

**The
British Psychological
Society**

3-5 January 2002

OCCUPATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY CONFERENCE

The Hilton Blackpool



**BOOK OF
PROCEEDINGS**

Performance Coaching - Spin or Win?
**An evaluation of the effectiveness of a coaching training programme in a
retail organisation**
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Introduction

Much has been written in the popular literature about the benefits of coaching. Books, articles and training courses all extol its virtues. There has been, however, little substantive research to support the assertions that have been made. The majority of studies that have been conducted have concentrated on the field of sporting performance. As business psychologists, we were afforded the opportunity to investigate coaching in a business context. We were able to evaluate both a training programme that managers undertook, and the impact of the managers' coaching on their direct reports.

Coaching has been defined as 'the provision of support and guidance for people to use their existing knowledge and skills more effectively' (Bentley, 1995). Additionally, 'coaching aims at organisational excellence through the effective use of everyone's abilities and potential, in a way that allows growth in knowledge and experience' (Thomas, 1995).

At a more practical level, coaching in the current study is defined as 'an ongoing process for working with people to improve their performance and develop their potential'.

Our investigations evaluated the effectiveness of a coaching skills training programme for managers in terms of whether it was successful as a training event and whether the training led to an improvement in managers' performance as coaches in their day to day work. The question of whether coaching ultimately affects business performance was also explored.

The training programme

The purpose of the training programme was to provide managers with the skills needed to conduct brief, 'two way' coaching discussions, focused on improving current performance, with these discussions taking place on an 'as and when' basis as an integral part of a manager's job. The training lasted 2 days. The first day, conducted in groups of up to 30 participants, covered the following learning points:

- **Giving feedback:** which included the underlying psychology shown to be important for providing effective feedback. There is considerable evidence that performance feedback, if given appropriately, can lead to substantial improvements in future performance (Guzzo, Jette and Katzell, 1985)
- **Planning improvement:** to ensure participants work with their direct reports to form a development plan. Through adopting a problem-solving approach, focused on performance, the manager and individual work together to find solutions to current work problems. It has been suggested

that such an approach may help to reduce defensiveness (Greenberg, 1986) and is one of the means by which the manager demonstrates supportiveness (Whetten, Cameron and Woods, 1994).

- **Setting clear expectations for future performance:** to make sure that direct reports know exactly what they are expected to achieve and what is unacceptable. Goal setting has strong theoretical underpinnings and there is considerable evidence that it has a positive impact on employees' subsequent performance (Locke and Latham, 1990). Additionally, if people are clear about what the boundaries of performance are, they can shape their behaviour to ensure that they do not under perform.

The second day of the training programme, conducted in groups of 3, was practical in nature. Each participant took part in two 'live' coaching discussions with direct reports in the workplace, observed by a trainer and 2 colleagues, from whom they received feedback on their coaching skills. The second day took place between 1 week and 1 month after the first day.

Research Objective

The main research question addressed by this study was: 'How successful was the training programme? The key measures of success were:

- I. Manager (i.e. trainee) reactions to the training programme
- II. Post-course attainment of coaching skills
- III. Staff perceptions of management behaviour post course

Method

Samples

The overall sample consisted of managers working within a large British retail organisation. We used two different samples for the study.

In order to examine **Manager reactions** and **Post-course skills attainment**, we used a sample of 237 managers who had been trained as part of the first phase of the coaching training programme as it was rolled out nationwide.

In order to examine the effect of the coaching training programme on **Staff perception of management behaviour** we used a sample from 12 stores where the coaching training had been rolled out to 132 first line managers (the experimental group) and a matched sample from 12 stores where 134 first line managers had received no training in coaching (the control group).

Evaluation measures

Most training conducted in organisations is only evaluated at the 'reaction' level i.e. the extent to which the participants enjoyed the course, usually measured by a 'happy sheet' filled in at the end of the programme. In this study we had the opportunity to evaluate the effect of the coaching training programme using a range of qualitative and quantitative sources. The first two measures evaluated the coaching training programme directly, the third measure evaluated the impact of the training programme indirectly, by

examining the perceptions of staff in relation to their managers' coaching skills before and after the training programme.

Manager reaction measure

All participants on the programme were asked to complete an evaluation sheet immediately following the programme. Respondents were asked to indicate, by marking a percentage on a 6-point Likert-like scale, their perceptions of the:

- I. Applicability of the content of the programme to their role
- II. Satisfaction with the quality of the material
- III. Extent to which the programme met personal objectives
- IV. Extent to which the programme introduced new skills.

Participants were also asked for qualitative feedback on the programme.

Skill attainment measure

At the end of the coaching programme, the participants were assessed, by the facilitator using a structured rating form, on their coaching skills. Each participant was given one of three ratings: 'showing exceptional coaching skills', 'at the standard expected', or 'further training needed'.

Staff perception measure

The organisation runs an employee survey twice a year, measuring 30 factors which are important for people to be effective in their work. We selected, as the measure of Staff perception of management behaviour, eight of these factors. Employees are asked to respond to a question on each of the key factors, giving 'marks out of 10' on a scale from Definitely No to Definitely Yes. The eight factors selected were the ones most likely to be affected by the skills being developed in the coaching training programme:

- I. Clarity about job responsibilities
- II. Clarity about expected results
- III. Feedback on performance
- IV. Praise for performance
- V. Credit for achievement
- VI. Feedback on development needs
- VII. Encouragement to take on new challenges
- VIII. Encouragement to develop

To assess whether the coaching training programme had an impact on the managers' behaviour, the responses of the managers' direct reports on these factors were analysed from the survey before the training (September 2000) and the survey after the training (February 2001).

Results

Manager reaction results

- Applicability of the course content was rated at 100%
- Satisfaction with the quality of material was rated at 95%,
- The extent to which the programme met personal objectives was rated at 96%
- The extent to which the programme introduced new skills was rated at 78%

The two main themes reported in the analysis of the qualitative comments were that participants found the programme 'intense, but worthwhile' and that a certain degree of anxiety was expressed concerning the second part of the programme: the 'live' coaching.

Skill attainment results

92% of the 237 participants on the programme reached or exceeded the standard of coaching expected. The remaining participants were provided with further training at a later date to bring them up to the standard required.

Staff perception of management behaviour results

The detailed results are contained in the table below. A Mann Whitney U test was carried out on the employee survey data, comparing changes in direct reports' perceptions between the first and second surveys for the experimental and control groups. A significant difference was identified between the groups; with the staff perception in the experimental group reporting significantly higher levels of change, on six of the eight selected factors.

	Experimental group scores - Mean			Control group scores - Mean			Mann Whitney	
	S1	S2	D	S1	S2	D	U	Sig
S1= Survey 1; S2 = Survey 2; D= Change								
Feedback on performance	39	47	+8	40	44	+4	.014	.05
Praise for performance	45	52	+7	44	48	+4	.024	.05
Credit for achievement	41	48	+7	41	45	+4	.039	.05
Feedback on development needs	44	53	+9	46	51	+5	.012	.05
Encouragement to take on new challenges	48	54	+6	46	51	+5	.033	.05
Encouragement to develop	47	54	+7	46	50	+4	.010	.05
Clarity about job responsibilities	68	75	+7	67	73	+6	.143	NS
Clarity about expected results	66	73	+7	64	70	+6	.160	NS

Discussion

Overall, the results show clearly that the coaching training programme has been a success. It is pleasing that the **Manager reaction** results are overwhelmingly positive, but we would argue that they are not enough in themselves. Research shows a lack of relationship between positive or negative affect on subsequent behaviour (Alliger and Janak, 1989). The fact that the most common theme reported in the qualitative data was that the programme was 'intense but worthwhile' is, however, of importance. Such a reaction has been shown to have a positive impact on subsequent job performance (Alliger, Tannenbaum, Bennett, Traver and Shotland, 1997).

The **Skill attainment** results also appear very positive. Again we would say, however, that they are not compelling evidence on their own of the success of the training programme, particularly as in this initiative it was not possible to conduct pre-programme skills assessment. This focus on post-training attainment is not unusual, since many organisations are only interested in assessing whether their employees reach a certain level of competence, rather than the amount they have learned **during** training.

The **Staff perception of management behaviour** results, are however extremely interesting. They suggest that the managers have been successful in transferring the coaching skills covered in the programme to the workplace, and that the training programme has been successful in improving managers' performance as coaches on a day to day basis. The findings show that the training programme has had a significant impact on people in terms of 'improving their performance and developing their potential'. On closer analysis the lack of impact of the coaching training on people's clarity about what they are expected to do and the results they have to achieve might be explained, at least in part, by the high level of clarity reported by direct reports in the experimental group in the first survey on these areas.

Coaching and business performance

So the coaching training programme has been a success. But what is the evidence that coaching delivers improved business performance? We have just started to look for this client at the relationship between employee perceptions and measures of business success.

Preliminary analysis of the data indicates that there is a strong predictive relationship between 'Praise for performance' and store sales per square foot. This analysis is currently in progress, and will be the subject of a paper at a later date, but is an exciting avenue for further exploration.

Conclusions

Overall the results of our investigations examining the effects of coaching and coaching training using a variety of measures have been encouraging. Our findings indicate that:

- Coaching does seem to have a positive impact in a business context. There

is significant evidence that training in coaching can change manager behaviour and improve employee perceptions about how they are managed.

- The indications are that managers who coach and specifically who give praise to their direct reports as part of their everyday activities can improve employee perception and ultimately leverage commercial performance.

As practising business psychologists, we will continue to conduct research in this area. Some of the areas which particularly interest us include:

- I. Can the results be replicated? To further substantiate the findings, we would like to continue to research the control group who have not yet undertaken the coaching programme and see if, when the managers in this group of stores undergo the coaching programme, the results are repeated.
- II. Are the results sustainable over time? Continuing to analyse survey responses and commercial data from the organisation could inform us about the robustness of the changes in behaviour and perception.
- III. Are the findings generalisable to other business sectors? So far we have found positive results in the retail sector, and would like to investigate whether the positive impact could be found in other industries.

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