

Coaching in Changing Environments

“If you ever run into an industry that says it needs better people, sell its shares. There are no better people. You have to use ordinary, every-day people ...and make them capable of doing the work.”

Peter Drucker

Peter Drucker cruelly points out another fact of leadership life - all too often we cannot choose the people we work with, yet we still have to work with them and get results from them. Worse still, we may find ourselves responsible for the results they deliver.

And when things are changing around us, the challenge is even greater. People may feel demotivated and lose interest, commitment can wane, morale can drop, productivity plummet. And we're not just talking about your staff; you and your colleagues may feel the same.

When caught in the uncertainty, confusion and sense of powerlessness that often accompany imposed change, it can be hard for people to see what is certain, make sense of what is happening, recognise their skills or notice where they do have the power to influence things.

Such reactions are understandable; but for those in leadership positions they do not help us deal with the situation at hand, maintain output or make progress towards new working arrangements.

What does coaching have to offer?

Let's be clear here, coaching is not the great panacea for problems such as these. It won't make all your troubles disappear but, used wisely and skilfully, it can help you make progress. It can help you explore people's reactions, identify where progress can be made, and get them moving in a more helpful direction. Skilful coaching can provide people with both the direction and support they need to interpret, make sense of and act within changing environments.

Coaching works best when used as an integrated part of day to day team leadership and change management processes rather than as a stand-alone activity. It adds a level of personal support into the mix of regular communication, training, target setting, feedback, performance appraisals, team briefings, and one to ones which form the basis of good leadership.

For those in leadership roles, charged with delivering results, the ability to create environments that support the growth, learning and development needed to adapt to change is critical. In an ever-changing world, the quality of your coaching skills may mean the difference between the success and failure of the projects or teams you lead. Do you need to develop your skill as a coach?

A deceptively simple idea

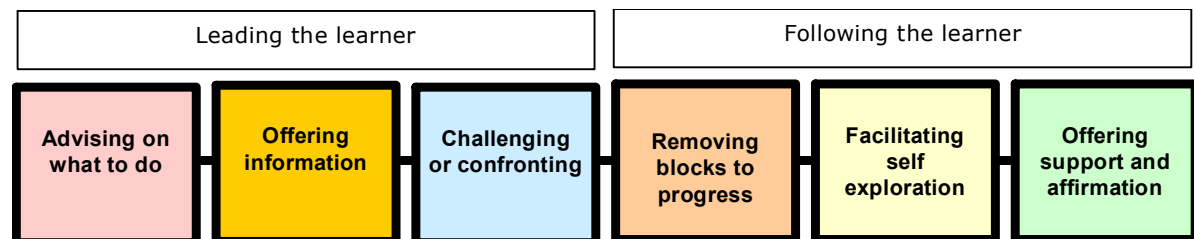
At its core, coaching sounds deceptively simple – one person helping another to learn, develop and improve their performance. Despite this apparent simplicity it can be remarkably difficult to do well and surprisingly powerful in the results it delivers. Some of the critical coaching skills sound simple too – setting goals, listening, questioning, advising, and managing conversations. Yet developing and using them skilfully and appropriately takes much practice and self-awareness.

Lots of options for improving performance

So, how does one person best help another to learn, develop and move forward? This is the question at the heart of the coaching process. There are as many different ways to coach someone as there are people. Coaching is highly tailored help not programmed, off-the-shelf guidance. Just as the tailor cuts the cloth to fit the person, so a skilled coach offers the help best suited to the needs of a learner and their situation.

At different times a coach might: tell someone what to do; give advice, offer information; suggest and discuss options; challenge a particular view of a situation; offer some challenging or confronting feedback; discuss way to overcome blocks to progress; facilitate exploration of a situation; help rehearse ways of dealing with something; or simply offer support and encouragement. Coaching can involve all of these actions or interventions and many more.

Some types of intervention involve leading and guiding the learner; in others we follow the learner's interest and agenda and are guided by them. The skilled coach is able to use a wide range of interventions to support learning and performance improvement, and has a well developed sense of what will be most useful when.



A range of coaching interventions

What works best - to lead or to follow?

One of the central dilemmas in coaching revolves around whether to lead or whether to follow the learner. What do you think gets best results?

Leading styles of coaching may involve the person coaching telling the learner what to do, based on the assumption that they know the answer and the learner doesn't. This is a perfectly valid approach provided the person coaching has a good answer and the learner is willing to listen to it and then give it a go. In a changing workplace, directive styles of coaching can help give people a sense of focus and direction, and assist them in mastering the new tasks, procedures and skills needed for their new job, role or working arrangements.

Following or non-directive styles of coaching involve the person coaching helping the learner find their own answers to their problems, questions and issues. The coach acts as a sounding board, drawing out thoughts, ideas and solutions from the learner on the assumption that they are capable of working it out for themselves. This style works best when the situation demands that the learner takes responsibility for working out the answer for himself or herself.

In the turbulence of imposed change, non-directive coaching is an invaluable way of supporting people as they struggle to make sense of changes around them and decide for themselves how best they should respond. It helps people create their own sense of direction and clarify what they need to and can do to move forward, something which can help alleviate the feelings of powerlessness which often accompany imposed changes.

Leading styles of coaching encourage learners to look to the coach for answers. Long term this may create an unhelpful dependency. By contrast, following styles of coaching can help build self-confidence, initiative and learner autonomy. This is great if you want to develop trustworthy people you feel confident delegating to or who can navigate themselves through changes.

Of course both leading and following approaches have their place. Indeed, most coaching conversations involve using both these different styles at different times. Your effectiveness as a coach depends on your ability to deliver a broad range of leading (directive) and following (non-directive) interventions, in a timely and appropriate way.

Coaching to support adult learning

Whether you are directive or non-directive, there is no change or performance improvement without learning. Coaching others involves helping them to learn. The developing body of knowledge about adult learning suggests that more learning takes place:

- when learning is voluntary and self initiated, so people are naturally motivated to learn;
- when learners are self-directed, fully involved in setting learning goals and evaluating progress;
- when there is a balance between trying things out (action) and reflecting on them (reflection);
- in a spirit of collaboration and co-operation rather than competition;
- in a climate of mutual trust, where people feel safe to have their assumptions challenged;
- when critical reflection is encouraged - learners are challenged to reflect on the usefulness of current assumptions and perspectives and seek alternative frameworks to guide action.

What does this mean for coaching? Well, it stresses the importance of non-directive modes of coaching as important ways of supporting adults engaged in learning.

The challenge for managers and leaders

Research evidence continues to suggest that many organisational managers and leaders overuse directive styles when coaching. What's more they don't recognise it. Researchers have consistently found that even when managers said they were using non-directive styles, those they were coaching frequently experienced them as being directive. What do you think your team would say about you?

Coaching in a truly non-directive way can be a great challenge to those used to leading from positions of expertise and authority. Yet it is essential. Today's leaders say they need to tap the talent and potential of the people they lead more than ever before. They say they desperately need to get the best out of the people they have. This talent and potential needs releasing. It cannot be forced out. Today's leaders need a broad and flexible repertoire of coaching skills to skilfully nurture and release the potential available to them. Are your skills up to the job?

Coaching is for change

You've probably heard all the clichés about organisational change – the more things change, the more they stay the same, the only thing that's certain is change, transformation is the key to success, adapt or die. I guess there's a little truth in each of them.

Change is undoubtedly a feature of the modern organisational landscape. Organisational leaders at every level need the skills and confidence to navigate their own way through the changes they face and to guide and support their teams on that journey.

Coaching has much to offer here. When you ask people what coaching is, they usually say it's about supporting people, guiding, teaching, developing, improving performance or helping people move on. All these things share a common purpose; to help people change and cope with change. Coaching is for change and change is at the heart of coaching. Can you afford to be without it?