need to include the 'how' the person will behave as well as the 'what' they will achieve. Many organisations have developed sets of management and leadership competences, but few have managed to fully integrate them into a regular performance review. We seek to achieve that with this approach.
- The individual targets need to be made simple and visible. The creation of the measurement dials has two stages to it - the clear labelling of what the target covers and then the establishing of clear expectations for the coming year. Managers can find this surprisingly challenging, even though we apparently have had over 70 years of performance management in organisations. It often requires a clear distinction to be made between 'inputs', 'outputs' and 'outcomes'. The connection between these targets also needs to be understood. We are working with a 'balanced scorecard' here. Considering the organisation as a system, there is significant risk in over focussing on one aspect of performance. This has been explored in the writings of John Seddon and others in the area of systems thinking (5).



- It is crucially important that the expectations on performance are within the control of the individual. Often we find managers setting targets that are outside the performer's control, such as 'reduce journeys to work by car for all staff by 10%'. As a manager you would need to establish what things the individual can put in place, that they have control over, that would achieve this. This has been described in the world of sport as 'controlling the controllables' (6) or using the goal-setting language explored earlier, 'process goals' – the means to an end but not the end in themselves.
- There must be regular reviews. Reviews begin with a look at the dials: Which one or two require the most attention? If possible, use a question framework as the basis of the coaching conversation. Much of effective coach training prizes, rightly, the value of asking effective questions. Sir

John Whitmore popularised the use of the GROW model – a means of offering managers a structure for the conversation. We have developed a version for performance coaching, based on the solution focused tool ‘scaling’ where the focus of the conversation is scored between zero and ten. Adapted from the original scaling tool, the acronym we propose is “HØPES”, where

- H: “What are your *hopes* for this conversation?”
- Ø: “What makes it *not zero*(Ø)?”
- P: “What is the preferred future, what would success be like? ”
- E: “*Exploring* actions and outcomes, what will make a difference?”
- S: “What is the first *small step*, in the next 72 hours?”
- Having established an agreed framework, represented visually, the manager is then in a position to use it as the basis of a regular coaching conversation. We suggest every six to eight weeks although monthly would be good practise.

## Conclusion

Leading in a time of contracting budgets is arguably an even greater challenge than leading in a time of expansion. For this reason, we feel that the distinction between ‘developmental’ or ‘executive’ coaching and that of ‘performance’ coaching is an important one to make for the coaching profession. Doing so forces coaching professionals to recognise that what works for them as independent interveners in an organisational system does not work for the managers within it. It also means organisations will be better able to support their line managers with a set of values, skills and tools that are relevant to the current pressured economic situation. This is particularly important in the public sector organisations faced with unprecedented cuts in budget. For OD professions, it offers a practical tool and skill set to convert top level strategic intent and well thought through strategy papers into practical action and difference in day to day behaviour. We consider the types of skills and the toolset described in this article as crucial in developing the leadership capability required not only to retain the talent and commitment of professionals in these organisations but also to deliver the discernable shift in behaviour described and promised in much OD strategy so carefully prepared by OD professionals.

*what works for  
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