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Introduction to coaching

When most people think about coaching, they imagine a sports coach shouting and yelling at the players, trying to help them succeed without being directly involved.

In sport, the role of the coach is crucial to help people perform at their peak. Even the most accomplished sports people, such as Tiger Woods or Pete Sampras, still gain huge benefits from a good relationship with their coach.

The role of the coach in organisations is broadly similar. Whether the coaching is delivered by a manager as a general part of their duties or by a specific coach, it will still be about trying to achieve results through others.



Looking at coaching in this way, we can see that there is great benefit to be had from someone in the organisation who has the skills and abilities to draw the best out of others.

If it were possible for *everyone* in an organisation to improve

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their performance by as little as 1 or 2 per cent, the results would be staggering.

Many organisations are now taking the power of coaching very seriously and appointing people to the specific role of coach. While managers may have the skills and abilities to coach well, they are often preoccupied with more task-oriented matters and can struggle to find the time to coach effectively.

Increasingly we are able to tap into coaching outside our organisations. There are many small consultancies offering *Executive coaching*. This is where top-level managers in organisations can have regular weekly or monthly sessions with a trained coach to help them work through their current issues. It can often be valuable to have a coach who does not work in the organisation and who is, therefore, not involved in the same issues.

Similarly, some people are now seeking the services of *Life coaches* to help them work through personal problems, achieve goals and strike an effective work and life balance.

Whatever the context, we can see that coaching is intended to give one individual the means to help another move forward and develop in some way.

Coaching myths?

We have already said that coaching is a much-misunderstood concept and it is perhaps not surprising that many myths have sprung up around the subject. Can you see any truth in the following, for example?

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- Everything's fine we don't really have any problems and so we don't need any coaching
- I'm not a manager or team leader so I don't have anyone to coach
- I haven't time to coach
- I can't coach – I've no expertise in the underlying subject
- I went on a course about this, but then it was called feedback. That's all coaching really is
- This is just a fancy new name for what I've been doing for years – training people!

Everything's fine we don't really have any problems and so we don't need any coaching

Many people believe that coaching is about putting wrong things right. They would argue that things must be pretty poor in the organisation if it needs armies of people to solve other people's problems. If coaching is required, then it should be a short-term solution and the coaches should move on when things have been sorted out.

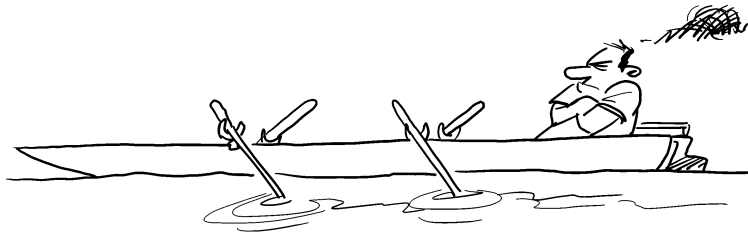
I'm not a manager or team leader so I don't have anyone to coach

Already we can see that coaching is a people development tool. By definition that means we must have people to coach. What then is the point of developing good coaching skills if we do not currently operate as a manager, supervisor or team leader and do not have any people reporting to us?

I haven't time to coach

We now know that there is more to coaching than at first meets the eye. If we think for a moment that a typical team will have at least six to eight people working in it, then we

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can begin to see that the team leader's task is almost hopeless.

Six to eight people, all wanting coaching every 6 weeks or so in sessions lasting up to an hour. How would we do any work?

I can't coach – I've no expertise in the underlying subject

How can we coach somebody to do something we cannot do ourselves? How can we keep up with all the changes in the ways that people do their jobs? How can we expect people to take us seriously as managers if we are not prepared or able to do what we ask them to do?

I went on a course about this, but then it was called feedback.

That's all coaching really is

For many people, coaching is something that happens as part of the organisation's Performance Management or Appraisal system. In some organisations, coaches have been known to sit behind a colleague while they are dealing with a customer

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and make notes on the things they did well or badly. Usually, the individual and the coach can then retire to a quiet area where the coach can run through the list and make suggestions for improvement.

This is just a fancy new name for what I've been doing for years – training people!

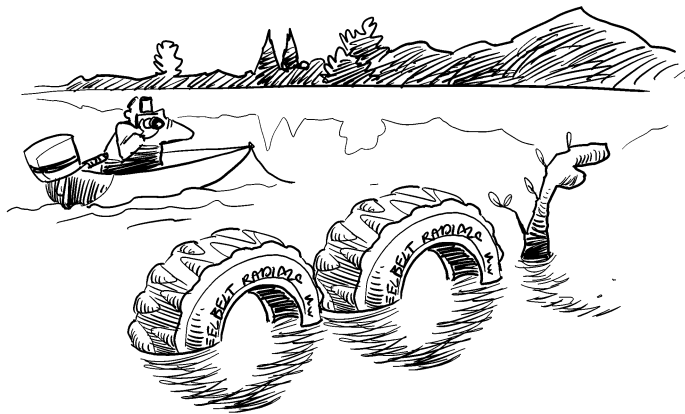
Can we really see any daylight between coaching and other methods of developing people? Coaching is ultimately about making people better at what they do, but then so is teaching, training, mentoring and counselling.

Let us now complete a simple self-assessment to see whether you feel that these statements are myths or not. Put a tick in the box you feel most comfortable with.

| Statement | This is true | This is a myth |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Everything's fine we don't really have any problems and so we don't need any coaching | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I'm not a manager or team leader so I don't have anyone to coach | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I haven't time to coach | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I can't coach – I've no expertise in the underlying subject | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I went on a course about this, but then it was called feedback. That's all coaching really is | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| This is just a fancy new name for what I've been doing for years – training people! | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

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We will revisit these statements again on Friday, after we have looked at coaching in more depth.



Coaching compared

We can begin to develop our understanding of coaching by considering how it compares with other ways of developing people. Specifically, let us consider the following:

- Coaching and teaching
- Coaching and training
- Coaching and mentoring
- Coaching and counselling

Coaching and teaching

We know from our own experience at school that teaching tends to be delivered to groups, following a predetermined lesson plan and with people of mixed abilities developing

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their understanding as best they can.

Of course, teaching can be given on a one-to-one basis and there are countless people who have benefited from being taught or tutored in this way. However, the dominant party in the teacher-pupil relationship is the teacher. The teacher will be concerned with passing on knowledge, facts and wisdom and, as pupils, we usually take a passive role and try to absorb it. We have little scope to set or follow our own agenda and we have to try to interpret what the teacher is saying and make sense of it against our own experience.

Coaching, on the other hand, is more often than not delivered one to one. It is the person being coached – often called the coachee – who sets the agenda and decides on the issue to be considered. As coaches, we are not there to provide input or advice or to tell the coachee how we would do things. Instead our role is to probe and encourage and help the coachee make sense of things for him or herself.

This can be a difficult concept to grasp and a comparison is useful here. When we get up in the morning we usually pad across the hallway to the bathroom and begin the mammoth task of making ourselves look presentable. For some, this will mean dragging a razor across their face and a comb through their hair, while others will concentrate on applying make-up and hairspray. All of these activities would be almost impossible without our trusty friend – the bathroom mirror.

But does the mirror say 'Ooh, I wouldn't do it like that' or 'that's not how we usually shave here' or 'you've never done your hair like that before'? Of course not! Nevertheless, the mirror does help us to make sense of what is going on and to achieve our aim – in this case, to look presentable.

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When we are coaching we are trying to perform the same function. The best coaches will hold up a 'mirror' so that people can develop a deep sense of self-awareness. When people are highly self-aware they have more choices about how to move issues forward.

Coaching and training

Bearing this in mind we can see that coaching is different to training. Training is concerned with helping people to perform of course, but again it is centred on the trainer and the subject matter, not on the individual.

Coaching and mentoring

Coaching and mentoring share many of the same skills and abilities, but are usually delivered by different people. A mentor is typically a senior person of greater experience who is invited to take us 'under their wing' and let us benefit from their wisdom.

If it is coaching we want, however, we are probably best advised to avoid a more experienced person who may be tempted to persuade us to 'do it their way'.

Given that we can now see how coaching is wholly concerned with drawing out and not putting in, we can also see how it is possible for anyone with the right skills to coach us – their position in the organisation is irrelevant.

Coaching and counselling

When we consider how coaching compares with counselling, we need to think about the limitations of coaching. Coaching in organisations is concerned with helping people to perform well in their jobs, not in dealing with deep-rooted problems from the past.

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It may be that as we coach we do uncover some painful or personal issues, but we need to know when to bring in the appropriate expertise. Most effective coaches are not trained counsellors or therapists, but they can still deliver excellent coaching support.

Arguably this exercise of comparison is academic. Do we really need to worry what method is used to develop people provided they are being developed? The short answer is no, but we do need to understand the unique qualities of coaching so that we can use it with choice and with greater care.

In reality, good coaches draw on all of these different approaches as they work with individuals. They will not be concerned about whether they are coaching or teaching at any one point in time. However, they will be concerned with using the right approach based on the needs of the individual and the demands of the situation.

In short, the best coaches have a simple philosophy:

'The brain with the problem, is the one with the solution'

Coaches work on this basis in the certain belief that people have vast reserves of potential which are rarely used and that their job is to draw it out.

Summary

Today has established an overall approach to coaching. We have outlined the basic philosophy of coaching and found

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I KNOW I HAVE THE ANSWER SOMEWHERE



that it recognises people, not as empty vessels into which knowledge and skills must be poured, but rather as seedlings who require careful nurturing and support.

In this chapter we have begun to develop an approach to coaching that is entirely in keeping with these ideas.

We have learnt that:

- Coaching in organisations is broadly similar to coaching in sport. The primary concern is to perform better and to develop people's abilities
- Coaching can be interpreted in different ways and we need to be aware that some views of coaching may actually be confusing
- Coaching shares many characteristics with teaching, counselling and training but has some subtle, yet important, differences
- Effective coaching allows people to develop their sense of self-awareness so that they begin to see their problems and concerns with greater clarity

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The remainder of the week will be concerned with developing our understanding and practical skills in order to become excellent coaches for the benefit of others and ourselves.

Tomorrow we will look more closely at coaching in the workplace and consider how we can build coaching into the set of management skills we already possess.