

Lighting the way

Coaching is becoming an increasingly acceptable approach to personnel development, especially – but not exclusively – at the high end. Buyers of coaching are more aware of what coaching at its best can offer, and consequently we are seeing a drive for quality and a demand for some form of standards and accreditation.

Coaching in the past has suffered from a somewhat indistinct identity. Rob McWilliam, product development manager at Thales Training Consultancy, describes it as “working with the individual to help them change areas of work or life that they want to change”.

He adds: “Coaching is fast growing, and customers are buying coaching both to bolt on to a broader programme of training or to offer individual coaching for individual needs. While it is very much part of the fabric at senior manager/director level, coaching is also generally accepted for middle managers. In some instances it can be used at junior manager level, especially in preparing managers for promotion.”

Sue Belgrave, a consultant at Roffey Park, says: “Everyone can benefit from coaching conversations. At the very beginning of their careers, when people are not set in their ways and are keen to learn, coaching can be beneficial with its active focus on moving from where you are to where you want to be. Coaching support is also particularly valuable in periods of transition.” For the most senior staff, for whom there is often less support from informal learning sets of similarly ranked managers, individual coaching can also be invaluable.

McWilliam explains that in medium and larger companies coaching is now “the main intervention” in development programmes for middle

to senior managers, with workshops and other forms of training bolted around it. “This is an interesting reversal from a few years ago,” he says.

Coaching seems to be accepted across business sectors, although Robert Myatt, director of business psychologists Kaisen, suggests that the only blue-chip sectors as yet to see value in coaching are those such as investment banking. There are, however, many organisations who don’t see the return on using external coaches and believe they can do as well in-house.

Myatt detects a trend towards specialisation. “Buyers are identifying what capability needs coaching and seeking specialist coaches in that area; they are moving away from the executive coach who claims to coach in anything. The market is becoming more sophisticated – there is more scrutiny in terms of return on investment. This makes HR people reassess what specific needs are being addressed.”

Adrian Starkey, head of coaching and executive development at global HR consultancy DDI, adds: “Quite a lot of HR people have woken up to senior discretionary budgets disappearing: no one knows the value and individuals’ agendas are not necessarily aligned to the organisation’s agenda.”

Starkey also sees a renewed recognition of the importance of the manager as coach: “This is a double-edged sword for us: we have to develop a coaching culture rather than simply delivering coaching directly.”

Further info

- *Coaching at Work* is the must-read publication for everyone involved in coaching. Preview the next magazine and sample the unique online resource at www.cipd.co.uk/coachingatwork
Call ☎ 0870 428 7966 to subscribe now.
- You can be the first to hear the latest CIPD research on coaching at the CIPD Annual Coaching at Work Conference in London on 12-13 September.
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At consultancy Right Management, head of coaching Charles Jones says that most large firms have probably experienced coaching and are now looking at using it more effectively. Meanwhile, SMEs are entering the coaching market.

Jones concludes that remedial coaching is being rejected in favour of a greater focus on high achievers, noting that there has also been a shift in the length of programmes. “Four or five years ago, one-year contracts were typical; now we are having increasing success with shorter programmes – say, four sessions over six months.”

Reducing the duration of programmes also has the advantage of addressing fears about coaching creating dependency. To prevent this, Starkey says, DDI works “within a defined time frame, starting with a diagnostic phase, setting objectives for, say, six, nine and 12 months, then sitting down with line managers to determine to what extent the objectives have been fulfilled. There’s always an end-point that drives the activity”.

The emphasis on specific deliverables rather than generalised “executive” coaching puts more focus on quality assurance. Coaching, by definition, is highly individual, and a successful match depends on both individuals. One size does not fit all, and even one coaching contractor may not have all the individuals to fit every need, although Jones notes a trend among large multinationals to move to single-sourcing to address perceived variability in standards, price and process.

At the same time, buyers are looking for assurances that coaches are not only skilled and experienced, but in the widest sense ethical – hence a greater focus on professional bodies, from the Association for Coaching to the British Psychological Society, which has fairly recently set up a special interest group in the area.

People Management analyses what the market leaders have to say about coaching

In an expanding field with blue-chip customers and more sophisticated buyers, you might expect some consolidation in the marketplace, but there is little sign of this. Mairi Eastwood, managing partner at executive coaching provider Praesta, notes that people don't want a single global programme – "they want to choose coaches for each country and culture, but with an international element of quality assurance".

Some providers, says Eastwood, are adopting a franchise style – having a small core, with a lot of self-employed associates who can benefit from joint branding and marketing and, in theory, common quality standards. HR people, she says, "tend to use sole traders that individuals have worked with before, but would like to deal with organisations so that they don't have to 'vet' individuals".

So what should buyers be looking for in a coach, given the wide variety of backgrounds, approaches and specialisms on offer? Jonathan Perks, managing director of Penna Leadership Services, says you

KEY CONTACTS

Association for Coaching

» www.associationforcoaching.com
☎ 0208 852 4854

DDI

» www.ddi-europe.com
☎ 01753 616000

Kaisen

» www.kaisen.co.uk
☎ 0117 925 5533

Penna Leadership Services

» www.e-penna.com/leadershipservices
☎ 0113 389 4900

Praesta

» www.praesta.com
☎ 0207 478 3100

Right Management

» www.right.com
☎ 0207 484 1714

Roffey Park

» www.roffeypark.com
☎ 01293 851644

Thales Training Consultancy

» www.thales-trainingconsultancy.com
☎ 0800 163 469

should look for three things: authority, presence and impact. Authority comes from training and experience, both of life and business. The acid test for presence, he says, comes when you meet them: "Do they have gravitas, do you trust them, are they grounded, energising, do they listen, do they have authenticity?" And impact is simply a question of whether

the coach can help you to make a difference in your job.

These attributes are not necessarily those you would look for in a conventional trainer or mentor. Perks neatly sums up the difference: "A coach has some great questions for you to develop answers; a mentor has some great answers for your questions." ■

