

Coaching leadership performance

Philip Atkinson



Coaching to create a high-performing leadership culture often involves dealing with difficult issues with a senior team. Philip Atkinson suggests that we need to use the full repertoire of 'hard' and 'soft' coaching skills and strategies to ensure a balanced implementation.

The important factor in shaping any business culture is the behaviour demonstrated by those who lead and control the business. What matters is to what leaders pay most attention. For instance, leaders of a business who invest in team building, work across boundaries, focus on implementing improvement, and make a deliberate attempt to improve customer responsiveness set that example for their people. However, if they fail to develop their people, and instead spend too much time on the little things – to the detriment of employee-customer relations and corporate performance – that's what will be demonstrated to everybody. What they do signals what is important, and what is not. Leadership, or rather lack of it, clearly separates effective organisations from their competitors. While theorists argue about whether leadership is a competitive advantage or not,

the real change makers have committed to effective programmes, coaching their management teams through the process.

It is fairly obvious that management or leadership style is critical in shaping change, yet few organisations use it as a change-management process. The benefits of coaching all staff to display variants of a desirable leadership style are strong messages to the whole organisation and its customers and key stakeholders.

People are boss watchers

Everyone does it – most of us spend some time observing the behaviour of those at senior levels. Their behaviour indicates whether they are living the values they espouse as corporate leaders. Leadership isn't just important at

the top of the business; it is important right the way through and all the way across the organisation.

But the leadership process clearly has to start at the top.

Key learning points

- ◆ A business's culture is shaped by the behaviour of its leaders.
- ◆ Leadership is important throughout and across the business.
- ◆ Change will only be embraced in a culture where leaders encourage and motivate for change.
- ◆ Coaching programmes will have their detractors, and issues must be dealt with head on.
- ◆ Strength of character is required when dealing with objections from people who are used to getting their own way.
- ◆ A leadership culture must take root from the top.

Review

The major reason for people seeking advancement with new employers is better prospects. Research shows that sometimes a close second reason for seeking alternative employment is that they have difficult unresolved issues around how they are currently managed. Bearing in mind that the retention of high-flyers is a major issue for most organisations, it makes sense to learn how to manage people. It should become a strong science and an art form too. The reality is that most organisations are facing a leadership challenge. Organisations are constantly assessing whether they have the right type of management or leadership – in order not to cope today, but to deal with tomorrow better.

Organisations with the right focus and passion for developing their people will realise their vision for their business. Personal style and leadership style are important. If a team leader cannot instil in others the energy and enthusiasm to drive improvements, then it may be time for them to let someone else take charge. If leaders are not part of the solution, they are probably part of the problem. Coaching a strong leadership style that is fundamentally transformational makes so much sense that it is surprising that many companies still fail to commit to investing in their most senior people – those who lead others. Change cannot be imposed overnight, and to reach new heights you have to work with the people you have in position. Coaching leadership is a process that pays dividends as long as it is recognised that it is a process that has complementary 'hard' and 'soft' solutions and skills. Once a strong leadership culture is installed, the organisation has a key strength that will sustain the culture far into the future – for without leadership there is no change.

Who is a leader?

Anyone who manages anybody is a leader. Anybody who has responsibility for the performance of others is a leader. If you have staff reporting to you, your results are determined by how well you lead them. A manager may leave today and a new recruit may take over tomorrow. The style of leadership will significantly shift in accordance with how they lever people to deliver results. Readers may have experience of the result when a poor leader took over from a strong leader or when the situation was reversed. Leadership has a major impact on team performance.

Consider the solitary individual with a more technical specialism – is there a role of leadership for this person? Of course; they are part of a supply chain and they need to demonstrate strong team behaviour to ensure that the supply chain is firm and delivers to expectations. This person will influence how others operate.

What benefits flow from leadership coaching?

- Behaviours will be clarified, which will immediately lead to improved team performance.
- Leadership will exist by design rather than by default, and will quickly highlight desired ways of working and team building, moving away from strictly task-led behaviours to more creative and strategic ones.
- Development activities can be designed specifically to support managers as they manage the transition to the strong transformational model of behaviour.
- Clear signals will be given to new recruits and to those new to a managerial role.
- Morale within teams will improve because team members will be expecting, and will experience, freedom to succeed – simply because trust will replace control.
- Performance management will be taken seriously and cultural measures may soon become tangible.
- Most importantly, those who are early adopters will be able to support those who need a little more time to practise the skills.
- The focus of the organisation will be on achieving the best from their teams.
- It is fairly obvious that the real benefits accrue to businesses who seek to attract the top talent in their field.

References

- 1 Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, Warner Books, 2000.
- 2 Rowan Bayne, *The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator: a Critical Review and Practical Guide*, Nelson Thornes, 2002.

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is critical in shaping change

Prerequisites for coaching leadership

Before we focus on what we should be doing more or less of as leaders, it is vital that the vision and values for the business are clearly articulated and a leadership model is developed. Working with several financial services businesses using models appropriate, and tailored, to the organisation, we were able to focus on the values that were process driven or enabled certain outcomes to be achieved. Drawing a distinction between values that are ends and means orientated enables us to establish core behaviours which will be central to coaching leadership at all levels.

Coaching and motivating through values

When leadership programmes work, they are viewed as processes which focus on the behaviours that enable or cause certain behaviours to evolve. Behaviour change takes place when others recognise that the new behaviours will do the following:

- Become part of everyone's unique style of management.

- Be encouraged and rewarded, by whatever means.
- Clearly lead to the conditions that will facilitate improvement in how people work together to achieve goals.
- Be applied by everybody who manages people and processes.
- Are open for discussion and debate.

Practical coaching Issues

When such a programme evolves, it will have its supporters and detractors. Every coach has to be prepared to deal with difficult issues. In too many instances, people wrongly regard coaching as a 'soft tree-hugging activity' and fail to address the key issues of implementing change where it is least welcome. Those programmes that do not become embedded fail because the 'tough' issues are never addressed. Managers are not buying into the process, either because they don't see the benefits of the change or the change does not suit the way they manage. Whatever the cause, the issues have to be dealt with head on; otherwise the programme may fail.

The tipping point for change

Every change programme has issues which, if addressed, will propel the organisation forward. Often the powerful emotions displayed by even small numbers of senior people mean that issues are left unresolved. Failing to address issues means strong reminders of the old culture remain, and if unresolved they can put the whole project at risk. These issues become the 'tipping point'¹ which determines whether the process is to become successful or not. At the

tipping point, the dissenters need to be coached to examine the benefits of changing and to weigh those up in terms of the status quo.

Giving bad news

The positive side of coaching takes up the majority of the literature, but examples in the real world suggest that some unpleasant issues have to be resolved quickly. There are many instances when a few senior staff members, or those who have powerful personalities or who are shapers of opinion whose views run counter to the change, can derail the programme. This needs to be addressed. It is our experience that a little effort employed with the right people can significantly affect the success of the programme.

This may not be an issue of dealing with giving bad news, but rather of knowing how to deal with assertive people who are used to getting their own way. We find a great deal of training for coaching fails to address dealing with the assertive personality. We must recognise that serious change in a business will have supporters and resisters. The resisters do not always highlight their

disapproval, but may be working against the change instead of for it. It is at this stage that the experience of the coach will determine whether the programme will evolve and improve things, or the process will hit a major road-block.

Coaching non-believers – take a look in the mirror

The only way to deal with potential road-blocks is to invest more time and energy into dealing with the issues that exist. In such a process we find that it is a distinct advantage to deal with senior managers on a one-to-one basis. For instance, when working with a major drinks company, we found it vital to talk with the senior team, discussing the desirability of using a variant of a peer review of their current leadership behaviour. To start the process, we focused first on working with peers and colleagues, requesting input from those who worked closely together. There was no requirement to impose a strict methodology; the aim was to encourage managers to ask very simple questions of their colleagues: 'How would you describe my management style?', 'What strengths do I portray to others?' This positive approach paved the way for a more open discussion in which limitations and weaknesses could be discussed. It helps to work through various methodologies – such as the Johari

Window – and use a sympathetic and positive approach to examining current management style. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)² is a great tool for examining individual and team strengths. Senior people like the speed of assessment, its apparent simplicity, its non-judgemental nature, and its flexibility in identifying type and behaviours. We find this approach using type rather than traits can be a powerful way of getting managers to move into the stage of self-disclosure, where they can explore the impact of their style.

To give a leadership culture the opportunity to evolve, it has to take root from the top. Our purpose is to work with senior people. Remember, these people will demonstrate behaviour that has enabled them to reach their position. They will say what they mean. Expect them to be outspoken, independent, assertive and decisive, and assume that they may have views and opinions on many subjects. They may want to debate, or at least discuss, the rationale for any new way of working and the tangible benefits that will accrue to their business. To coach such people requires experience and strength of character – but mostly it involves planning and preparation in establishing sufficient rapport so that they want to lead the process.

'The leader is not employed to be a super independent and sole performer but, rather, to be committed to achieve results through others – so that, ultimately, leadership is about creating an empowered culture which is self-sustaining.'

Benefits of mirror gazing

There is an acid test for a leader that they need to set themselves. They should take a good look in the mirror and explore and consider what it is like to be at the receiving end of their own behaviour. We believe the overall purpose of that is to encourage businesses to streamline their organisation swiftly, by examining the dominant behaviours presented 'top to bottom' and reappraising their appropriateness for achieving results. The aim is to establish the behaviours that lead to significant and enhanced performance and to differentiate them from those that do not. Dominant behaviours from the top tiers of the business determine the style of management that will flow throughout the organisation.

Leadership behaviour is what is received – not what is sent

Most behaviour is unconscious. Although people are conscious of what they are doing, they may not be conscious of their motives and the impact they have on others. They may not be conscious of how their behaviour is received, unless they have a high degree of sensitivity or spend time seeking feedback on their style.

Today, new recruits of the right calibre are a scarce resource, and they will commit genuinely to a business only if they feel that there is a psychological contract within which they will have the guidance and training to excel – not just in their specialism, but in the wider world of business leadership. Those companies that fail to develop sound HR strategies to attract and build and retain strong leaders will not have the best choice of the market. Their results will reflect the quality of the talent they recruit.