

Leveraging coaching for organisational change

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It seems to me that the coaching going on in most organisations is carried out in isolation from the organisation's change agenda, whereas if it were integrated I believe that it could be used to support the changes going on. Even if full integration isn't possible, a better alignment or direct connection is likely to make a difference to the success of the organisation.

Organisational change interventions definitely need some help! According to research approximately 70 per cent of organisational change initiatives fail: a success rate of only 30 per cent. At the same time, the gap between expecting change and being able to manage it is growing bigger. So it is clear that organisations need more effective strategies and methods to accelerate and sustain organisational change.

In this article I outline some current issues with how coaching is being implemented and where some organisations may be missing a trick. It is not that coaching is being done badly. Far from it, standards of practice in delivering coaching to individuals has never looked higher. My observation from conducting coachee surveys and many programme evaluations is that coachee satisfaction with their coaching experience is usually at least 90 per cent for established coaching programmes. I see lots of evidence of good practice and individual benefit. The problem is I don't see enough evidence of business benefit too. And I believe both can be achieved simultaneously.

What do I mean by 'change'?

There are various sources of change that impact on the workplace and individuals during their working life. At the organisation level, change arises from product/service innovation or improvement; market conditions; restructuring; mergers and acquisitions; leadership; and business strategy. At the team level, change arises from new products/services; increasing or decreasing customer demand; turnover of colleagues/team members; new team leaders, and ways of working together. For individuals, change also results from promotion; job role/responsibility; location; culture, and different hours/pattern of work. Managing these different types of change

may require different approaches, but fundamentally, change leaders need to ensure that they support their organisations and staff through them all. Otherwise the anticipated benefits may not be realised.

Evidence on outcomes from coaching

With high demand from HR and management functions, the continued investment in coaching initiatives by organisations is unsurprising. Anecdotally, feedback from coachees/employees over many years has tended to impress organisations on the effectiveness of coaching. Academics and coaching researchers have added their support to this view with mainly favourable reviews in the literature on coaching outcomes.

Positive outcomes for organisations include:

- leadership effectiveness
- increased productivity
- job retention and loyalty to employer
- improved customer experience
- return on investment
- adapting to change more effectively
- changing behaviours
- the ability to address workplace conflict.

Despite all these positive claims, there remain some uncertainties or gaps in the research evidence. For instance, we don't yet know the relative effectiveness of coaching compared with other training or development options. In addition, we don't know whether achieving benefits for individuals is at the expense of benefits for the organisation (or vice versa) or whether the predominant view among coaches is correct (ie that benefits for individual employees, especially in terms of enhanced personal effectiveness and personal productivity/performance, will over time feed through into benefit for the organisation).

How coaching could be supporting change

The different types of coaching can all impact on change more directly, without having to wait and hope! Examples include:

- One-to-one coaching can help individual leaders at all levels to clarify their role in a change initiative; develop a compelling case for change; deal with resistance; to

become a role model or champion; build relationships and secure agreement from key stakeholders; and develop communications plans to influence others to change.

- Peer coaching can accelerate skills acquisition and help individual staff in applying new knowledge or skills or behaviours in a shift to a new role, new product or new customer focus brought about by an organisational change.
- Managers adopting a coaching style of management can help their staff to understand the importance of a planned change, how it may affect them and what they can do to help and support the change.
- Team coaching can help a team to understand where it is in relation to what will make it effective. This often involves a focus on two aspects by the team: Firstly, the hard business imperatives such as goal and role clarity around improving increasing productivity, innovation or organisational change; action planning to support the change; and team discipline. Secondly, the softer issues which include mutual trust; commitment and accountability for the team's success and failure; ways of working together; and team members' relationships with the leader.

Making coaching work better within organisations

The business and HR press over the last decade has also advised on how to make coaching work better within an organisation more generally:

- Clarifying whether the organisation/division/team is ready for coaching. Insight can be gained by reflection on the culture (are relationships, learning and innovation valued?); business context (is there a future-orientated strategy?); and HR context (do reward and promotion systems encourage employees to be helpful to each other?).
- Establishing at the start the expected benefits or outcomes to be achieved and how you will measure or evaluate success.
- Addressing individuals' needs whilst also ensuring the 'big picture' fit with the organisation.
- A focus on continuous learning and adopting a coaching culture within organisations (eg building feedback into every development conversation and performance review) and maintaining a long-term focus.
- Ensuring commitment from senior management for the coaching programme.

Areas of disconnect between coaching and the sponsoring organisation

Despite all the advice, IES' work with companies over the last decade has revealed some common gaps in coaching practice between individual coaching engagements and the sponsoring organisation. I am concerned particularly about three aspects:

1. Unclear development goals.
2. Managers not sufficiently engaged in the coaching process.
3. Unsupportive organisational cultures.

Unclear development goals

'Unclear development goals or lack of agreement with their coach on their goals' was the most frequently reported barrier to achieving successful outcomes from coaching in the international coaching effectiveness survey of 644 industry professionals from 34 countries conducted jointly by IES and James Cook University (Australia). It could be that goal-setting processes are not working smoothly in these cases or that the demand for coachees to set goals was not welcome by one of the parties. This would lend support to the view that the simplistic prescription of SMART goals is not always appropriate and can even be damaging in the context of a complex and rapidly changing world.

Alternatively, it could be that unclear development goals are an organisation issue rather than a coach/coaching model issue. Interviews with external coaches during programme evaluations, reveal experienced coaches who are well aware of the advantages and limitations in their coaching practice of goal pursuit. They describe a nuanced understanding of goals, with the possibility for bringing greater impact and sophistication to their coaching engagements. We know that support from an individual's boss for the coaching experience can make a difference. It may be that clarity and honesty from the boss/line manager about the organisation goals, the reasons for nomination for coaching and what they hope the outcomes will be is what is important here, rather than more generalised 'support from my boss' throughout the period of the coaching.

Disengaged line managers

Line managers are key stakeholders in the coaching process not just to support goal-setting but also in enabling the transfer of learning from coaching back into the workplace, and in supporting changes that coached staff want to make. Managing change at the individual level is within the control of the person who is being or has been coached. However, many of the changes that coached staff have been inspired to

make at the team or organisation level may need active support, or at least co-operation, from others within the organisation.

A lack of management interest or accountability for the outcomes from coaching may explain why many organisation-sponsored coaching programmes result in personal and career aspirations taking precedence over business objectives. In one organisation, IES found that, of the 88 coachee action plans analysed, only 17 per cent of the coaching objectives listed were in any way related to business objectives. I think that is worryingly low. Are you sure it would be any higher in your organisation? Even when a three-way contracting approach is adopted, where the employee's boss is expected to represent the organisation's interests, I have observed that managers of coachees rarely play an active role. There is clearly an opportunity for many sponsoring organisations to strengthen the link between individual coaching engagements and the short, medium or long-term priorities for organisations. Greater engagement by managers would seem a good place to start.

Unsupportive organisational culture

Some coaching engagements and programmes are set up with specific aims and named senior management sponsors or champions. Programmes may be modified over time in response to shifting business priorities and personnel may move on. In these circumstances it is easy to see why roles and responsibilities in support of coaching (beyond coaches and coachees) may become blurred or forgotten. The coaching infrastructure to deliver internal coaching may continue but the coaching aims or target audiences for the coaching very often change.

Organisation culture is critical. A coaching-friendly organisation culture is one where relationships, learning and innovation are valued within the organisation and where employees feel able to talk openly with colleagues about their challenges and mistakes. I have observed that staff working in organisations with a coaching-friendly culture are much more likely to be able to transfer the learning from their coaching and make it part of their daily work. The IES/James Cook University survey of coachees found that an unsupportive organisational culture was statistically predictive of limited coaching effectiveness. This means that, whilst coachees are able to overcome the vast majority of barriers they face during their coaching and still perceive their coaching to have been effective, coachees reporting the culture of their organisation as a barrier are likely to perceive their coaching to have had only limited effectiveness or not been effective at all.

Peter Hawkins presents organisational case studies and advises on how to harvest the organisational learning from the '*thousands of coaching conversations*' and the potential that exists for coaching to drive systemic change within and between organisations. One of his suggestions is periodically to get coaches together and collectively identify

patterns and themes on challenges and disconnects from non-attributable coaching engagements.

When all these listed gaps in the coaching research and practice are taken into account, it is reasonable to think that coaching's potential as a tool to support organisation change is not yet being fully exploited and that organisations have opportunities to increase impact.

How to integrate coaching and organisational change

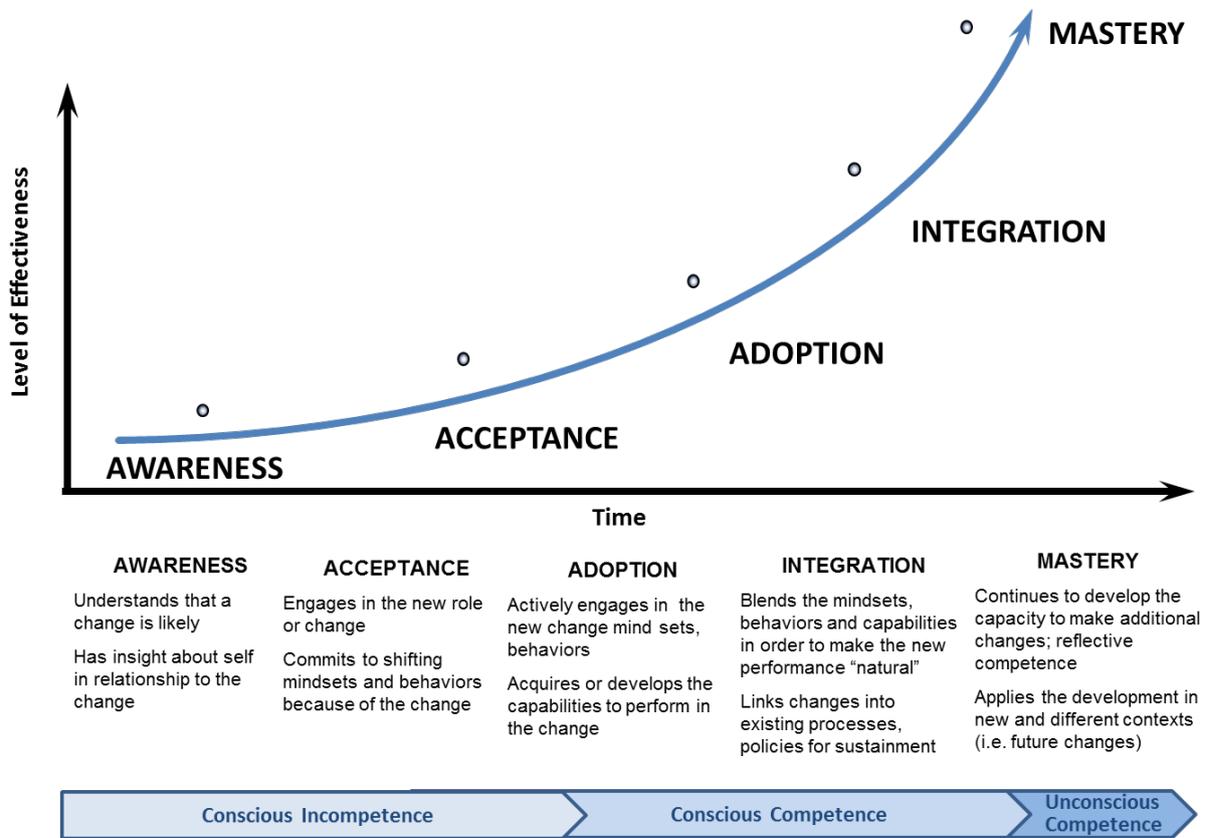
In October 2014 IES ran a workshop for its HR Network members on this subject. We were lucky enough to have two international leaders in organisational change management joining us to present their views (John Bennett Ph.D., Associate Professor of Applied Behavioural Science at the McColl School of Business, Queen's University at Charlotte, USA and Mary Wayne Bush Ed.D formerly led the Change Management practice at a US Fortune 100 firm, Raytheon Systems). They are co-authors of a book which advocates coaching as *'the intervention of choice for driving organisational change'*. They explained their views on change as follows:

'Organisations and groups are not capable of changing unless and until people within them change. Organisational change is inherently about individual change at the behavioural level...When well-planned and deployed; these individual changes are aligned and directed towards a common agreed-on goal. When they are not, the changes can appear to be random and diverse, and perhaps even undermine or limit the organisation's goal attainment.'

Bennett J, Bush MW (2014)

Bennett and Bush describe their concept of 'change coaching' as a broader, more strategic concept than 'change management', which recognises that change is now a constant in organisational life: it is 'the new normal' with a focus on multiple, often iterative and overlapping, changes over time rather than a series of isolated events. The IES members at the event recognised this description of constant change within their organisations. The goal of change coaching according to Bennett and Bush is to help individuals or groups successfully implement the desired change and to develop increased capacity to make future changes, resulting in mastery. The authors shared their Mastery Model with us, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 1: The Mastery Model



Source: Bennett and Bush (2014)

The five stages in the Mastery Model – awareness, acceptance, adoption, integration and mastery – apply to the experience of individuals moving through change, and also the mastery of skill of change coaching itself. The authors point out that not everyone in an organisation moves through the stages of change at the same rate. As they explain:

‘There is often considerable resistance, and variance in the timing and behaviour of groups or individuals, but when thinking of the organisation system as a whole, it is often possible to see the progress through the above stages.’

During discussion sessions, IES members at the workshop identified a recent major change initiative that they were familiar with and reflected on how current success might have been/can still be improved through using coaching. The majority of attendees felt that their organisations struggled to progress beyond acceptance of change before losing momentum, whilst a minority felt their organisations had reached the adoption phase where individuals were using the skill-set and behaviours required by the change. All aspired to reach integration (where the mind-set change is integrated

into the DNA of the organisation) and mastery (where the organisation has learned how to change itself next time and subsequent times).

There were many ideas emerging from the workshop on how using existing coaching infrastructure to better effect could support the changes hoped for, including:

- Minimise resistance to the change messenger (usually senior managers) by team leaders and supervisors coaching their staff to understand, thereby securing buy-in to the personal opportunities created by the change.
- Prioritising available coaching 'places' or capacity for the team members leading the change to ensure they have the appropriate skills to execute required improvements.
- Coaches ensuring managers and leaders build effective review processes into their change strategies and plans so that issues are addressed in a timely manner before momentum is lost or inertia takes over.
- Coaches to challenge team leaders to be realistic about what can be implemented within existing workloads.

I believe these ideas have much wider resonance beyond the workshop and provide key insights for any organisation seeking to integrate change or which aspires to be a 'change master'.

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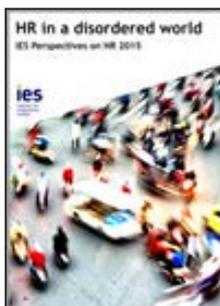
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IES Workshop: Leveraging coaching for organisational change

The workshop described in this article took place in December 2014.

IES HR Network members can download the documentation and presentations here:
www.employment-studies.co.uk/2014/leveraging-coaching-organisational-change

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