

# Providing Coaching Internally a Literature Review

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# Introduction

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Contemporary research has acknowledged the rise of coaching and mentoring as an effective method of supporting workplace learning, and has been empirically examined by a number of studies. As Carter *et al.* (2002) note, organisations typically resource one-to-one coaching in one, or in combination, of three ways: training line managers to coach their own employees; commissioning external coaches and utilising in-house specialist coaches.

The growing demand for flexible and targeted coaching, coupled with the acceptance of executive coaching as an effective development tool, have highlighted the role of internal coaches, that is, a professional within an organisation who coaches managers and executives as part of their job. In recent years, the stigma of having been assigned a coach has vanished. Moreover, there has been a shift from perceiving the coachee as someone who needs help with their development to someone who is important enough to warrant the type of one-to-one support that coaching provides (Stern, 2001). Illustrating this point, the Training and Development Survey (CIPD, 2001) found that over 80 per cent of UK organisations were using coaching or mentoring to develop at least some of their employees.

## The emergence of internal coaching

In addition to the widespread acceptance of coaching, the organisational benefits of investing in employee development have also been widely publicised. In many organisations the responsibility for employee development is being devolved to line managers (Hyman and Cunningham, 1998). Indeed, some see the central role of the modern manager as supporting the management of performance or the management of learning. More specifically, there has been a shift from the role of the 'manager as a controller' to that of a coach or mentor, of which developing employees is a major part (Tamkin *et al.*, 2003).

With enhancing employee development on many organisations' agendas, organisations have bought in managers with better employee development skills and, in addition, have tended to upgrade the skills of existing managers. These skills had traditionally only been available to organisations through external means.

However, as Tyler (2000) notes, it is only in the very recent past that organisations have started to go one step further by actually sourcing coaching internally, something that had always been outsourced. This makes intuitive sense to a lot of organisations as an internal coach not only has a deeper understanding of the organisational functioning, but is also cheaper and would have more reliable credentials.

Although many human resource professionals would argue that coaching had always played a role in their work, this was never comparable to the quality provided externally, that is up until recently. Although the literature is scant regarding the number of organisations adopting internal coaching in the UK, the fact that some people are referring to themselves as 'internal coaches' and even as working within an internal 'coaching department' means that internal coaching is indeed emerging.

## **Where do internal coaches come from?**

As Frisch (2001) suggests, many internal coaches were once human resource professionals, some are external consultants who have opted for the security of a salaried job within a large organisation, others may be managers who were seen as being effective coaches of their employees, and who were offered an opportunity to get involved more in the coaching role. Although, internal coaches share a variety of backgrounds, Shupert (1999) argues that internal coaches should never come from executive ranks. As he sees it, senior executives are hired to be good leaders, not good coaches.

# Defining internal coaching

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## What is an internal coach?

The internal coach is comparable in every sense to the external coach, with the exception that the internal coach is an employee of the same organisation as their coachees. There are many definitions of coaching in the literature that centre around coaching as a task-orientated form of personally tailored training. These definitions are suitable for both internal and external coaching. At the most basic level, defining internal coaching can simply mean that the coach is a fellow employee of the same organisation as the coachee, who has the job title 'internal coach.' In a more descriptive sense, however, Frisch (2001) offers the following definition:

*'Internal coaching is a one-on-one developmental intervention supported by the organisation and provided by a colleague of those coached who is trusted to shape and deliver a programme yielding individual professional growth'.*

However, although internal coaches are part of the same organisation, they should not be a part of the same organisational hierarchy, that is, they should be disassociated from the everyday management of their coachees. The reason for this is to separate the process from the job coaching that line managers may do.

## Confusing terminology

Having discussed what internal coaching is, it is important at this point to discuss what it is not. Internal coaching is not the type of counselling/coaching that is sometimes provided by human resource professionals. Although there are overlaps, they both have different aims and objectives. On the one hand, the counselling/coaching role is routinely for the benefit of the organisation (eg to improve recruitment, quality, motivation etc), whilst on the other hand, internal coaching is aimed more at the individual (eg to improve management competencies). As internal coaches have in-depth understanding of the organisation, they are in a better position to help the coachee's personal development. For instance, no matter what workplace topic the coach and coachee are discussing, the emphasis will always be on the potential

developmental opportunities of the challenge that the situation brings as opposed to the actual topic itself.

The domains of training and team building consultants may also overlap with that of internal coaching in terms of both topic and one-to-one support. But yet again, the organisational objectives they use fall outside of the definition of internal coaching.

Earlier, reference was made to the growing trend of viewing the manager as coach. Indeed, some organisations are beginning to introduce coaching skills and techniques into line management. (Carrington, 2001). However, the rationale for doing so is not to give the manager the same expertise in coaching as the coach themselves, but enough to equip them with some effective coaching techniques. Internal coaching solutions do not have to concentrate on making coaching a line management responsibility.



# Internal versus external coaching

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## The advantages of internal coaching

One of the most rudimentary benefits of internal coaching is that it is far less expensive than hiring external coaches. In relation to this, internal coaching can also be applied further down the organisational hierarchy. As internal coaches have much more in-depth knowledge about the organisation and its culture (ICF, 1999), they are able to work more quickly, for example, they are able to create development plans more efficiently because they know what resources are available. Moreover, as they reside within the organisation, they are easily contactable and available.

The internal coach is able to gather feedback on the coachee which can be used to alter the development plan as it is needed. Internal coaching is also compatible with the ethos of the learning organisation (Senge, 1990). Here, internal coaching can help to model this approach for other managers. However, the fact that the coach has in-depth knowledge of the organisation can also be a disadvantage because internal coaches may be blind to certain aspects of the organisation, whereas the external coach may have a more objective and balanced view.

Taken further, Germann (2002) argues that organisations can achieve more leverage by developing coaches within an organisation than through any other activity or investment. The reason, he suggests, is because internal coaches are essential for continually developing skills that will benefit the organisation in real time and can be applied everyday as new opportunities and challenges arise.

## The advantages of external coaching

As the provision of external coaching is outsourced, it does not require any additional internal resources or employees. The credibility of external coaches may sometimes be greater as they are likely to have vast experience within a number of different organisations (Hall *et al.*, 1999). The role of the external coach is often more defined; that is, internal coaches are likely to have additional roles and responsibilities, whereas the external coach is there just for the coaching. This in itself raises issues surrounding

trust and confidentiality for the internal coach which will be discussed in more detail later.

Further issues to be considered centre around the extent to which the coach or mentor already knows the employee they are going to be working with. The evidence suggests that the whole process is more likely to be beneficial when the coach and the coachee have different mind-sets that will create a more stimulating learning environment. However, if the organisation is of considerable size, it is unlikely that the coach and coachee will have ever worked together before.

# Implementing internal coaching

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There are no set guidelines for the implementation of an internal coaching programme. There are, however, a number of issues that must be addressed when considering establishing such a programme.

## Recruiting internal coaches

As mentioned previously, internal coaches may come from a variety of different backgrounds. There is no one particular background that means one coach will be more effective than the other, each should be assessed objectively on the specific competencies required by the job. However, it should be a pre-requisite that candidates have a relevant qualification in a related field such as occupational psychology or counselling. It may be useful to use an external coach to help design the selection process, or have one on the actual selection panel itself.

In terms of specific competencies, Frisch (2001) offers 12 general competencies that an effective internal coach should possess:

- build trusting relationships
- understand and execute the specified coaching model
- psychological curiosity
- articulate observations in simple and useful terminology
- understand how employees develop and change over time
- have an innovative and creative approach to their work
- have expertise in management issues
- good listening skills
- balance commitment both to employees and to the organisation
- open to continuous learning opportunities
- seek and accept help when issues arise that are beyond their expertise
- gain satisfaction from helping employees and seeing the organisation develop.

## Training internal coaches

It is important that internal coaches have unambiguous guidelines that relate to their coaching activities. These guidelines should outline the coaching services they are to offer and the issues that they are likely to be confronted with. Courses on communication, interpersonal skills and giving feedback should be developed, possibly with the help of the coach, so that the coach can deliver this training to the coachees.

## Trust and confidentiality

When employees request coaching themselves, confidentiality is much less of a concern. However, some employees may be resistant or defensive about having to have a coach, and this is where the issue of trust is crucial. In the most definitive sense, most coaching programmes are not entirely confidential, senior managers typically know who is coaching whom and possibly the content of the coachee's development plan.

However, as Sears (2000) points out, some organisations are implementing policies of not revealing the names of coachees to management. Whatever the case, it is critical at the start of the process that it is made clear exactly what is confidential, and what information will be available and to whom. Sears (2000) notes the procedure of issuing the coachee a 'promise letter' outlining the coaching process and promising that the coach will not share any information with anyone in the organisation. Another useful approach here is to design the process in such a way that both the coach and the coachee are present when any information is to be shared with other organisational members. That is, the coach cannot talk to anyone about the coachee unless he or she is present. This helps to build a sense of trust between the coach and coachee.

The issue of confidentiality is particularly salient with internal coaching as opposed to external coaching, precisely for the reason that the internal coach has much more interaction (both formally and informally) with other organisational members than the external coach. In relation to this, internal coaches need to develop a diplomatic way of responding to questions regarding how certain coachees are doing. More often than not, this can put the coach in a difficult situation, as they may feel pressurised by senior management into divulging certain sensitive information about one of their coachees.

Indeed, Mackintosh (2003), on reflection of six years' experience as an internal coach states:

*'I remember on a number of occasions, incurring the wrath of my manager, when I refused to answer questions about a particular employee. This was extremely difficult for me to do, as I had always*

*been brought up to respect authority and when your boss said jump ... You jumped! It was painful, but I stuck to my guns.'*

The internal coach must always be on their guard, innocent questions answered around the water-cooler, for example, can lead to serious breaches of confidentiality. There is also a need for the internal coach to play no part in discussions regarding pay or promotion *etc.* Coachees who know that their coach will have input to decisions regarding their pay or promotion are unlikely to be totally honest, and therefore, the developmental benefits of the whole coaching process are nullified:

*'Coaches were there to do the senior managers' "bidding" and as a result those coaches that did the "bidding", did not build any trust with the other employees they were meant to be coaching. Some coaches, (and it was aimed at me on one occasion) were the manager's "right hand man", a person not to trust!' (Mackintosh, 2003)*

## **Commitment**

As external coaching is so expensive, a lack of commitment on the coachee's side does not go unnoticed. For example, the coachee is unlikely to miss, or be late for, an appointment at the risk of being severely reprimanded for wasting money. The same cannot be said for internal coaching, and it is necessary to clarify expectations, respect and procedures for changing appointments at the start of the process (a coaching logbook can be provided for coachees to keep track of their programme):

*'My advice to any internal corporate coach ... is to ensure that at the onset, you make time to ensure that you contract your coaching role. Sit down with your manager, your team, any other employees that you will be coaching, and ensure that they realise what coaching is all about, how a coach operates, what your expectations are (check theirs!) and how coaching can benefit them personally. Make sure you manage the "authority bit" and be brave in terms of challenging higher authority behaviours where they need challenging.'* (Mackintosh, 2003)

## **The physical environment**

The actual physical organisational environment in which the coaching is provided is particularly salient for internal coaching. Ideally, coaching should take place in a relaxing, comfortable room with the necessary resources. This type of environment is sometimes difficult to find in an open plan office. It is necessary for the coach to have their own office, away from the distractions of the coachees everyday workplace. If the internal coach has their own office with all the resources at hand (*eg* video, charts, boards, books *etc.*) and is familiar with how to use them, then this can be an added advantage the internal coach has over the external coach.

Having the equipment readily available also makes it more likely that it will be used as opposed to having to arrange to get it set up especially. Internal coaches are also in a more suitable position to observe the coachee in their day-to-day activities. For example, it will be easier for them to attend meetings/presentations *etc.* involving the coachee to observe and give feedback at a later date.

## **Assessment and feedback**

External coaches are likely to use standardised assessment techniques at the start of the coaching process. These techniques will be applicable to a wide variety of organisations. The internal coach, however, having an in-depth understanding of the organisational processes and procedures (eg 360 feedback and appraisal reports) has the advantage of using specific assessment techniques that suit the particular needs of the organisation.

## Summary and conclusion

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This paper has discussed the increasing appearance of the internal coach and the associated advantages and disadvantages as opposed to providing coaching from an external source. The advantages of internal and external coaching that have been covered are summarised in Table 1.

Even for organisations that have the most effective internal coaching systems, there will always be issues of confidentiality, personality clashes, credibility *etc.* that would lead some senior-level employees to be better suited to external coaching. Organisations should undoubtedly view internal and external coaching as two sides of the same coin.

They should not be viewed as competitors for the reason that they are in fact more likely to be complimentary. The most effective use of coaching, as Aviss (2001) suggests, may be to use a mix of both internal and external coaching.

**Table 1: Advantages of internal and external coaching**

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<b>Internal</b>	<b>External</b>
Knowledge of organisational culture and politics	Increased trust and confidentiality
Increased availability and easy to contact	Experience in various organisations give credibility
Less expensive	More objective and balanced view
Produce more efficient development plans	No extra internal resources or employees required
Can gather feedback more easily	Clear role definition, no additional responsibilities
Model for other managers	Will definitely not know coachees
Flexibility to be responsive to organisations' needs	More commitment from coachee
Can coach further down organisational hierarchy	Can offer more challenging perspectives
Can have well resourced office and equipment	
Can use assessment techniques specific to organisation	

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