

Top team coaching and beyond: a safe approach



Philip E Atkinson highlights the necessity for a coaching role and argues that developing to become a senior manager requires a strong coaching environment. He also contends that managers at other levels who experience ambiguity, complexity and rapid change would benefit radically from committing to using a coach to secure growth often beyond their current comfort zones.

Although we talk about the importance of a strong team culture emanating from the very top of an organisation, the reality is that when special circumstances dictate, those who lead the team often have to work in a vacuum. Just at the time when dialogue with colleagues is required, circumstances such as acquisition, merger, restructuring and rationalisation often prohibit it. It is in these circumstances that a senior manager of an organisation can benefit and profit from the special relationship gained from working with an experienced personal coach.

While I was working with the chief officer of a major financial institution, I soon understood that leading a company and a team of senior managers can be a very lonely job. This particular business had faced possible merger, but because of 'confidentiality agreements' with the potential business partner, the CEO could not share the issues and his concerns with his team. At the initial stage, he was effectively forbidden to do so, because any information filtering to the marketplace could put the first steps of the merger at risk. He still had decisions to make, ideas to discuss and strategies to formulate, but had no forum to test for coherence and understanding. Over time, he shared his thoughts and aspirations for the future with me – not specific business issues, but rather possible scenarios or

strategies for bringing about the integration. Trust had to be established and when truly 'shared' a special relationship developed.

Two years later this CEO moved to be the MD of another business, which he further successfully developed through organic growth and a series of acquisitions. During the time I worked with this very capable man, he was pleased to have someone to 'bounce ideas off' who was not directly involved in the day-to-day work of his business. The apparent detachment helped him to work through the processes without having to disclose the specific issues to me or others.

In effect, this 'process orientated' coaching approach helped him to air his anxieties and test new ideas. It must be stated that the relationship was one where control resided 100 per cent with the client *only* when 'special business circumstances' prohibited him from working and sharing specific issues with his team. At times he had to work in isolation. Perhaps this illustrates how important it is to develop a nurturing, content free, approach to coaching.

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The relationship formed is a learning curve. Over time I have come to understand that, *under special*

• COACHING



circumstances, the role of (and pressure on) senior staff forces the person occupying the leadership position to display uncharacteristic 'team exclusion' rather than 'team cohesion', behaviours and attitudes. Examples include those shown in Table 1.

Change is accelerating at a rate at which many organisations just can not cope. Some argue that the strategies for dealing with the changes we are currently witnessing have not yet been devised. In these circumstances, the demands on the 'top people' can be so intense that only a *confidante* outside the career progression, politics and dynamics of the organisation can provide the objective support necessary in times of severe change and transition.

WHO NEEDS COACHING?

So is it only top team players who need coaching? Many organisations are now so flat that quite junior staff (in terms of status) have huge responsibilities. When we had substantial numbers of middle managers they would have had time to adjust from the demands of an operational role to that of a more strategic focus. Nowadays, huge responsibilities for specific operations reside on the shoulders of those who have not had the luxury of developing their experience. For these people, coaching is a must activity to support them in their transition – and to help cope with the pressures and expectations of senior staff.

COACHING DIALOGUE

I once asked a group of managers attending a workshop the following questions.

- Have you ever experienced times in your careers when you did not know what to do next?
- Have you ever confronted times when you felt you lacked the experience and confidence to take action to resolve a major problem for your businesses?
- During these times, did the ambiguity between 'expected performance' and 'ability to deliver' create any tensions for you personally, and did this affect your performance?
- When experiencing all these emotions did you share your concerns and fears with staff senior to yourself?

And the answers? Fewer than 10 per cent of managers attending that workshop agreed that they had purposely sought help from the 'hierarchy'. Most sought advice from colleagues or just muddled through. It would seem that there is a strong case for

coaching staff at all levels – especially when they are dealing with managing transition states.

EXTERNAL COACHING DURING CHANGE

The inclusion of external coaches is not always welcome – although one advantage is that coaches are not part of the politics, career dynamics and culture of the organisation, and will therefore provide more objective advice, be it content-free or focused on applying techniques to support improved organisational performance.

This may indicate behaviour that flies in the face of the 'current organisational theory' of creating an open, internal team-based and empowered culture – but this neglects the constraints and demands of how the real business world operates. For instance, when driving significant corporate change such as restructuring, re-engineering, merging or acquiring a business, or in times of severe threat to the future of the business, the real barriers to speedy implementation of change for senior players can be the rest of their own teams. In these circumstances, the senior player, even the CEO, may be the sole person battling against unknown odds and requires the support of others, external to the main business, to help her or him think through and implement what is required – objectively.

Ask empowering questions that yield imaginative solution states. Answers in many cases imply providing solutions to technical or business issues – that is, the province of the top team or external business experts. The reference here is to coaching for defining scenarios, looking at 'What if ...?' situations, defining problem boundaries, asking who else has conquered a similar problem, exploring positive strategies for change, and working through a whole host of issues with successfully implementing solutions and sustaining continuous learning and improvement. Coaching is about stimulating others to expand their horizons, question assumptions and cause-effect relations, and examine beliefs and values that impact on the whole business, share holders, customers or consumers and staff at every level.

COACHING THROUGH CHANGE

Any coaching that results in 'selling solutions' lacks credibility. The coach is there to challenge, to question, to elicit, to explore, to amplify, to confront self-limiting beliefs, while rigidly maintaining confidences. The coach may need to act as the conscience of the top players, and debate issues with them that others may think about but avoid voicing.

COACHES

Everyone needs a coach. This 'coach' can work with people from operational to strategic level. However, you may need a variety of coaching styles to deal with the particular context of the role and the demands and constraints on that role. Operational people may require a coach with particular expertise to enable them to look at alternative techniques and methods to improve performance. Alternatively, the top team player may require someone with a more strategic focus.

Some top players need someone to ask the right open-ended questions to explore opportunities, to look at a problem from different perspectives. Often, they need to be stretched beyond their specialist area and beyond their personal zones of most comfort. The areas

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Table 1: Examples of team exclusion

Below is a list of possible reasons why the person leading your team may uncharacteristically be unable to share information.

- Acquisition of another business when disclosure could affect share prices of both companies.
- The coming together of partners in a joint venture when competitors can seek assistance to stop it.
- When corporate performance is less than expected and a 'profits warning' is imminent.
- When potential customers are threatening to move business elsewhere.
- Any public disclosure that can put the future of the business and its people at risk.

where they need the most help are frequently the sensitive issues that seriously impact on the long-term prosperity, growth or continuation of the business.

TEAMBUSTING

What is in the best interests of the business? We do not generally approve of teambusting. Sometimes, however, independent thought is required. It can be in the best interests of colleagues not to share real concerns and issues with them. At that point in time, business pressures may be so intense and risk of failure so severe that their input would only complicate the issues and generate a less than optimum solution. Perhaps, if occasion merits it, that is time to take the leadership role and go it alone – even if only for a short time. When a solution is not apparent, sharing concerns with colleagues who do not have the answers may result in a lack of confidence in the ability of the leader.

What is important is that the ‘top player’ adopts the appropriate behaviour in the best interests of the business, and that is contingent on a wide variety of circumstances to which only the top players may be privy. Other commentators on the scene never have the full picture. Any significant organisational change is like a late-breaking news story; the pictures, actors and events unroll at an unsteady and illogical pace. At times like this the senior players have to be trusted – period!

DIRECT APPROACH

Never shy away from exploring the unpleasant and tough questions. The role of coach should be that of listener and inquisitor – requiring the client to reconsider the unpleasant as well as pleasing outcomes. The effective coach should probe to test for understanding of key issues. He or she needs to conduct a review of ‘current and proposed action’, assessing potential strategies for change compared against identified threats and opportunities.

With significant business experience at senior level and relevant expertise, the seasoned coach knows precisely where dialogue and discussion will have most impact. Daring to ask the questions that other senior colleagues may want to ask but shy away from (perhaps because of perceived risk to personal career), the coach can add real value and be totally objective.

A coach can add tremendous value to the personal development of the team players at all levels. Although astute business people, the manager or executive may not always portray the required charisma, personal presence or ability to project, communicate and market their ideas to great effect. The coach should be able to demonstrate that he or she has mastered the process of communication and can work together with the client as a seamless team, aiding that client in the presentation and implementation of proposals.

SVENGALI AND SPIN DOCTORS

There are many coaches – the good, the bad and the ugly! The good ones explore the tough and sensitive questions, taking people through key issues and working on delicate areas without fear of the consequences. The poor coaches are selective in their discussions and consider their own interests rather than those of the organisation. We reject the Svengali or spin doctor approach.

Political manoeuvrings will always be a fear, especially in a small team, and can tarnish what could be a very powerful relationship. Too much collusion, rather than effective coaching, between coach and senior players, exposes the relationship to abuse. On the other hand, little commitment to coaching will result in ideas remaining in the head of the ‘senior manager’ with little exposure to keen discussion, dialogue and debate. At worst, without due debate and reflection, and in the absence of coaching, senior people can present their ideas poorly, without prior full analysis, leading to dire consequences.


SUMMARY

Coaching as a tool is applicable to any manager or team leader who is responsible for driving significant change and does not possess all the information, solutions and techniques for implementing changes. However, the main thrust of this article is focusing on senior managers. People who occupy senior positions need to be able to share their thoughts for testing. They need a mode of expression where they encourage others to challenge, to criticise, to build upon, and to analyse their thoughts and plans.

There are many times when thoughts and ideas have to be honed and tested. In these instances, it is time to consider the benefits of key players and leaders in the business developing a special relationship with others who are not afraid to ask the obvious and the obtuse. Unfortunately, there is no specialist training for such a role – in all contexts. There are no help lines to call. The trust that is developed and is displayed matures as the relationship evolves. This happens after working with clients when the two parties experience a ‘critical incident’ that demonstrates the requirements for a high degree of mutual trust.

Research tells us that the top ten personal traits identified with credible leaders are:

- honesty
- forward looking
- inspiring
- competent
- fair minded
- supportive
- broad minded
- intelligent
- straightforward, and
- courageous.¹

Our view is that these traits are also fundamental in establishing the trust, rapport and credibility required to enable the leader, CEO, managing director, senior executive or whoever else, to stretch beyond their comfort zones and achieve results in a climate of turbulent change. 

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Reference

1. Philip Atkinson, *Creating Culture Change: Strategies for Success*, Rushmore Wynne, 1996.
Original source, JM Kouzes and BZ Posner, *Credibility: How leaders gain and lose it, and people demand it*, Jossey Bass, 1993.

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