

Is Coaching Becoming a Management Cop Out?

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Introduction

In a previous role as Human Resource Development Manager, we had a phrase – “Don’t send your ‘management problems’ to training”. This meant that training should not be seen as a miracle cure for problem performance. Now, I’m increasingly concerned that internal and external coaching is sometimes used as abdication of ‘management problems’. This paper explores how internal and external coaches can ensure that they are not colluding with managers to take on their management problems but effectively contracting to ensure benefit is gained from coaching. I’ll start by exploring why managers fail to tackle under-performing staff and then progress to how to contract for different types of coaching. I’ll conclude with specific suggestions on how coaches can facilitate proper contracting between the coachee, his/her manager and the organisation both before and after coaching interventions.

Sending management problems to coaching?

A recently trained internal coach illustrated the challenge of discussing behaviour and performance issues with direct reports. At a break during a group supervision session, the coach indicated that he was considering getting another internal coach to work with one of his direct reports. We briefly discussed the changes that he would like to see in his direct report’s skills and performance. He quite easily articulated the desired outcome. However, when he was asked if he had discussed this with the individual, his countenance dropped as he realised that he had not had this conversation and had assumed that the individual knew what needed to change. It is interesting that a trained coach could easily fall into this trap of sending his ‘management problems to coaching’. This exemplifies how easy it is for managers to assume that they can effect a change in performance through telepathy or osmosis!

Sadly, this is certainly not an isolated example. Research by Performance Coaching International published in *Coaching at Work* (2008) shows:

“Ninety per cent of managers do not address poor performance effectively.” The research among more than 750 managers across public, private and voluntary sectors found that “70% of managers said they are either unable or unwilling to have the ‘courageous conversation’ needed to address underperformance from staff. Of the remaining 30%, two out of three are unable to have the conversation without using an aggressive style. Only 10% are actually having conversations with a purpose and in a style that works.”

“Managers cited several reasons why they were unwilling or unable to address poor performance. The top five reasons were:

- They were too scared to do it
- They simply didn’t know how to do it

- They had good intentions but found themselves having a conversation that did not address the specific issue causing the problem
- They didn't think they would get backed up by their line manager
- They thought changing another person's behaviour was a process that was too long and hard. Some indicated that they thought if they left it long enough it would become someone else's problem."

Unfortunately, recent experience indicates that one of the ways that some managers tackle performance problems is by handing the issue onto an internal or external coach to 'fix' the individual.

Is it appropriate for managers to outsource 'performance issues'?

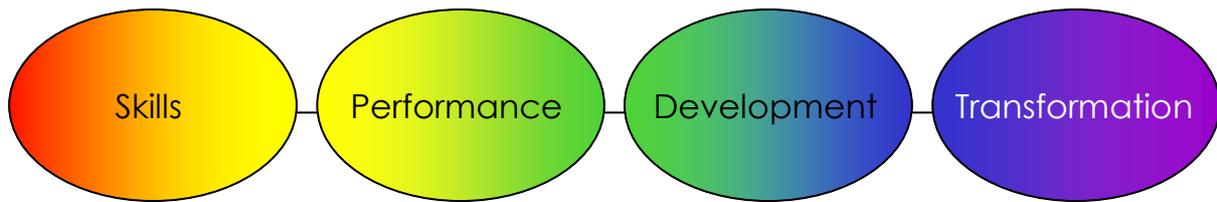
Over the past couple of decades, the trend has been more and more management responsibilities have been outsourced. It is very common for organisations to outsource whole functions, so perhaps it is also appropriate to 'outsource' coaching on performance issues.

Most managers find that they have insufficient time to complete the daily to do list so it is not surprising if many managers would want to 'outsource' to an internal or external coach. Some managers may have the time but they lack the coaching skill set to effectively coach individuals to achieve the desired outcome. This is similar to outsourcing information technology needs to an individual or organisation that can meet your need. We wouldn't expect a manager to be self sufficient in computer networking and data security for example. What is different about outsourcing a coaching requirement to a coach who is able to effectively enable the coachee to achieve the desired outcomes?

The difficulty comes when managers pass their management problems to coaching with an expectation that this will magically 'cure' the coachee of all performance ills! Clearly this is not the case. So, how can we recognise when this happening? How can internal and external coaches contract with the manager and the individual to ensure that we have a clear understanding of the specific skills, behaviour or performance needs?

Determining what coaching is appropriate

One important skill for both internal and external coaches is assessing the coaching need and determining if they have the capabilities for the specific coaching intervention. Peter Hawkins and Nick Smith's (2007) Spectrum of Coaching is a helpful model to determine the nature of the coaching required. They suggest a continuum that distinguishes four types of coaching, by their main focus:



“At one end of the continuum there is a focus on developing new skills in the coachee. These could be specific skills related to their role or job, such as sales skills, IT skills, etc., or more general people management skills; how to appraise staff, or give and receive feedback. Much of this type of coaching could also be provided as training courses.”

If it is a skill issue, the individual will not know **how to** perform the skill to an acceptable level. I recall a trainer on a training needs analysis course jokingly say “if I hold a gun to the person’s head, would he / she know how to do this skill / performance?” If the answer to this is no, then you have a genuine skill need. If the answer to this is yes, it is probably less of a skills need and more of a performance or transformation need. There is something else that is getting in the way of the individual performing to an acceptable level. Skills coaching requires the coach to have a good working skill in the subject being coached. Consequently, when faced with a skills requirement, the coach should ask him/herself, ‘am I sufficiently skilled to be able to coach in the subject? If not, who could I refer to that has this skill and is able to coach some one to develop the skill?’

Hawkins and Smith note that “performance coaching is less focused on the acquisition of skills (inputs) and more centred on raising the coachee’s level of performance (outputs and outcomes) in their current role. Typically this type of coaching is provided by a manager or internal coach.”

Less commonly, performance coaching can also be provided by an external coach. In either case, it is essential that the coach gains a clear understanding of the current and desired performance from both the individual and the manager.

Hawkins and Smith add, “development coaching is less focused on the current role and more centred on the coachee’s longer term development and thus has some aspects of mentoring. Besides helping the coachee develop competencies and capabilities, it will include more focus on the development of the whole person and their human capacities and how they can use their current role to develop their capacity for future roles and challenges. Thus there is more focus on second order or double loop learning, which focuses even more on second order learning and change. Whereas development learning will tend to focus on increasing the coachee’s capacity within one level of life stage and action logic, transformation will be more involved with enabling the coachee to shift levels and transition from one level of functioning to a higher order level.”

“In transformational coaching, the intention is not for the person bringing the issue or case to leave with a new insight or a ‘must-do action list’, but rather to have experienced a ‘felt shift’ in the session, starting to think, feel and act differently about the situation they are concerned with. Our research shows that the chance of

learning and change being transferred back into the live situation is much higher when this felt shift occurs than when people simply leave with good intentions.”

Should I take this on?

If the proposed coaching is skills or performance focused, it is important for the coach to determine the extent of the skill or performance issue so that a judgement decision can be made regarding the appropriateness of coaching. Typically, there will be a meeting with an HR sponsor or the line manager to discuss the situation and agree the need for coaching. Good questions at this stage include:

- How has this situation come to your attention?
- How long have you been aware of it?
- What has been the trend? Over what time?
- What percentage of the overall performance is below the acceptable standard, at acceptable standard, above acceptable standard?
- What else have you tried?

Even before meeting the coaching client, the coach needs to decide if this is a coaching assignment that s/he has the capability and capacity to take on. If the percentage of unacceptable performance is very high or if the impact of the skill, behaviour or performance deficit is negatively impacting the overall job performance, then a performance improvement process or disciplinary process may be more appropriate than coaching. Typically, this is the domain of the line manager in conjunction with Human Resources.

The coach is faced with a professional decision depending on the extent performance improvement that is required. Your past experience and expertise in dealing with similar coaching should be taken into consideration. If you are in doubt about the appropriateness of a coaching intervention, consult your supervisor or an experienced peer that can help you consider the situation and options.

Typically, the options include:

- a. Yes, the skill, behaviour, attitude, performance issue is specifically boundaried to make it a viable coaching intervention. Three way coaching will help to optimise the outcome and its sustainability.
- b. Yes, with caution. Three way contracting with the coaching client and the manager is essential in this type of situation. You might be able to make a more informed decision after the contracting meeting.
- c. No, the magnitude of skill, behaviour and attitude change required is greater than the capability of the coach within the number of sessions available.
 - (1) Suggest an alternative approach i.e. performance improvement process. In some circumstances coaching can be used effectively as part of a performance improvement process. In these situations, the line manager

would typically involve HR to implement a performance improvement process that may include verbal or written warnings regarding the performance that needs to improve. Usually there will be a timebound development plan that specifies the consequences if the performance is not improved to an acceptable level. Coaching is provided as a resource to enable the individual to make the changes in performance. In this type of situation, three way contracting is essential so that everyone is clear about the role of coaching and any other interventions. Often an HR person will be involved in the performance improvement and coaching contract discussions.

- (2) If your assessment is that you don't personally have the experience or expertise to progress, you could refer to another coach who has more experience in dealing with this type of issue. Who do you know that you could trust with this coaching requirement?
- (3) In some situations, the extent and the duration of the performance issue may negate the realistic possibility of a coaching intervention making a difference. This is especially true when performance issues have been long term without management intervention. In these situations, it is probably best for the coach to recommend a performance improvement or disciplinary process. It is best to be dealt with by the manager with appropriate human resource expertise.

Three way contracting: 'hand off' to the coach

Especially when the focus of the coaching is skill or performance oriented, three way contracting between the potential coaching client, the manager and the coach is essential. It is important to remember that this facilitated conversation may be the first time that the two individuals have ever talked about the skill or performance issues! There may also be a high level of emotion for the client, the manager and in the relationship between them. Consequently, it is important for the coach to have authority and presence in establishing the trust and comfort to talk openly. Carefully consider (and practice!) your opening preamble.

You may want to say something like this: "Thank you for inviting me to discuss this potential coaching requirement with you today. The purpose of this conversation is for me to enable us all to get a clear understanding of the coaching that you want. We'll explore what is the desired outcome, what is currently happening and then consider if coaching is the best alternative. If the answer to that is yes, we'll agree how we are going to work together. If it is no, we'll consider the other options that are available. Is that OK with both of you?"

Next, you will want to have a dialogue with the client and the manager to develop a common understanding of the situation. To ensure this is a dialogue and not an inquisition, make sure you are stopping to summarise your understanding at regular intervals.

Typical contracting questions include:

- What is the skill/performance/developmental performance/transformation that we want to focus on today and in this potential coaching?

- How does this skill/performance/developmental performance/transformation contribute to [client]'s overall performance /future performance?
- When is this necessary? How frequently is it required? What 'triggers' it to be done?
- What personal qualities or characteristics would be needed to experience this change in skill/performance/developmental performance/transformation?
- If a miracle happened overnight tonight and [client] was able to do this to the expected level tomorrow, what would be happening? What else?...
- What would be the evidence of this? What would you see, hear, feel? What else?... What would others - subordinates, manager, customers – see, hear, feel?
- What is the current impact of this skill/performance/developmental performance/transformation? How does it impact you [client]? How does it impact you [manager]? How does it impact the relationship between the two of you (if at all)? How does it impact relationships with colleagues (if at all)? How does it impact relationships with clients or customers (if at all)? Does it have any other impact on relations?
- What makes this difficult?
- What would be the positive benefit to client, manager, subordinates, peers, customers, organisation? Other positive benefits?
- Forecasting the impact of improving or not improving:
 - i. What will or might happen if this continues as it is now?
 - ii. What won't happen if this continues as it is now?
 - iii. What will or might happen when the desired outcomes are realised?
 - iv. What won't or might not happen if the outcome when the desired outcomes are realised?
- What coaching/support have you [manager] already provided?
- What coaching/support do you [client] need have from [manager] ?
- Is there anything else I should know about coaching [client] to improve this specific skill/performance/developmental performance/transformation?

Next, you will want summarise and play back your understanding of the coaching requirement. So, our objective is to coach [client] to skill/performance/developmental performance/transformation to x level. This will contribute 'x' to performance and 'y' to relationships and 'z' to the organisation. I will draft the coaching outcome so that we are all clear about what has been discussed and agreed."

Next you'll need to agree the logistics of coaching including:

- Durations/Number of Sessions
- Confidentiality and boundaries
- Record Keeping and who sees what
- “No fault divorce”
- Reviews: Midpoint and at the end
- Ending - how and when?

Three way contracting: ‘hand back’ to the individual and manager

In our experience, the final review and ‘hand back’ to the individual and the manager is often neglected. The review is an important point to reflect on the changes that have occurred and to engage the client and the manager in planning the sustained skill use or performance improvement.

You may want to say something like this: “When we met previously, we agreed that the expected outcomes from the coaching were.... Today, we are here to review the outcomes and to agree the next steps towards a sustained change. Let’s start by reviewing our perspectives of the change and then considering what is required going forward.”

- [Client], how is it going from your perspective?
- [Manager], how is it going from your perspective?
- [Client], to what extent do you perceive that you have achieved the outcome(s)?
- [Manager], to what extent do you perceive that you have achieved the outcome(s)?
- To what degree are you satisfied with the outcome? – fully achieved the coaching outcome, partially achieved, completely did not achieve the expected outcome
- What is needed to ensure that this a sustainable and prolonged change?
- What support do you need from your manager to make this a sustainable change? What other support do you need to make thi-
- Do you need to plan a further review at some point in the future? When?

Conclusion

Many managers find it difficult to have the 'courageous conversations' regarding skills and performance issues. Some will quite happily abdicate their responsibility on an unsuspecting coach. By following these guidelines, you will be able to make sure that the 'monkey' of responsibility is not inappropriately transferred to your back. More importantly, you will add value to the coaching client, the manager, the managerial relationship and the organisation.

References

Hawkins, Peter and Smith, Nick (2006) *Coaching, Mentoring and Organizational Consultancy*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Hall, Liz (2008) Managers fail to tackle under-performing staff, *Coaching at Work*. January 2008.

Gil Schwenk co-leads Bath Consultancy Group's Coaching Excellence and Supervision capability. He is an executive coach and specialises in enabling organisations to create their coaching culture and harvest systemic feedback from coaching. His clients span a diverse mix of public and private sector organisations including Ernst & Young, Nationwide Building Society, Nokia, Thring Townsend Lee & Pembertons, Unilever, UK NHS and the Ministry of Defence. He has trained hundreds of coaches and mentors in a wide range of private and public organisations. He is also an executive coach on executive development programmes at London Business School working with international general managers.

Gil is on the board of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council UK and represents EMCC on the 'roundtable' of UK coaching bodies. As the former Chair of Standards, he led the creation of professional standards for the UK and Europe. He is also the co-author of 'Coaching Supervision: Maximising the Potential of Coaching' published by CIPD in 2006.

Previously, Gil had 15 years blue chip experience in Human Resource Development as Group Learning and Development Manager at Orange and prior to that, as Manager of PHH University Europe.

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