

Coaching – a valuable alternative in Learning and Development

By Alison Griffiths

One of the first lessons in Coaching is never to assume anything. So, let me begin by asking you to take some time and write down what you truly want to achieve in:

- a) your current role?
- b) your future career?

We will come back to this. However let me also ask you - how easy was it for you to come up with clear answers to those questions?

To put it into context. How much time do you spend ensuring the stability, safety and efficiency of the Products and Services you provide now and into the future? Now, compare this with the amount of time you spend on ensuring the personal stability, safety (as much as you can) and efficiency in terms of self motivation, energy and belief for yourself and your team? Am I right in thinking that it is a great deal less? What are the reasons for that? Where should the priorities be right now?

There is much discussion about the value of Human Capital and Knowledge Management ie. how we can financially calculate the value of what employers know about the company, its products, working practices, culture, the fact that they carry this around with them and take it away with them when they leave. With much of it intangible, it is not an easy task. However, on a personal basis you can probably very easily define your value and importance to the success of your company from the contribution you make and the service you provide. Without your peak performance, ability, commitment, loyalty, motivation and desire to deliver what needs to be, what would happen? Just as in the fable of the Goose that lay the Golden Egg – if we do not look after the Goose the eggs will no longer be golden.

It is therefore, a fundamental part of our roles as Leaders and Managers to look after our Geese and for us as Geese to ensure that we look after ourselves for the future in order to be the best now and gain for ourselves the level of stability and security we desire.

How do we get the best from ourselves now and for the future?

There are many forms of 'Learning and Development' (L&D) and for companies and individuals to achieve the most from it, I have always promoted a policy of mutual responsibility between employer and employee. This includes mutual responsibility for awareness of skills and knowledge gaps, contribution to commitment, time and funding. As we know, L&D comes in many guises which includes: Training; Mentoring; Secondments; Conference, Seminar and Meeting attendance; Reading and Thinking time and of course - Coaching.

How is Coaching an effective L&D tool?

There are many forms of Coaching and the word 'Coaching' can mean different things to different people. To me it is 'the art of facilitating the learning,

development and performance of another' (Downey, 1999:15¹) and it brings its own unique value that complements Training and Mentoring - giving individuals and teams a complete package. Just as for your health you might visit a Chiropractor for skeletal problems, a Chiropodist for foot problems and an Ophthalmologist for your eyes, so too might you be trained, coached or mentored depending upon your need. To put this into perspective, for a knowledge gap you may need some specific technical or personal training. To then develop the skill - a mentor (ie. someone experienced in the task or role) could help you put it into practice in the workplace. If both those have been accomplished and there is still a desire to improve performance - Coaching is likely to be the answer. In the words of Janice Caplan 'it is the glue that makes the training stick'². (For more information on the differences between Training, Mentoring and Coaching, please refer to 'Coaching for Career Enhancement'³).

Coaching can be used effectively for personal development in many different ways in the professional environment, including:

Leadership and Management - When preparing for a supervisory or management role or aiming to improve your current style, coaching leadership techniques can help build confidence, effective methods, the right style and attitude in order to build a more open, productive and motivated team

Career Development - Role transition within your organisation; As part of an Induction Programme for new employees (when the first three months can be the most challenging); Managing stressful situations; Career management; or when considering a complete life change

Performance Enhancement - Improving both good and poor performance, the technique of Coaching can help you increase effectiveness in your current role, for example, by building confidence and assertiveness, overcoming procrastination and fear (eg, presentations or change.)

Executive Coaching - a more open ended type of Coaching which links the personal goals of the client or coachee with the wider business goals - uncovering attitude blocks and challenging style. This is often acquired for senior-ranking executives. However, as with Career Coaching, Executive Coaching is increasing in popularity for high performers and middle managers as part of Human Resources' Retention and Talent Management strategies.

Coaching can be short or longer term. For example, with Executive and Career Change, the Coach is usually seen regularly in the first few months and then called upon as necessary. The Coach often acts as a sounding board or reality check as the person progresses. For Role Transition, Induction, Performance Enhancement Coaching, it is usual for coaching to last a finite amount of time depending upon the specific need - usually 3 to 6 months with a course of 6 to 12 bi-weekly sessions.

What could you expect to experience from Coaching?

¹ Neenan, M and Dryden, W: Life Coaching A Cognitive Behavioural Approach; 2002: ix

² Caplan, Janice: Coaching for the Future; 2003:7:82

³ Griffiths, A: BIRA Regulatory Review, June 2003: 6:4 (24)

The art of a good Coach is in Socratic questioning ie. being able to gain depth of thought from you in a way that you may be unable to do alone. This is done with questions that are relevant, brief, specific and appropriate. Using this technique helps problem solving, decision making, unravelling blocks that may be preventing performance or progression. The result is that you tap into a level of potential and ability that you might not otherwise have discovered. You may have heard Coaching being referred to as 'helping you realise your true potential'. Unlike a trainer or teacher, the Coach is there to facilitate your learning rather than give you the information and it should be noted that this can be challenging in itself. In Career Coaching I am often faced with individuals wanting me to wave a magic wand and tell them exactly what to do – even if I could - who am I to do that? Only we as individuals can make such decisions ourselves and as much as I would love there to be a Job shop I could send people to – it is unfortunately not possible. The role of the Coach is to help you discover what it is yourself and the message therefore is - be prepared to work, be persistent and you will get results!

Many Coaches use the same fundamental process and more can be found on some of the different Coaching models in 'The benefits of Coaching in Management and Leadership'⁴.

To help put a common process into perspective I will use the GROW Model (as demonstrated in Figure 1) and return to the questions I posed to you at the beginning of this article. These were aimed at getting you thinking about your goals. You could be asking 'Why?' and many of my clients have asked 'Why do we spend so much time on goal setting?' In reply I would ask – 'How can you change something you don't 'want', to what you do, if you don't clarify what your 'want' is?' How often have you spent time worrying and discussing a situation or problem rather than using the time more productively to focus on how you would really like to change it and what that change looks like?

G	Goal Setting
R	Reality Checking
O	Options
W	Willingness to implement

Figure 1: The GROW Model⁵

Coaching is about helping you achieve those results. Setting the goal is pivotal and to me the role of a good Coach is to ensure that the stage of defining the goal is not rushed. The reality of the situation should be clarified and the goal should be challenging but not overwhelming. There should be a desire, willingness and demonstrable level of self motivation and physical energy from you to begin taking action. If this is lacking, the goal should be re-assessed and that is so throughout the process. It is therefore important that the reality and energy levels are re-evaluated regularly to define whether the goal has changed / should change.

⁴ Griffiths, Alison: ESRA Rapporteur; September / October 2003: 10:5 (25)

⁵ Whitmore, John: Coaching for Performance: 2003

Once the goal is set, the role of the Coach is to help you define what your options are in achieving it, and using techniques, define which is/are the most appropriate option(s) to pursue. You will then put an Action Plan together, consider any obstacles and how you may overcome them.

Throughout the process you may be set tasks to help you. The Coach is there as your motivator, challenger, sounding board and confidante. Be prepared to be challenged, questioned and nudged (especially if you fall behind with your Action Plan or Tasks!) Your Coach should have your best interests at heart – after all the sessions are to help you achieve your goals, not those of the Coach! For that reason it is important for you to have faith and build a good rapport with your Coach. Many offer free half hour or hour sessions for you to ascertain this at the beginning. Even though you will be taken out of your comfort zone (a necessary aspect if you are going to achieve something new) you should feel comfortable with your Coach and have an open, honest and assertive relationship.

I am sure you will now have gained an insight into how Coaching works as an alternative L&D tool in a number of situations. There will be many of you who can relate to times in your life when maybe the services of a Coach have or could have been invaluable. The techniques you learn through such a process provide valuable self-help tools which with practice can become second nature. They can also be adapted for all aspects of our busy lives – thus instilling greater confidence in our own ability to develop ourselves and manage the constant change that has become our norm.

About the author

Alison Griffiths, Director Executive Services, Unicus Ltd, is a qualified Cognitive Behavioural Coach who specialises in Career Enhancement Coaching and provides services in Performance, Executive and Personal Coaching. She is a founder member of the Association for Coaching (AC) and a member of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council. The Association for Coaching is committed to raising awareness of the value of Coaching in Organisational Development for more information visit www.associationforcoaching.com.

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