

TRANSFORMING PERFORMANCE WITH COACHING

When you were at school did you find, as I did, that one of the least useful criticisms a teacher could offer was 'could do better' written at the end of your work. It was hardly a helpful remark because it told you nothing other than the teacher didn't like your work very much and wasn't sufficiently inspired to offer suggestions on how you could actually do better.

As adults we are entitled to receive constructive comments about our work or overall performance, but no matter how constructive these comments might be, in the real world of business, I believe everyone could do better!

Coaching in business should be offered to empower you to do better and also to show you how you can do better. Learning how to do better is not an easy task. As children we are more open to having our personalities guided and our performances prodded and improved than we are as adults. By the time we reach adulthood our experiences of life combined with our genetic heritage leave most of us feeling that our personalities are fully formed and that we're not really open to making changes in our attitude or behaviour.

You hear the consequences of this all the time. "I am what I am" people say; "Take me or leave me", they often proclaim; "It's too late for me to change" is another comment made by people who feel it is too late to change.

The problem is people who make these types of proclamations do not, I believe, perform to the top of their potential. They might do well, perhaps even very well, but even if this is so you can be sure they could do better. If they are going to do better two basic factors need to feature within their attitude towards their performance.

1. A Willingness to Change

Fortunately this is a diminishing obstacle in today's business world. Coaching is maturing as a concept and people are getting used to the idea that coaching is not just a remedial intervention for people who aren't doing well, but a means of helping people who are already doing well to do even better.

2. A Willingness to find out what you need to do in order to change

Add these two factors together and you have a formula for being more successful in the future. The truth is, whatever level of performance we reach there is always going to be an increment of improvement available to us.

Just as professional sportsmen and women take for granted the need to probe every aspect of their performance to make it even better anybody in business - no matter how much they have achieved to date - should surely do the same. People need to accept the role coaching can play in maximising their own performance and helping them strive for a greater level of achievement.

In broad terms business coaching should be directed at all of the following objectives:

- **Amplifying an individual's own knowledge and thought processes**
- **Improving the individual's self-awareness and facilitating the winning of detailed insight into how the individual may be perceived by others**
- **Creating a supportive, helpful yet demanding environment in which the individual's crucial thinking skills, ideas and behaviours are challenged and developed**

This is the broad picture. What about the specifics of coaching? Business coaching today covers a wide range of areas of human expertise. Some coaching is directed at improving important niche skills such as writing a marketing plan, a financial report, or even a press release; on the other hand coaching can also involve psychological interventions that address very fundamental personal issues, preconceptions and attitudes the individual brings to the workplace; however, not every kind of psychological intervention is coaching e.g. psychotherapy and counselling. As powerful as these tools can be, they are directed more at helping individuals understand themselves better in a personal context and to cope with and enjoy life more.

Business coaching is focused on business and in particular on how individuals can be helped to perform better at the organisations they are employed by. In practice some of the issues addressed by business coaching are ultimately about helping people perform at a maximum level within a particular organisation.

Another vital difference between business coaching and psychotherapy/counselling is that business coaching tends to be focused around a very specific problem or challenge identified by the individual being coached or by the organisation that employs him or her. This means business coaching is usually limited in time and will usually focus on the problem at hand. Psychotherapy or counselling involve going into aspects of the 'private self' and can last for a long time, sometimes many years.

What sort of person should be a business coach? When a particular professional or technical skill is being taught an experienced practitioner in that area of expertise is likely to be the best coach, but when a more psychological type of intervention is required, such as when a behavioural issue is being scrutinised in the coaching process, a trained psychologist with experience of the real world of business is most likely to be suited to the demanding needs of the assignment. Business psychologists need to be good at spotting the positive aspects of an individual's psychological make-up.

At CMT we offer training on the Psychology of a Debtor. The presenter I use has worked as a Bank Manager, Psychologist, Debt Counsellor, Hypnotherapist and Stress

Consultant and has represented Debtors with Mortgage Lenders about to repossess their homes, reaching amicable solutions.

If a coach/presenter without this first hand knowledge is used, there is a serious danger the intervention may be unskilled or superficial and may even cause more problems than it solves; however, business psychologists bring to their work an in-depth understanding of human behaviour, thought processes and other manifestations of personal psychology in the business world.

Business psychologists need to be good at spotting the positive aspects of an individual's psychological make-up responsible for successful performance, but in many ways the most important contribution business psychologists can make to the coaching process is to be able to identify problems that are inhibiting the individual's performance or preventing the individual from really fulfilling their potential.

This last point is particularly important. As human beings we are, at one level, simply highly sophisticated types of biochemical machines and like any other machine it is all too easy for our capabilities to be massively undermined by a spanner in the works. The spanner might be something easily identifiable through just one or two coaching sessions or it might be something buried deep down in the individual's make-up; something that needs unearthing by a business coach carrying out a fairly detailed and in-depth investigation into their psychological background!

Let's look at the example of a high-performer who refuses to delegate authority even to highly able and dedicated colleagues. There may be a simple, but not immediately obvious personal reason for being like this. These personal reasons often turn out to originate in the individual's childhood. It's not necessarily the case the individual doesn't perform well, but rather that the individual will never be all they can be until the problem is identified and recognised. This may be solved in just one session or it may take many months, but when a cause of negative behaviour is identified and its potency diminished, the sky can be the limit as far as performance is concerned.

Because coaching is essentially a psychological intervention it's easy to assume the benefits it yields will themselves be psychological and relatively intangible, but this is not the case. There is evidence that coaching can be a highly effective process at a commercial level.

Here are some of the benefits to organisations providing coaching:

- **Improvement in company revenues and profits**
- **Enhancement in operational efficiency**
- **Development in employee morale and motivation**
- **Increased employee productivity particularly through developing soft skills**
- **The provision of clear thinking space to gain clarity and fresh perspectives**
- **Improving organisational culture with change**
- **Better career progression and succession planning**
- **The creation of cultures and environments which promote loyalty and reduce staff turnover**

There's no doubt coaching is already recognised as a major resource for businesses in the UK. According to recent research carried out by the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD) around 87% of UK companies make use of some form of coaching to develop their staff.

Business coaching can take place on a one-to-one or team basis, but the crucial point is that either individual executives or the team of executives should be given access to one or more professional specialist coaches who are solely motivated by the desire to help the coached person succeed. The coach will be, or should be, immune from company dynamics and politics while also being aware of them. The coach will take time to monitor, assist and guide the coached person without having any other personal or political agenda than the success of the individual.

There is currently a boom in business coaching and the reason isn't hard to find. It can help an individual being coached make great strides in their personal performance and the quality of this personal performance can also bring huge benefits to the organisation employing the individual. There is a particular boom in one-to-one coaching because this form of coaching is especially effective; indeed, business executives are so much aware of this, they are increasingly providing coaches on an ongoing or periodic basis.

Finally what about the confidentiality issue? This is always a sensitive matter in business coaching because one principal purpose of the coaching activity is to unearth and identify issues that may be inhibiting the individual from performing to his or her full capability. To what extent should the organisation who employed the coach (and most coaches are employed by the organisation rather than the individual) be made aware of these issues?

The simple answer is that it is unethical for a coach to break confidence about sensitive matters. Coaches will therefore regard the coaching sessions with individuals as sacrosanct and private; however, they will certainly urge individuals to bring particularly difficult problems to the attention of the organisation and may in certain circumstances ask the individual's permission to do this themselves. Furthermore, any really serious problems identified do need to be brought to the attention of the organisation, but this must be done with the full consent of the person being coached. Unless confidentiality is in place, there is little chance of the individual approaching the coaching procedure with the level of frankness necessary for the process to be effective.

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