

The A&DC Thought Leadership Series

Coaching Environment

Creating the Environment for Coaching



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Coaching was initially introduced into the workplace in order to develop those who were underperforming or who were displaying inappropriate behaviour. However, this remedial connotation has no place in respect to today's workplace coaching. Nowadays, coaching is seen as an approach to help individuals to develop and utilise their full potential in order to benefit themselves professionally and, additionally, to benefit the organisation within which they are employed.

Infinite definitions of coaching are available and the term is often used interchangeably with counselling and mentoring. However, it is generally agreed that workplace coaching demonstrates the following characteristics:

- A set duration
- One-to-one developmental discussions
- Facilitative rather than directive
- Focus is on specific development areas/issues
- Focus is on achieving specific, immediate goals (including steps to achieve longer-term goals)
- Goals can be both organisational and personal (although these are often aligned)
- Dominant focus on work related issues, however it may be necessary to discuss personal and out-of-work issues to achieve optimal success

Coaching in the workplace is experiencing rapid growth and popularity, particularly within senior management. This increase is in response to the link between workplace coaching and improved business performance. Unlike traditional development methods, such as training courses, coaching is able to provide bespoke, intensive development specifically for an individual. A further emerging trend demonstrates that organisational coaching is moving away from one-to-one personalised coaching towards developing strategic programmes focused on developing targeted groups of future leaders. Such programmes are directly aligned with business needs and fully integrated into talent management systems.

This rise in the popularity of coaching has led to numerous papers attempting to evaluate the return on investment (ROI) of coaching, and infinite numbers of books being published providing instructions of how to be an effective coach. Aspiring and practicing coaches would be forgiven for feeling confused about which coaching model to adopt and indeed industry debate rages as to which method is most effective in bringing about change. No matter which model, strategy or set of tools you find works for you, it is argued here that all coaches need to invest continual time and effort into ensuring they are providing an optimal environment in which to practice chosen models and techniques. However, managing the coaching environment is not only the responsibility of the coach, the workplace coaching environment has to be managed at four levels; 1) the organisational culture; 2) the evolving coaching relationship; 3) the coach; and 4) the coachee.

This paper aims to present practical suggestions as to how organisations, coaches and coachees can help to create an optimal coaching environment. These will be supported by current research in the field of coaching and social psychology and from the direct experience of practising coaches.

1. Coaching Culture

In theory, coaching environments or coaching cultures are supportive environments where working relationships grow and flourish and where all individuals are collectively focused on improving individual and organisational performance. In such an organisation, employees will welcome feedback from others, both above and below them, and indeed will actively seek it. Here, coaching is seen as a responsibility of all employees throughout the organisation (Clutterbuck, 2003).

Understanding how to establish an effective coaching environment at an individual one-to-one level is a necessary foundation for an organisation to start organically establishing its coaching culture. According to David Clutterbuck (the co-founder of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council) the following steps are required in order to develop a coaching culture:

- Ensure managers have, at a minimum, the basic skills of coaching
- Equip all employees with the information and skills to be effectively coached
- Equip senior managers and HR staff with advanced coaching skills
- Provide opportunities to review good coaching practice
- Set up rewards and recognition processes for managers who demonstrate commitment to coaching and good coaching practices
- Provide feedback on coaching and establish how to measure the effects of coaching (e.g. employee attitude surveys held during, before and after the coaching sessions)
- Identify and overcome barriers within the organisation which are preventing effective coaching
- Ensure top level staff provide positive, strong role models committed to coaching

Although establishing and maintaining a coaching culture is regarded as key to supporting effective individual coaching sessions, it takes a long time to achieve. Such a culture cannot be imposed upon organisations or indeed individuals who are not yet ready for it. Coaching cultures will only become properly embedded into organisations if all of the individuals making up the organisation understand the aims and objectives for coaching. The first step to creating a coaching culture is the same as setting up an effective coaching relationship with a coachee: you have to know what the organisation wants to achieve from the coaching, i.e. where does it want to get to? In the same way an individual starting their introductory coaching session should be guided towards establishing exactly what they want the coaching sessions to achieve.

The aims and objectives of workplace coaching sessions can be difficult to ascertain. For example are the aims and objectives purely that of the individual, the organisation or the line manager? Ideally all of the objectives should be aligned. If the process is not managed carefully the individual's aims and objectives may not be congruent with the expectations of the organisation. The coach, organisation and coachee all need to be clear from the outset what the political background to the coaching is. This can often be difficult to ascertain, particularly when the organisation is typically paying for the coaching sessions. However, if an organisation truly wants a coaching culture, then it must accept that the individual needs to be allowed to grow and flourish and develop, and by doing so, the best outcome, in the longer term, will be achieved for the organisation too.

Whatever is the case, all potential coachee's should be made fully aware, upfront, of the organisation's objectives for providing them with the coaching opportunity. By definition, all of the options should be derived from the coachee, and success is dependent upon the commitment the coachee assigns to the process, therefore all coachees need to be fully aware of and dedicated to the process.

2. The Coaching Relationship

It is a fact that not all coaching relationships are effective. Research has shown that the single most important factor for successful coaching outcomes is the relationship between the coach and coachee. A good match is therefore essential. Coachees should be encouraged to have an introductory session with potential coaches first. All individuals should be assured that it is okay for them to ask to see a different coach if it does not *feel* right. This section will explore: how the interaction between coach and coachee can be managed to ensure an optimal frame of mind is cultivated; address other fundamental relationships which are required to ensure the best outcomes for the individual and the organisation can be achieved; and how the programme can be effectively drawn to a close.

Cultivating the right frame of mind. Coaching sessions can take place at any time of the day. Both the coach and the coachee may be experiencing a busy schedule, have many things which they need to achieve and have a lot of things on their mind. It is therefore very important that once the coach and coachee enter into the assigned coaching session they put the 'noise' of these interruptions to one side in order to focus solely on the coaching session. After all, coaching sessions are hard work; to work effectively they demand the complete concentration and full attention of both parties.

The Coach in particular has to be mindful of how he/she interacts with the coachee during the sessions. For example, when and how they show emotion can strongly influence the coachee's state of mind, the decisions they may come to during the session, and their level of creativity. For example, research has shown that expectations, inferred from others, towards our decisions, have been found to be very powerful in shaping our attitudes and actions. Such a strategy of using other's opinions to guide one's decisions appears to be functional, particularly for complex decisions when one has no direct experience of the possible options. Neurological and social psychological research has shown that emotions are critical in being able to make decisions. For example, if a person feels happy when they are taking part in a sport or hobby, then they are likely to attribute that positive feeling with that activity and tell themselves that they like doing it. Therefore if a coachee feels positive during a coaching session, they will subsequently feel happier and more positive about their development plans and putting them into action.

Emotions are also thought to be contagious (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). It is proposed that emotional contagion occurs as follows: person A tends to automatically mimic the expressions, vocalisations and movements of person B. The mimicked expressions cause A to experience the corresponding emotional state, thus causing A to 'catch' B's emotion. Furthermore, once an emotion is experienced, the individual will search for stimuli from the environment to explain their emotional state. Similarly phobias are thought to develop through witnessing the fearful responses of others towards particular stimuli, such as spiders or snakes. How does this relate to establishing the optimal coaching environment? This theory suggests that if a coach expresses negative emotions (e.g. irritation or frustration from their day) when the coachee is discussing a suggested course of action, the coachee will 'catch' the negative emotion and attribute it towards their decisions. Even being aware of this may not be enough to prevent people from being affected by mis-attributed emotions because such a process is thought to operate below a conscious level of awareness.

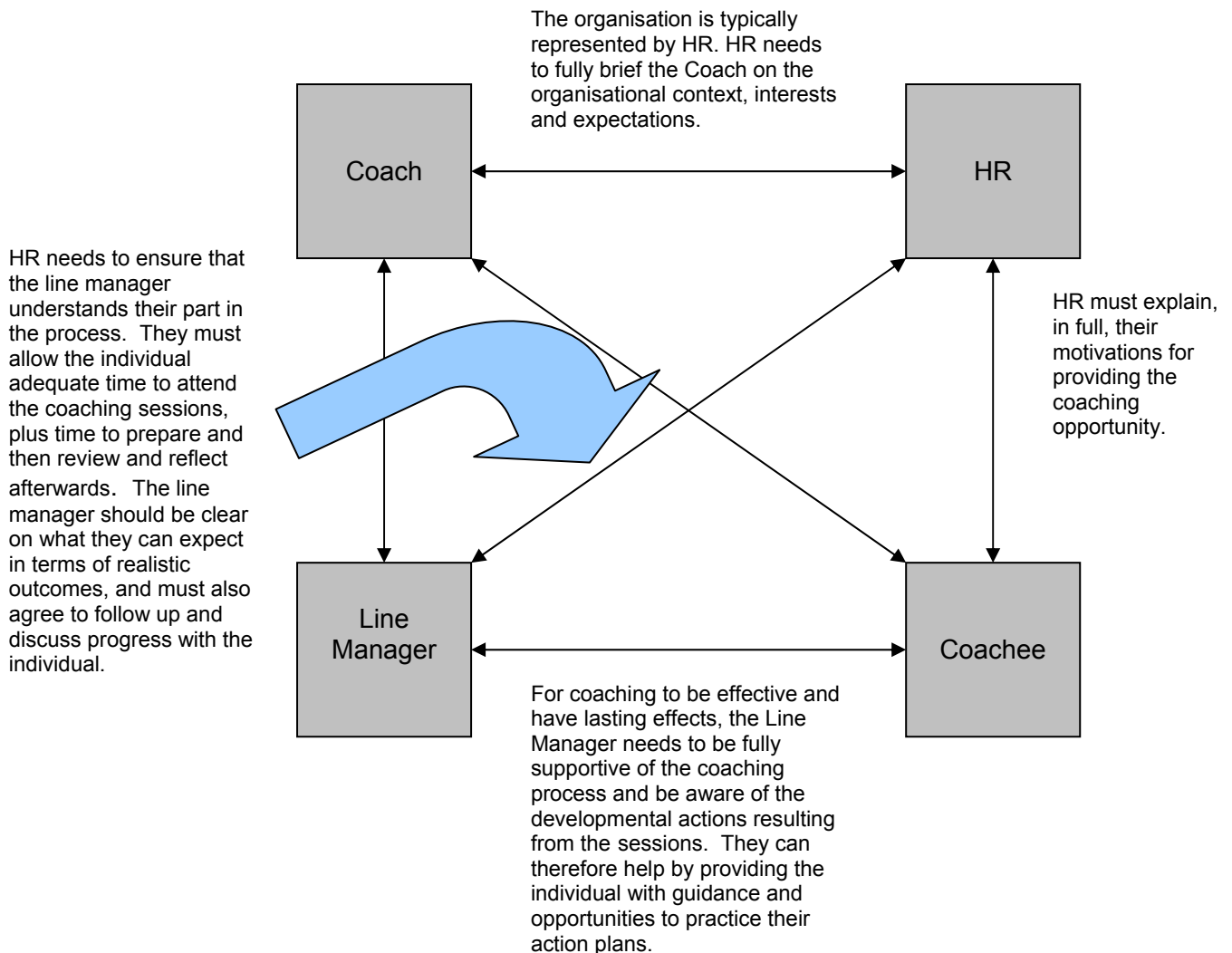
Projecting a non-judgemental, positive and calm composure has been found to broaden people's cognitive focus, enhancing their creativity, and allowing them to link different experiences, ideas and thoughts which are not normally related. Being in a positive state of mind widens the repertoire of thoughts and actions which come to mind (Fredrickson, 2001). Similarly Passmore and Marianetti (2007) suggest that practising 'mindfulness' can help the coach maintain focus, and become emotionally detached: "mindfulness cultivates consciousness attention and awareness of the moment in a non-judgemental way". Being in a state of 'mindfulness' is thought to help us view

the world as it really is. Typically we only process a minute proportion of the stimuli which surround us at any one moment in time. This provides us with a blinkered view of the world and such limited processing can lead to errors in how we perceive the world compared to what is reality. Viewing the world without judgement reduces the extent to which we perceive our problems and increases the power of our resources, therefore allowing forward action and development.

In sum, if a coach maintains a positive, calm expression, the coachee will be more inclined to follow suit, allowing them to be more creative in their ideas and actions, make them more positive about their decisions and consequently more likely to take action. So how do we remain focused and in a non-judgemental positive state? Passmore and Marianetti (2007) suggest the following:

- **Preparation:** Ensure you arrive at the coaching location 5 or 10 minutes early, manage your diary to account for your preparation time. Use this time to perform a relaxation technique which you find works for you, e.g. breathing and/or visualisation exercises. Review your notes or action plans from the previous session to help focus your mind.
- **Maintain focus:** Concentrate on the task you are doing. Remain consciously aware of your thoughts and continually bring back your focus on the discussion at hand if you feel your mind start to wander.

Other Relationships. Earlier in this paper, the importance of aligning the organisation's, individual's and line manager's aims and expectations of workplace coaching was highlighted. For this to be effectively managed, not only is the coach-coachee relationship important, but the following relationships also need be considered:



Drawing the coaching to a close. Successful coaching programmes will end with the coachee feeling empowered to effectively coach themselves through future problems. However, the last session should not just come to an abrupt end. It is important that all parties are made explicitly aware of the length of the coaching programme from the outset. Towards the end of the sessions, the Coach needs to prepare the coachee for upcoming challenges and how they will tackle them. This can be done in collaboration with the coach, coachee, HR and the line manager.

3. The Coach

The coach has the responsibility of ensuring the coachee's expectations are set appropriately. A fundamental element which the coach needs to stress early on is that it is not their job to provide answers to problems or to tell others what to do; their role is to facilitate the coachee in identifying their own way forward, being the experts in their own life.

Setting Expectations: It is important that anyone who has requested coaching, or who has been put forward for coaching, is clear about what coaching is and what to expect from this. The more the individual understands and is engaged with the coaching process, the easier it will be for the coach to work with them. In the past, coaching has often been seen as a remedial activity, and has therefore had negative connotations. So, it is essential that the coach spends time carefully explaining the purpose of coaching, to ensure the individual has realistic expectations, and to avoid them misinterpreting the reasons for coaching or feeling apprehensive about what will happen. Failing to set realistic expectations at the start of a coaching programme has been found to cause coachee's stress and disappointment in the process (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2006). It is therefore important to cover the following points when briefing the individual:

- The purpose of the coaching and why they have been offered this. Discuss with the individual what they want to get out of it and agree the objectives for the coaching, including both personal and organisational objectives.
- Ensure they take ownership for the areas which are agreed that they will cover.
- The length of the coaching arrangement and typical outline of a coaching session. Discuss the number of sessions and length of each session.
- Confidentiality and reporting back of information – it is important to make it clear that information discussed in the coaching sessions is confidential as between the coach and coachee. Agree specifically upon any information that will be shared with the line manager and/or the organisation.
- Do not 'overpromise' anything– for example, make it clear that by receiving coaching they are not guaranteed a promotion or any other specific career opportunity.
- Know your limits and stick within your professional boundaries. For example, only use tools and psychometrics for which you are accredited. If the Coachee brings up issues of psychological ill health, explain your professional boundaries and be prepared to refer them to other professional bodies which may be more appropriate.

Allow the Coachee to be the Expert: It is argued that people are intrinsically motivated towards growth, development and optimal functioning (Rogers, 1953). If this is so then it follows that people inherently know what is best for them. In other words the coachee is the expert on what actions and path they should follow to develop, not the coach. Instead, the coach's job is to act as a mirror, to reflect back to the coachee their image in order for the coachee to more clearly view their situation. Similarly the coach should act as a sounding board for the coachee to bounce their ideas off.

In order for people to develop and grow towards optimal personal performance, they require the right environment (Joseph, 2006). The individual needs to feel understood, accepted and valued for the person they really are. If the person does not feel valued for being themselves, but instead only feeling valued for being the person that they perceive someone else (i.e. the coach, manager) wants them to be, they will start to develop out of congruence with their intrinsic, inherent path, which will result in distress and dysfunction. If the coach takes the role of the expert and states what is best for the coachee, the coachee will be inclined to follow the advice and actions provided which could result in two things. Firstly, they could follow a path that is not the best one for them; and secondly, they could very easily become dependent on the coach for all decisions. A successful coaching programme should end with the coachee having learnt how to coach themselves through decisions and actions.

The coach should therefore be very careful to not spend too much of the session talking and leading the discussion. They should be consciously aware of slowing their thoughts and listening to the coachee to help reflect back to the individual their situation and possible solutions.

4. The Coachee

The coachee is not a passive recipient of coaching. Being coached is a very demanding process and it is the responsibility of the individual to consider firstly whether they are ready for coaching and then whether their developmental goals can be best achieved through coaching. Finally, if they perceive coaching is for them, they need to be aware of the effort and time required from them in order to gain the most from the process.

The below questions should help the individual diagnose whether they are ready for coaching:

- Are you open or resistant to coaching?
- Do you have self-awareness and ability to gain self-insight?
- Do you see the coaching as a 'quick fix'? If you do not take responsibility for changing your behaviour, coaching is unlikely to be a successful solution. Long-term behavioural change requires a great deal of effort and hard work on your part.
- Do your work and personal circumstances allow you time and energy for coaching?
- Are you shortly leaving the organisation? If so, career counselling or career coaching with an independent coach from outside your current organisation may be more appropriate.

Development goals where coaching may be a suitable solution include:

- Developing potential.
- Improving interpersonal skills.
- Improving conflict management skills.
- Developing skills to developing others.
- Developing a more strategic perspective.
- Developing new skills due to a change in role / new business challenges.

For a coachee to get the most from their sessions, they should be aware of the following:

- Good coaching requires focus. Making sure you have two hours of uninterrupted time, so that you can give your full attention, will pay dividends.
- Your time is precious and so is the coach's. Make every effort to keep appointments.
- Many coaches will suggest 'homework' for you to do between sessions, usually to extend your understanding of the areas on which you are focusing. You will benefit from this opportunity to integrate your learning into real life. It is up to you to negotiate the amount of homework that fits in with your workload.
- To make the most of your time together, and in order to be clear what you would like to achieve, it is worth preparing for the session. Generally there will be time to deal with pressing issues, but also to consider your longer-term goals.
- Once the session is finished, try to allow yourself a short space to reflect on what you have taken from your coaching session. Some of our best insights come to us in this reflective thinking time.
- Generally, you will establish some 'hard' objectives for your coaching sessions, which are likely to also be agreed with your manager. In addition, it is also valuable to establish markers with your coach for some of the softer issues you may be working on, so you can identify the progress you make.

Summary

Below is a summary of the key actions that can be taken by the respective parties to optimise the benefits workplace coaching can offer:

Coaching Culture

- Ensure managers have at least the basic skills of coaching
- Equip all employees with the information and skills to be effectively coached
- Equip senior managers and HR staff with advanced coaching skills
- Provide opportunities to review good coaching practice

Coaching Relationships

- For coachees to benefit from creative thoughts and actions and to develop a broader focus, they need to maintain a positive mindset. Coaches should facilitate this mood by facilitating an atmosphere of interpersonal respect conducive to high self-esteem.
- Coaches should monitor their own emotional expressions in the presence of clients in order to regulate the emotional contagion they transfer. Should a client 'catch' a negative emotional state from the coach, they may attribute it to the topic being discussed.
- Although the coach-coachee relationship is only one consideration, HR and the line manager also need to establish effective relationships, or communication with each other and with the coach and coachee.

The Coach

- The coach needs to explain the purpose of coaching, to ensure the individual has realistic expectations, to avoid them misinterpreting the reasons for coaching and to reduce apprehensive feelings.
- People will inherently grow and develop towards achieving their optimal potential if they are provided with the right social environment in which to do so. Coaches should therefore use open questions and active listening to facilitate the coachee into developing their *own* solutions and action plans, rather than telling them what to do.

The Coachee has a responsibility to:

- Reflect upon whether they are ready for coaching
- Decide whether their developmental goals are best achieved through coaching
- Be aware of the effort and time required from them in order to gain the most from the process

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About A&DC

Founded in 1988 by Nigel Povah, author of 'Assessment and Development Centres', A&DC is one of the leading experts in the Assessment and Development field. We combine our expertise in business psychology and behavioural change to create and deliver end-to-end solutions to HR issues across the talent management spectrum.

We work in partnership with our clients to unlock human potential, using best of breed processes to enable them to select, promote and develop talented people who can contribute effectively to business growth and cultural enhancement. Always, we apply recognised best practice, putting our clients in a position where they can minimise risk and optimise return on investment in these critical areas of people strategy.

Based in Surrey, our Consultants operate across the UK. Through our international partners, we ensure that our comprehensive portfolio of products and services is delivered through specialists with a high degree of local cultural and business insight.

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