

Coaching for transformational change

Philip E. Atkinson



Without leadership there is no change. To transform behaviour, we cannot wait for a change initiative to percolate down from senior layers. Philip Atkinson outlines the key issues that coaches need to address to help their clients achieve performance improvements and transform their organisations.

Facilitating performance improvements

Coaching is now probably the most effective tool for transforming organisations, radically improving the performance of leaders. Change can be brought about by working with key individuals rather than by cascading a whole process down.

The styles employed in coaching interventions may vary a great deal. It is critical that a contingency view is applied to deciding on the right strategy for the client – with the client. What works in one organisation may not be appropriate in another. The culture, politics and history of the business, the dominant management style and other factors suggest a tailored approach is needed. When devising a coaching intervention, avoid ‘off-the-shelf’ packages; there is no one right way to coach, and not all ‘nuts’ and ‘bolts’ fit together well. The experienced coach will know which tools to use when and, vitally, when the client is ready to stretch that little bit more.

Focus, energy and alignment

The key issues to be managed at the outset are focus, energy and alignment. The client needs to understand that all three are essential to moving beyond the current performance level:

- Without focus, the client is lost. They need to agree their goals and their methods of appraising actions. Without personal goals they lack direction.
- If the client lacks energy, or the motivation to change, the coach has a difficult role. Focus without energy and energy without focus are both useless.
- The third factor is alignment. Coach and client must work closely to ensure that the client’s work for self-improvement is congruent and in alignment with other things going on.

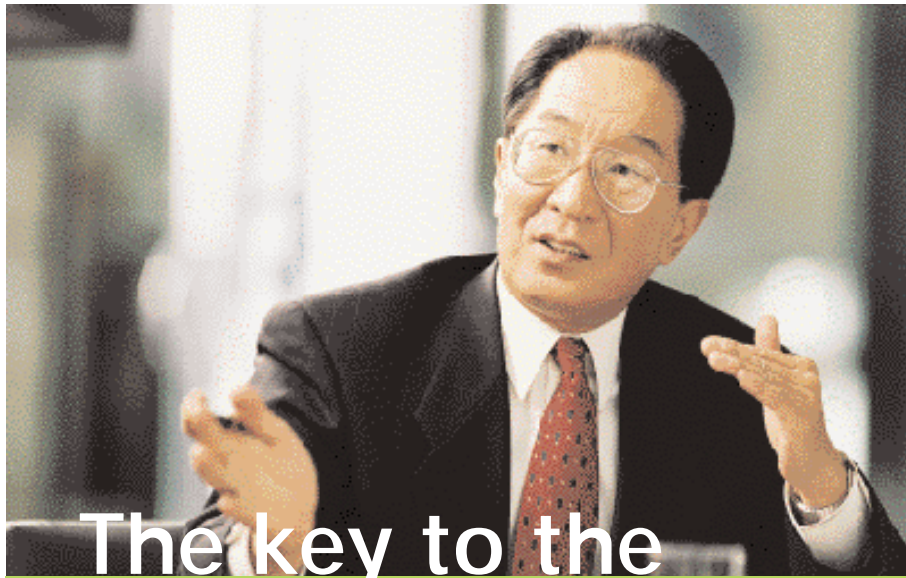
What’s the right coaching formula?

Banish the books and the neat diagrams that illustrate a sequence of steps comprising ‘right coaching

process’. The coach should be an experienced change-maker with the diagnostic skills to adapt the coaching process as it evolves, with the needs of the client uppermost.

The range of strategies, tactics and tools in the coaching process is vast. Coaching is a very sensitive process that requires the coach to act as orchestrator, teacher, facilitator and designer of the learning process.

A contingent approach is central. The circumstances and challenges facing the organisation, and the relative competence of those who are to undertake the coaching process, dictate the approach, methodology, tools and techniques to be employed. What works for one individual may be inappropriate for another because of the mix of confidence and competence of each – the nuts and bolts must vary. Perhaps the most important skill for the coach is the ability to flex, reflect and adapt to the needs of the person and their stage in the process.



The key to the

whole process is mutual trust

Managing unease and defensiveness

There may be times when straight talking is required, and times when feedback is requested or appropriate. When a coach has to feed back or comment on factors that are less than comfortable to discuss, they must have the honesty to manage the client's defensiveness. Few coaching interventions are simple dialogues. Most require serious consideration and debate, and the coach who cannot handle difficult or bad news needs a reality check on their effectiveness.

Important coaching qualities

It would be nice to outline the coaching process as a diagram, moving from one stage to another through a sequence of steps. That format looks very organised and logical when displayed, but it does not reflect the process. The role of the coach is to facilitate the learning of the client. Clients have different needs, drives and skills, and only an experienced coach can bring out the best in others. The following qualities are important:

- mutual trust;
- managing unease and defensiveness;
- psychological contract and ownership of change;
- focusing upon specific issues for change;
- developing an action plan;
- setting a process and measures to assess progress;

- reviewing progress.

The first three themes are environmental factors that must exist for the coaching partnership to work. No matter how good you are at the rest, if you don't get these right little progress or learning will be made.

Mutual trust

The key to the whole process is mutual trust. Without trust, honesty and integrity, the relationship will flounder. In Kouzes and Posner's research identifying the most important character traits in the leadership role, the defining characteristic was honesty. Coaching requires the integrity to manage a complex relationship that involves the sharing of confidences; honesty is a guiding factor that unites coach and client. Without it, the client will not risk going outside their comfort zone.

Psychological contract and ownership for change

Client and coach need a clear understanding of how they will work together and with whom their discussions are to be shared (if at all). When helping the client move forward in their learning, there will be times when both coach and client are unsure of the outcome. Preparing for most contingencies is central to the psychological contract. There will be times when personal improvement is positive, but most learning entails some fallbacks. Not everyone learns and achieves at the first shot. Enabling the client to take responsibility for shaping their own future and ownership to manage more of their learning is central.

Focusing upon specific issues for change

Once the environmental factors are grounded, it is fairly simple to undertake the coaching process.

Identifying concerns and issues to be addressed is important. The coach may provide support to help the client understand their impact on others. For this to happen the coach may help the client to seek feedback. That may involve helping them to understand and also manage effectively the process of 360° feedback. Real learning takes place when the client has developed the skills to solicit feedback from others and initiate discussion to involve others in the next stage – formulating an action plan for them.

Developing an action plan

Creating an action plan together with staff, peers and colleagues may be a major indicator of the coach's effectiveness. They will have enabled their client to take charge. Any dependency on the coach lessens and the client-coach relationship becomes a true partnership. At this stage, the difficult issues should have been resolved.

Setting a process and measures to assess progress

It is a good sign to see the partnership evolve to this stage and to become aware that feeling good about developing plans for change is only a small part in the process. Converting these plans to a time-frame and agreeing deliverables is difficult for inexperienced coaches. The problem is the conversion of behavioural objectives into measurable actions.

Reviewing progress

This is the ROI (return on investment) aspect of the coaching

process. We should be aware of how well changes in behaviour have measured up to the outcomes desired. There may come a time when these changes are assessed to illustrate the impact the coaching intervention has had on business performance. If the coach cannot illustrate a direct and causal relationship between intervention and improvement, they have lost control of the process. This is a major reason why coaching is not taken seriously by businesses that have to justify their expenditure on the activity. Not every organisation has the capability and the resources to expend on a process that is less than precise in its outcomes. Coaches who work on 'hard' as well as 'soft' issues will be more valued in most business communities. When we were able to prove that a 4:1 ROI at least was the outcome to expect following pilot work with a North American manufacturing facility, the VP of strategic manufacturing became committed to a long-term programme for all US plants that wanted to be involved in the process. The European arm of that business was already committed to a culture change drive based on firm deliverables presented to the European board by the first 20 participants who went through the coaching programme.

Similarly, a Scottish-owned bank experienced the same outcome, but a higher return. Because of a culture-change process based upon coaching senior teams on cross-functional projects, the returns in organisational and financial terms far exceeded the cost of internally and externally funding and resourcing the programme.

Coaching for all

If an organisation has the resources to coach all their staff, undertaking that is a very fast way to tailor learning and development, and direct the thrust of business leaders. But when an organisation commits itself to becoming a learning organisation, it should also commit itself to developing its own coaches. Working through learning and development strategies, most organisations can acquire the internal capability to drive change and make learning and coaching the sustainable culture.

Directive versus non-directive strategies

Coaching may vary from directive to non-directive. Directive coaching is a process that many purists back away from, suggesting it is merely providing consulting advice. I disagree. Many consultants lack the interpersonal competence of the coach – directive or not – to support the client in considering specific outcomes and actions. There is a role for the directive approach when groups of staff need specific advice, often when the organisation is going through traumatic times and their future is at risk.

I apply the non-directive approach because I believe it has more impact. The content-free focus is the ultimate extreme of non-directive coaching in which the coach has no awareness of the particular issues. It is an area for rapid expansion in the future when business executives, owing to special circumstances such as the following ones, cannot reveal the content of the issues they have to work upon:

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- Acquisition of another business when disclosure could affect share prices of both companies. Disclosure of information at this crucial time may also force a hostile bid and reduce business confidence in the new entity.
- When a profits warning is imminent and the business is under threat.
- When potential customers are threatening to place business elsewhere.
- When a public disclosure may put the future of the business and its people at risk.
- When organisational change is the only option, requiring restructuring or reorganisation of resources.

The reality of these situations is witnessed every day. Change is accelerating at a rate with which many organisations cannot cope. In these circumstances, the demands on the leaders may be so intense that only a confidante outside the career progression, politics and dynamics of the organisation can provide the objective support necessary.

Summary

Coaching is about helping others learn how to enable exceptional performance in difficult times. I have tried to demonstrate that it is a critical skill that will deliver organisational results. However, effective coaching – taking people beyond their current abilities – requires somebody of exceptional experience and skills, and carries enormous responsibility. This becomes even more important when coaches work with senior

people whose actions and decisions may impact on the lives of many others. Finally, as coaches we must ensure that before we enable others to learn, we ourselves are confident

of moving outside our own comfort zone to ensure that the service we provide to our clients is truly exceptional. That is the best ROI that any coach can deliver.

Who gets coached?

Many organisations are now so flat that relatively junior and young staff have huge responsibilities for specific operations on their shoulders. For these people, coaching is a must – to support them and help them cope with the pressures and expectations of senior staff, whilst dealing with operational difficulties and fire-fighting.

Non-directive coaching: asking the right questions

Being an MD is lonely. Frequently a coach can help. I was once privileged to work with the CEO of a financial services business who had the task of agreeing a business merger. Because of confidentiality agreements with the potential business partner, the CEO could not share the issues and concerns with his team. At the initial stage, he was forbidden to do so because any information filtering to the market place could put the merger at risk. He had decisions to make, ideas to discuss and strategies to formulate, but no forum to test for coherence and understanding. Over time, he shared his thoughts and aspirations with me – not specific business issues but, rather, possible strategies for bringing about integration. Trust was established and a special relationship developed. Two years later, this CEO moved to be the MD of another business, which he successfully developed through organic growth and a series of acquisitions. During the time I worked with this very capable man, he benefited from having someone to ‘bounce ideas off’ who was not directly involved in the day-to-day work of his business. My detachment helped him work through the processes without having to disclose the specific issues.

Reference

JM Kouzes and BZ Posner, *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose it, Why People Demand It*, Jossey Bass, 1993.

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