

Skills for effective coaches

Coaching is an effective way of encouraging individuals to solve their problems, identify their goals and decide on the action they need to take to increase their performance.

It is an increasingly popular technique as it creates a natural pause in our hectic working lives, giving us the time to consider what is happening now and what we would like to happen in the future.

Coaching begins at the point when you identify a need for it, even though in the early stages you may find it hard to articulate exactly what it is that you want the coaching to achieve. In my coaching practice, I find it important to explore the need for and the expected outcome of the coaching in the first session as the answers can sometimes surprise the coachee. It is only by asking for a description of the challenges that they face and the concerns that they have that we can work out where they would like support and where they expect to have difficulties.

When I am supporting those leading complex change initiatives I find the coaching sessions fall into one of three categories:

1. Reviewing the strategic objectives and direction of the organisation or department that the coachee is responsible for to assess the nature and urgency of the changes and the forces driving the need for change
2. Identifying and devising the scope and objectives of the change
3. Acting as a critical friend and sounding board for ideas during the change initiative

The initial coaching session is also important for establishing if there is likely to be a mutually respectful relationship between the coach and coachee, as the coachee has to believe that the coach will be able to help them learn.

In my experience, I cannot effectively coach someone unless I have respect for them professionally. This respect comes from an appreciation of our shared values, for hard work, willingness to be honest and share information openly and address rather than shy away from difficult points. It is this respect that sparks the empathy and trust which enables us to say what needs to be said, even if that is not what the other person wants to hear.

If coaching is to be delivered effectively I think it is useful to provide some structure, identifying how the sessions will move towards achievement of the desired outcomes. However, I think it is important that the structure does not become the most important aspect of the coaching. I have had quite a few coaches in my own career and those that were most successful kept the structure loose and were able to respond to changes in circumstances. Those that were least successful created a detailed timetable at the start which they felt unable or unwilling to deviate from.

An excellent model for helping to structure coaching sessions is the GROW model, developed by John Whitmore in 2002. GROW stands for Goal, Reality, Options and Will:

Goal – this is the agreement on the expected outcomes from the coaching. Understanding what is to be achieved increases the likelihood of success and discussing the outcome in detail helps to identify how its achievement can be measured and what the critical success factors are likely to be. Focusing on the goal also helps with the ‘housekeeping’ elements of coaching which include the expected

timeframe, frequency and duration of sessions, location of coaching and how the information and insights generated in the coaching sessions will be translated back into the workplace.

I find it especially important to encourage my coachees not only to book the time for the coaching sessions but also to put time into their schedules for preparation including review of the previous session and documentation of agreements and next steps following each session. I find that if this does not become a routine part of the coaching then the sessions lose their power. They might be productive and enjoyable conversations but action is not taken as a result of them, so very little progress is made.

Reality – this is the definition of what is happening now. To ensure that decisions are not taken based on false assumptions it is important to help the coachee find the evidence for their concerns or to analyse the situation to discover its causes. As a coach it is important to ask for definitive answers to questions such as:

- What is happening?
- How often is the event happening?
- Who is primarily involved and are there any others that we should include?
- What is the impact when an event occurs?
- What is the impact when the event occurs and what evidence do you have that this is the true impact?

Gathering information about the reality of the situation is quite analytical. We associate effective coaches with high degrees of emotional intelligence as they need the ability to build rapport and to empathise with their coaches. However, the need for technical or commercial skills is often overlooked but are essential in helping the coachee diagnose their problems.

An essential part of my role in coaching someone is helping them to assess the true impact of the changes they are proposing, and I can only do that because I have extensive commercial experience that enables me to ask penetrating questions about the financial, legal, HR and customer service aspects of the change, as well as to consider the infrastructural impacts on IT, communications networks and operational processes.

Options – this is the stage in coaching when we have accurately diagnosed the issues and are now starting to think of the possible options for improving the situation or addressing the challenges. In complex change situations there is unlikely to be one option that will fix everything so it is important to research the benefits, costs and risks of as many options as possible. I know that coachees find this part of the coaching very beneficial in that they are able to confidentially express their concerns about certain courses of action that they would not document in a risk log because of the sensitive political nature of their comments. However, by articulating their concerns they can be worked through and comparisons made between the severity of the different risks. It is useful if the coachee can summarise their preferred options and then rate them for their practicality because this gives them a good idea of their chances for success.

Will – once options have been agreed, it is important to address the motivation and effort that will be required. By working through the likely obstacles that will hamper success it is possible to define



contingency actions and back up plans that give the coachee reassurance and increase their confidence in their own abilities.

I think it is very important that the coachee walks me through a very detailed action plan, identifying exactly what they plan to do and when they plan to do it. This gives them an opportunity to verbalise and visualise their intended actions, which often helps them to identify small points that they had not previously considered but which are essential to their success.

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