

Creating a coaching culture: relational field coaching

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Coaching is increasingly seen as the remit of the professional practitioner. The flurry of coaching qualifications further reinforces a view of the coach as a skilled professional and of coaching as a practice that is out of the reach of the normal individual manager or leader's grasp.

As highly skilled coaches have become available, managers in organizations seem to have somewhat relinquished their responsibilities for growing and developing staff. Leadership models that promoted such behavior (e.g. situational leadership) now seem outdated or just not spoken about.

It would seem that in some organizations, the emergence of coaching as a specialism is leading to less emphasis being placed on the benefits of creating and maintaining a coaching culture and stance. Not only is the latter more cost effective than hiring external coaches, but recent research from the Institute of Leadership and Management has shown the direct benefits of coaching to organizations. Maximizing these benefits means creating a coaching culture that permeates throughout the organization and develops internal coaching capability at all levels.

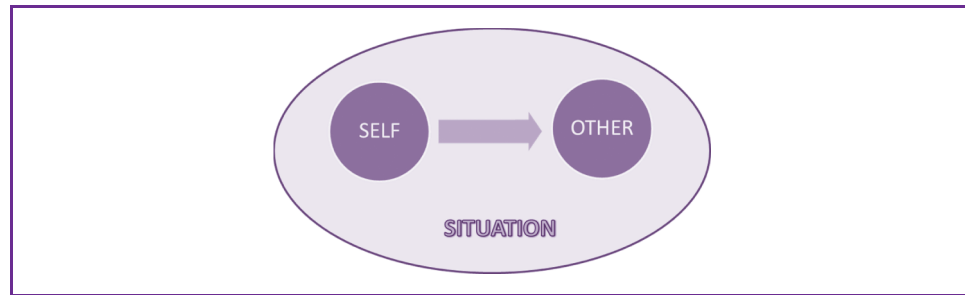
Whilst, executive coaching trends are emphasizing the importance of the coach/coachee relationship in terms of successful outcome (De Haan, 2008), this however is only one aspect of successful coaching. *Gestalt* psychotherapy for example, reminds us that individual experience is a function of the dynamic interplay between individual(s) and the wider field. In other words, the context or situation in which coaching takes place can be as impactful as the coaching relationship itself. We all, for example, can recognize how a timely and supportive comment by a colleague or manager can make the difference between a difficult assignment and sleepless nights of anxiety.

Wanting to capture both the "relational" and "field sensitive" nature of coaching, I suggest the term "relational field coaching" as a more appropriate reflection of a new paradigm that takes account of both relationship and the situational context in coaching. Relational field coaching is well captured by the three pronged relational framework (see Figure 1) of self-other-situation (yes it does spell SOS!) highlighting that it is the interplay of all three dimensions that need to be attended to (Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac, 2013). What is different in this model is recognizing that the context or situation is at least as important as the individual.

The relational field coaching paradigm invites us therefore to revisit the predominant view of coaching as only taking place *ex situ* in a closed office between an expert coach and a coachee. The question that arises is: how can we create a coaching culture within organizations where people feel empowered and supported to both ask for and provide "coaching" to each other?

Where to start?

Figure 1



Good intent and presence

It is important to de-structure the notion of coaching as a high-end skill unavailable to the manager or team leader. Coaching is more usefully viewed along a continuum of styles and skills with a starting point of positive intent and presence. We all know at an intuitive level what it feels like to turn towards others and try to be as present and available to them as possible. The notion of presence defined as “energetic availability and fluid responsiveness” (Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan, 2007) captures this sense of bringing all of oneself to the moment and responding to the need of another person.

It is important not to confuse this type of coaching with “being nice” or feel that it needs to happen formally or according to some pre-set rules. Often the most useful interventions are the ones that have taken place informally at the coffee machine.

A customized approach to building coaching capability

Many HR practitioners imagine that busy managers and leaders will be reluctant to participate in training programs to build their coaching skills. Experience has showed however that many managers like the idea of learning to coach (Rock and Donde, 2008) and furthermore that coaching others often reverses the effects of “power stress” (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2006).

It is important however for the capability building program to be well designed and appropriate to the organization’s context. When teaching a “real world coaching” one-day program to NHS leaders, I was aware of how much taking a full day out of very busy schedules reinforced the importance of coaching in a culture where productivity was key. The four-step process model devised for the “real world coaching” program (Denham-Vaughan and Gawlinski, 2012) also provided good support in a culture of process and procedure.

A different example of building coaching capability within an FMCG organization going through an extensive change program required a more modular approach. In this case, a flexible two hour “coaching skills” training package was designed which was accessible and easily slotted into either an extended team meeting or lunch session. The rollout strategy here required that team and department leads create the time for up-skilling their teams appropriately. What was different in this case was that a “pull” approach to building coaching skills was encouraged, with team leaders and managers requesting the training, supported by follow-up facilitated action learning sessions.

Embedding coaching strategically

We know that “what you measure is what you get”, and with respect to developing a coaching culture, it is no different. A coaching framework or program is not sustainable without clearly reinforced messages through all HR and people processes. Is coaching rewarded in performance appraisals, is it recognized as a valuable and strategic use of time? Are the leaders at the top of the organization walking the talk? Is the question of “how far are we to achieving a coaching culture” kept alive in team and board meetings?

Keywords:

Coaching,
Organizational change and learning,
Culture change,
Gestalt psychotherapy,
Organizational change,
Gestalt psychology

Conclusion

With the over-emphasis on the expertise of coaches, there is a trend towards downplaying the usefulness of the coaching provided by peers or managers. This article is a reminder that coaching is both relational and situational and that the benefits of a vibrant and responsive coaching culture should not be underestimated.

Relational field coaching is an approach to support an organization as a whole to take responsibility for moving towards a culture of coaching that is appropriate to its context and existing challenges.

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About the author

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