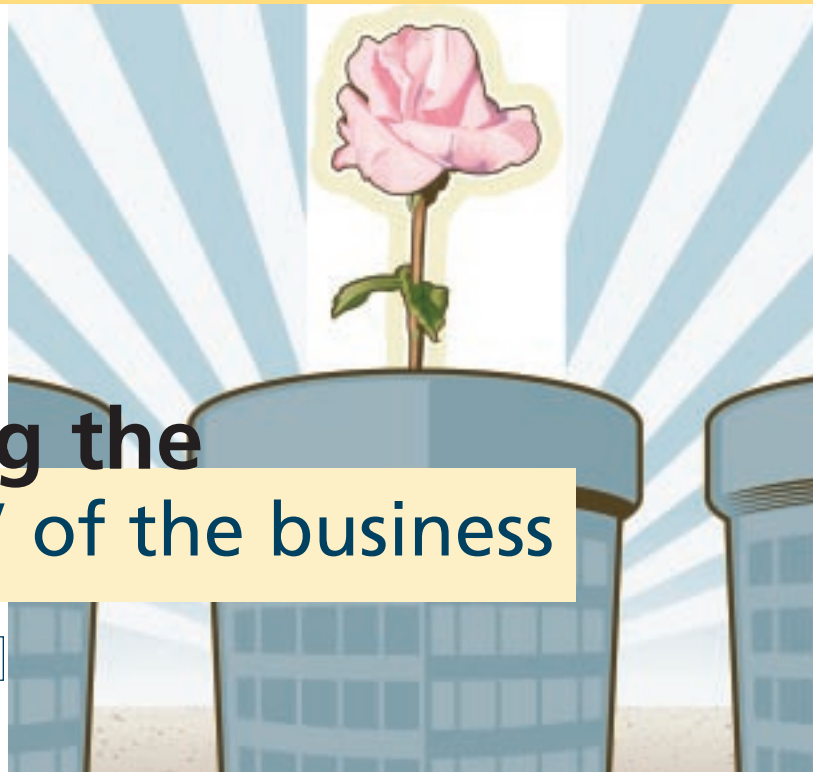


# Harnessing the 'backbone' of the business

Philip Atkinson



There's a benefit to extending coaching throughout the organisation.

*Senior staff are guilty of focusing too much of their coaching attention on the high fliers, neglecting many staff who are the real backbone and asset of the business. Instead of concentrating solely on the contribution of a few high-potential individuals, management teams need to focus also on those who give loyal service and comprise the backbone of the business. Huge benefits can accrue to the organisation by using a coaching methodology extending beyond the confines of high-potential people. We should be investing more in the trusted and loyal group whose performance is consistently above standard, but who, in many cases, may receive little in terms of recognition, praise and development.*

A heated debate arose with colleagues of mine over the relative return on investment of working with the 'early adaptors'

or the 'resistors' to a change initiative.

- Would working with those who were destined for a meteoric rise reap rewards that could be shared across the business?
- Would it be wiser to focus energies on those regarded as less than positive to change?
- Would the strategy of working with the 'question marks' – those whose contribution is well below standard and who have plenty of scope for improved performance – lead to an overall higher rate of acceptance and implementation of the change over the whole business?

## Coaching – where do we invest?

- Would we gain a higher rate of return by working with those who have dizzying ambitions?
- Where should we focus our energies if we want to create a

coaching culture that spreads through functions and permeates the organisation?

- Should we concentrate our energies on the vital few – the small group of recognised staff with real potential, the high fliers?
- Alternatively, is it wise to concentrate upon the question marks?

There are no easy answers. Of course, it depends on the circumstances and the resources available. This highlights the perception that coaching is largely a strategy reserved either for the exceptional staff member or for those not making the grade. Coaching can be seen as a real learning tool to help a select group of people to excel, or as a powerful performance management process, leading to help raise the bar for those who are currently underperforming.

They gain huge experience at our expense. We take them to the next level and they depart, with the consequence that new employers benefit at our expense.' There is a growing recognition that too much of our resources is spent coaching one group while other groups are neglected. Many believe the time has come to balance the equation; and many perceive that the backbone is the untapped potential of the business and the real challenge for the future.

*'concentrate on developing those who will stay with the business'*

## From backbone to new achiever

A friend of mine, the owner of a recruitment business, has suggested that companies now have learned that working with high-potential people does not give a strong competitive edge to their business. Continuity and renewal are what foster growth. Many organisations are rethinking the staffing of their business with a reversal towards employing older staff who have solid experience. Age does not diminish dynamism. Organisations need continuity and consistency, and are starting to question the assumption that only younger employees demonstrate a dynamic go-getting mentality.

Many employers acknowledge that they do not benefit substantially from a largely youthful and transitory workforce of staff who move on after 18-24 months. They are starting to recognise that the high fliers may not add that much to the bottom line, whereas careful development of the backbone of their business has a much stronger contribution to make.

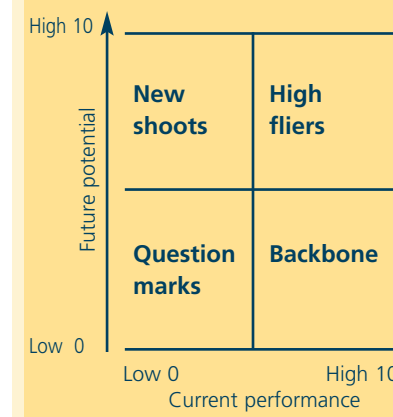


Fig. 1: Motivation grid

### Question marks

These people may be performing below requirements, and have a question mark hanging over their future potential. They often receive coaching because they are perceived as maintaining an attitude that relates to poor or low performance standards. Some practitioners believe that coaching these staff has most impact and demonstrates to others that coaching works.

### New shoots

New shoots may be people who have moved to new positions or have changed roles. They may be ill-prepared to deal with their new role and need guidance and support. They strongly benefit from coaching to move them to the high flier quadrant. When energy is invested in new shoots, they will grow. If development does not happen, they will decline into the question marks quadrant.

### High fliers

These people are excellent at what they do, and have probably evolved from being new shoots. They have perfected their ability to work with others and constantly look for challenges in what they do. They are often the sole recipients of coaching programmes.

### Backbone

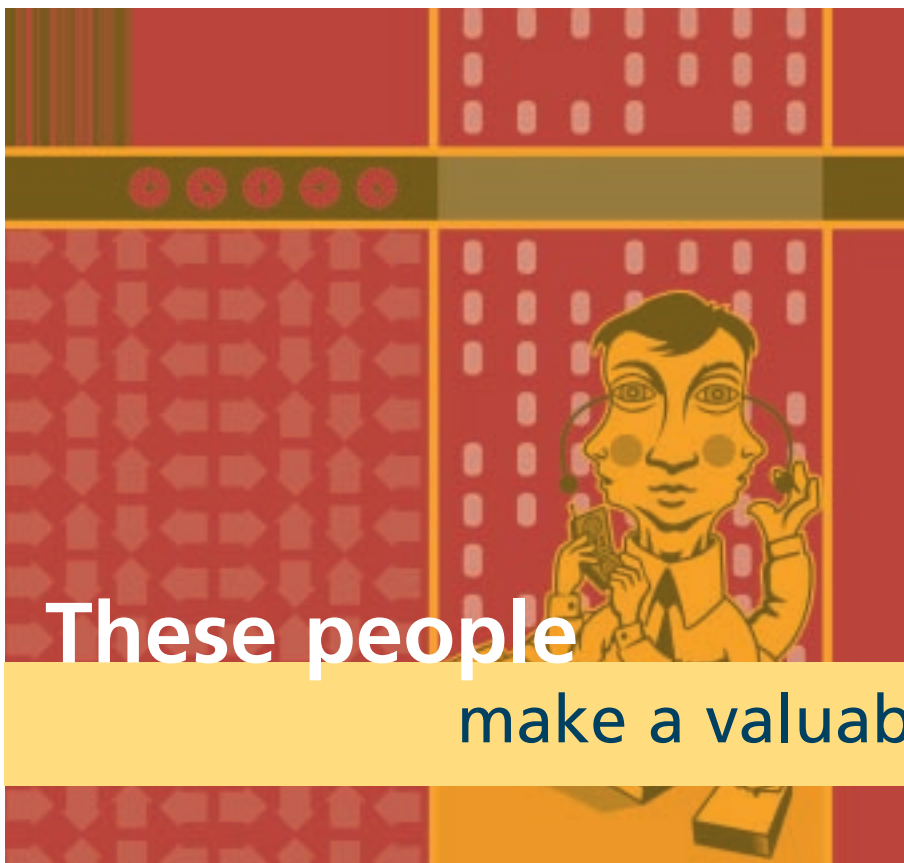
These people have extensive experience in the organisation. They know how things work. Because of their experience and the time they have spent in the business, they have probably been stretched and work across boundaries. They have learned to do things in different ways and understand the cultural dynamics of the business. They may never achieve the really high standards of high fliers, but they are consistent in their performance, dependable and trustworthy, and often an undervalued asset. This vast army of people may never be developed beyond their technical expertise.

### References

- 1 Philip Atkinson, 'Leading and motivating: mastering potential', *Coach the Coach*, Issue 12, 2005.

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# These people make a valuable contribution

## Coaching: is it only for the elite?

I believe that in many organisations we focus too much coaching energy on people who will make it anyway, and thereby divert our attention from the loyal and talented group of people who come to work every day to do a cracking job, but who would do even better if given the opportunity for development. The discussion highlights that often we focus on coaching as a very narrow tool only for use with those at the top or the bottom end of the performance curve. My contention is that the loyal group or backbone is largely forgotten and their performance is taken for granted. It is important to note how frequently people who fall within this area have little development opportunity beyond that of updating their technical expertise.

In a module published earlier this year on leadership and motivation,<sup>1</sup> I

introduced readers to strategies for maximising the potential of staff. We used a simple typology that broadly categorised people under four headings. The typology was based on two scales: assessment of current performance and assessment of future potential. We created a four-box diagram and broadly described the performance of people who fit within these very general categories as high fliers, backbone, question marks and new shoots (see page 4).

It is my contention that organisations often fail some of these people and in turn fail their organisation by not harnessing their potential.

## The 80/20 performance rule

The 80/20 rule is generally accurate in terms of investment in human capital. Most organisations tend to address the performance of staff at the top or bottom end. Because those

who fit in the arena of backbone are defined as consistently delivering above standard, it usually follows that their development is not perceived as critical in taking the organisation to the next level. These people attract the word ‘consistent’ to their performance. Reliability is not an issue. There is an assumption that each of these is a safe pair of hands and each practises their skills daily. Along with these assumptions are others that may not be motivational. It is understood that the vast majority of the backbone will probably not rise much further in the organisation in terms of status. Because those comprising the backbone have earned the reputation of being reliable, too

often they may be taken for granted and sometimes even wholly forgotten in the arena of human resource development.

## Personal development

Recently, I have been working with an organisation employing over 1,400 staff. Their high fliers are given the opportunity for coaching and, if desired, may attend a fast-track programme at a local business school. Poor performance is an issue but is largely left unresolved. My concern is not with either group but rather with those in the middle of the spectrum.

Notably, those backbone people who attend the programmes acknowledge this as their first formal input on personal development or training for over 12 years. Over three hundred people have commenced the programme, and it is generally very well accepted. Much of the programme is based on action learning through a coaching

perspective, with frequent use of personal development plans. It is amazing that for these three hundred people the world has in effect largely stood still since 1993 in relation to changes in practice, management and personal development.

## Intellectual capital

The true financial cost of failing to motivate and maximise the potential of this group of staff is a huge loss. Each year the average company fails to capitalise on its backbone. It is criminal to witness the potential lost in energy wasted, enthusiasm displayed but never tapped, and opportunities for improvement that never materialise.

Consider the implications of this argument if you operate in a labour-intensive industry or sector. The public and the third or charity sector are largely labour intensive, and the salary bill comprises at least 50 per cent of the cost of running the organisation. Consider the knowledge and experience lost in such organisations as government departments, the National Health Service and those sectors in the economy where labour is the key component in processing business. The loss has never been calculated, but is an element of what we understand in terms of human capital accounting.

## Continuous improvement

Many organisations are pinning their hopes on the achievements of the few rather than on the contribution of the many. Focusing attention on the backbone is a great strategy for bringing about culture change through continuous improvement. In the early days of quality management, many manufacturing businesses hit on this idea and made it work for them. They recognised that they could focus

their energies on several strategic initiatives that could radically improve performance. Goals were set, and rested on the back of a few projects that could deliver improved performance of 50 per cent over a fairly short timeframe. These figures paled in significance when data from leading Pacific Rim and US businesses such as Toyota, Hitachi, Samsung IBM, Corning, Dow and many others – including Nissan in the UK – was examined. That highlighted the benefit of not just going for the ‘big bang’, working on those projects that were vital to the business, but also focusing upon continuous improvement.

## Case study – Toyota

Some years ago I was part of a study tour on culture change visiting the USA and Japan. In Japan we visited a typical manufacturing plant in the Toyota empire, in which the proud claim was made that their implementation rate for improvement was incredibly high. They said they focused their improvement initiatives not just on the high fliers, but also on those who comprised the intellectual capital of the business. They relied on the expertise and the loyalty of those who worked for the organisation, and who would probably continue working for it for the rest of their lives – the backbone employees. Further, each employee contributed 187 ideas per year for improving safety, performance and quality, and 97 per cent of those ideas were implemented. Because ideas may impact performance only by 2–3 per cent, the improvements were easy to accommodate. The cumulative total would have had a huge impact on performance, especially when ideas on best practice were shared across plants and across geographical boundaries.

The continuous improvement experience in the case study highlights the real gains that can be made by extending coaching initiatives beyond the usual recipients of such programmes.

Now consider the average rate of improvement ideas from the typical European business. Some businesses would be delighted if they experienced staff formalising ten ideas per year on average – never mind 187. And of those ideas suggested, what percentage would remain unimplemented? Too many, I fear, in a culture that values the contribution of high achievers only. This is why we must focus on change and coaching by working with the trusted experienced groups – the neglected majority.

Another thought that appealed was this: if Toyota were genuinely encouraging their valued backbone employees’ voices and their ideas, and these were implemented, what effect would this be having on their competitiveness?

## Critical issues

What can we learn from this approach? I believe that we focus far too much energy on a select group of high achievers to the detriment of our valued experienced people. I believe that we should stop being obsessed with developing and coaching our high fliers and concentrate on developing those who will stay with the business. All too often, high fliers gain their experience, take the best investments the organisation has to offer, and then literally fly off elsewhere to practise their skills, leaving challenging consequences behind them. Some HR managers are asking: ‘Why spend and invest so much on the high achievers? We educate and develop them.’