



Creating the in-house coaching culture

Philip Atkinson and Ann Atkinson

Internal team of high-potential coaches

Just imagine being able to call upon a select group of coaches at any time to resolve organisational problems – especially if calling on that resource would not incur any expensive consulting costs, but would be taken care of through the normal budget of HR. This is a very real possibility, but few organisations ever understand or are aware that they have the intellectual capability within their own ranks to achieve their potential. Simply stated, most organisations fail to recognise that they could have a team of elite coaches to be called upon to take the organisation to the next level.

We are referring to scenarios in which organisations effectively use their own resources as a powerful knowledge management tool to develop the rest of the business. We are well aware that the average organisation fails to capitalise on the knowledge, experience and skills of its people, placing too much emphasis on the high-flyer, to the detriment of the backbone of their business. The backbone (referred to in a previous module)¹ comprises

those who consistently perform well above average and represent a safe pair of hands. With minimal training, these high performers can offer a staple form of development for the rest of the business.

Performing at the next level

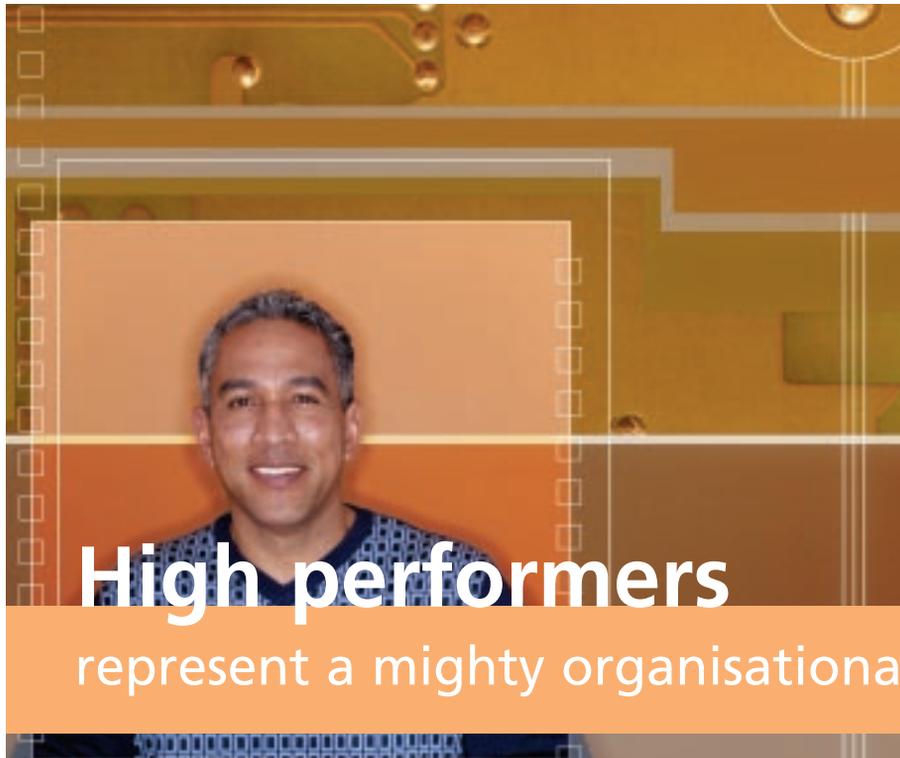
When the organisation commits to logging, recording and analysing its core capabilities, it often focuses on the processes that separate it from its competitors. Although the processes are important, they are not as critical as the people who drive, manage and work those processes. Every organisation can categorise or segment its staff in terms of their capabilities, but what many fail to do is to leverage the whole power of the workforce by using the top 10–15 per cent of their staff to best effect.

Operating at the next level of organisational performance requires different thinking from that which has enabled the organisation to reach its current state. Although technology and processes have their place, the human component is what separates winning companies from

those that achieve only average performance.

Still, many organisations need to realise the actual value of their staff as core intellectual assets that grossly exceed their cost. We should move away from simply recording the asset value in human capital accounting terms to implementing their talents in order to generate future experiential growth of their experience for the business.

We contend that the average employee has the capability to develop well beyond the capability perceived by their employer. Unlocking assets and capabilities that may lie dormant is achieved by carefully designing a process of L&D strategies to fit their desires and needs. This enables people to partner others who have a proven degree of competence in any specific area. In effect, this suggests creating in the longer term a formalised database of staff, illustrating their skills, expertise and experience. Only when full use is made of this can we design L&D processes that enable people to evolve as coaches.



We suggest that many businesses have lost the impetus, and maybe now it is time to maximise this capability.

Danger in the comfort zone

At a recent session, a senior manager asked ‘Isn’t there a danger of training too many of our people to become coaches, building a false belief that we can aspire to perform beyond our potential?’ The answer from the floor was general agreement that this would be a problem the whole business would like to solve! But without taking this view out of context, most organisations are risk averse with regard to trying new

approaches to utilising the talent of staff, because the organisation cannot manage or measure the process. What is important when loosening the reins is having a robust process in place to ensure that coaching is undertaken in a controlled manner and that improvements can be captured, implemented and rewarded.

Prerequisites for creating internal coaches

Organisations have the choice to use coaching as a change-management tool, and have a number of L&D strategies to pursue. They can aim to create an elite group of coaches based upon using the top performers from their staff (10–15 per cent) or they could gradually introduce the model of manager as coach. The latter model is focusing on coaching becoming a line responsibility for every manager, but it takes too long and may lead to problems because some line managers take longer than normal to rise up the learning curve. However, by focusing on the alternative of top performers (and

High performers represent a mighty organisational development tool

Sometimes, this approach is witnessed when line managers are encouraged to become part of a cascade process to act as trainers. Our suggestion goes much further than this very limited formal role, usually for one-

off projects. What we see as key is a legion of line managers having coaching skills leveraging their skills and experience to move the organisation forward radically. Some organisations capture this informally.

Economics of Coaching

- Identify the top 10 per cent of performers.
- Commit to develop these staff to transfer their best practice to others. Because those selected are quick learners, learning and development (L&D) activities should be short, sharp and focused.
- Release coaches for only a half day a week (approximately 10 per cent of their time), allocated to formal coaching to ensure that coaching becomes the culture.
- Ensure each coach has two learners or coachees.
- Focus on the role of coaches in encouraging integrating organisational performance through the development of staff.
- Record progress and encourage sharing of success through learning logs.
- Formalise progress only when all are comfortable.
- Share best practice and link to knowledge management.
- Focus on implementation of changes.
- Quantify time usage, rework costs, return on investment (ROI) of projects, best-practice transfer and innovations implemented.
- Coach recipients to become coaches.
- Spread the culture and reward with the knowledge that everyone is a learner first and a coach second.

those who want to improve their coaching expertise), the enterprise can at least be aware that the quality of the coaching staff is relatively high consistently. The following points are key issues in creating an in-house coaching culture:

- Choice of coaches.
- L&D strategies for coaching.
- Training content.
- Measuring progress.
- Aligning with other change activities.

Choice of coaches

If coaching is to become a dominant element of the culture, then choice of coaches is critical. Focusing on encouraging those who deliver sends clear signals to the rest of the business. One would expect that top performers have been fast tracked (as a result of their achievements so far), and this communicates the message that specific focused behaviours are encouraged and rewarded. It is also important to focus on those who have promise as new shoots – who may not have the experience but do have the willingness and confidence to be included in this team. Some critics may suggest that this approach is elitist, but we would counter this with the argument about defining, retaining and refusing to dilute standards of high performance. We believe it should facilitate the achievement of goals and point some clear messages about how the culture will evolve.

L&D strategies for coaching

‘Let us start from where the coach is currently, not where we would like them to be’ is a dictum that guides all our L&D work.

Assumptions about the capability of each coach to fulfil their role should be questioned. We use the four-quadrant model shown in Figure 1, focusing on competence and confidence. Working with the internal coach, they assess where they are currently in terms of the development of their role.

High confidence Low competence	High confidence High competence
Developers	Executive coaches
Low confidence Low competence	High competence Low confidence
Learners	Specialists

Fig. 1: Performance grid

If, for instance, the coach sees themselves as high in competence and low in confidence, we will

help them adopt their own L&D strategy, which focuses on a process-oriented approach to their development. If, however, coaches are on the high confidence and low competence quadrant, we might work on supporting them in seeking more directive interventions. And it is possible that some coaches fit on the low competence and low confidence quadrant, especially if they are active volunteers for the process or if they or their role are perceived as new to the organisation (new shoots). Here, we would lead with more structure. What is important is that each coach assesses their own development and then pursues their own L&D strategy. In effect, we use coaching to promote internal coaching. The big advantage to this is that, once they have experienced this, they can go on and do exactly the same with the next tier of coaches creating a cycle of self-renewal.

Charting commitment to change



We use the Acceptance curve² to help us isolate those who may be best placed to act as coaches. The curve illustrates and reflects the relative enthusiasm and energy expressed by staff to commit to engagement in change. This engagement is very active and reflected by individuals who could be categorised as

Champions, Early adaptors, Late adaptors, Spectators and Resistors. Clearly the organisation would have to decide on criteria to evaluate where people would fit on the curve, but this approach does help clarify the commitment of staff to change and the role they can play in this process.

Training content

Using the performance grid, it is fairly easy to design modules of input of other L&D tactics to help take each participant to hit the top quadrant of high confidence and high competence. The most important skill, we believe, is that of having choice by being flexible in adapting one's style to different situations and circumstances. Contingency models help in promoting a consultative style of coaching. Central to this is focusing on learning as the first stage in coaching. How can one coach if one does not understand the learning process of oneself and others? Focusing upon learning and implementing that learning through behaviour change is a major element of any L&D activity.

Measuring progress

Any process for managing performance must have a method of assessment and measurement. Reviews and feedback from initial stages help in the selection of coaches for further work. It is critical to develop measures for each activity and each stage of the process. Systemic learning occurs when those who initially design the process for the whole organisation take a step back and incorporate the learning of self and others into the next iteration of the process. It is also important to help each coach adopt their own means of assessment, by which they can appraise themselves. Imposing a specific set of criteria goes against the whole philosophy of people taking charge and driving their own learning. For this reason, it's a good idea to provide typical criteria, but let each coach tailor their own and document these into a learning log. Over time, this log will manifest itself as their own personal development plan, which

should be a direct input into HR development strategy. This process closes any loops and moves away from any accusation that coaching is failing to deliver results that impact the bottom line.

Aligning with other change activities

Coaching is focused on improving performance. The process will draw some very clear associations and identify specific cause-effect relationships in terms of bringing about change. Because coaching is measured and managed, there are some very clear links between investment in coaching and improved performance. A focus on aligning coaching with other change initiatives is central in gaining credibility, and in the coaching culture becoming business as usual.

Summary

Coaching can be a very powerful process of changing an organisation's culture from the inside out, if it satisfies certain criteria. It has to be a structured intervention with a firm focus in mind. Coaching should demonstrate some very tangible results for the business. These results come about

by using your most able people to support others in their journey to improved performance through their own personal development. If structured well, it is a very strong process to change behaviour and focus on performance issues. Developing this culture as the norm can very quickly create a significant shift in the management and leadership of the business. Clearly, the development of people is critical to performing more effectively and that is the direction to which this process is fundamentally geared.

Because there is focus on isolating the higher performers and equipping them with the skills to coach, to work with their assigned learners or coachees, significant progress can be achieved without committing major resources to the process. Consider the resources required for a company-wide initiative against the more effective use of coaching as the preferred tool to bring about change and improvement. There is little doubt that the organisation that has developed internal coaches has the capability to bring about change to become fast, nimble, flexible and to have the edge over their competitors.

References

- 1 Philip Atkinson, 'Rapport building: matching the client style', *Coach the Coach*, Issue 13, 2005.
- 2 Philip Atkinson, *How to become a Change Master*, Spiro Press, 2005.

The authors are directors of Learning Strategies Ltd, specialising in strategic, behavioural and cultural change. **Philip Atkinson** is a consultant in the UK, Europe and United States, has written seven business books and published many articles, speaks at conferences and runs workshop sessions.

Ann Atkinson works as a coach and trainer in soft skills and is a lecturer in psychology and HR at Stevenson College in Edinburgh.

- Telephone: +44 (0) 0131 346 1276
- E-mail: AtkinsonConsult@aol.com
- Website: www.learningstrategies.ltd.uk