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# Creating a coaching and mentoring culture

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# Creating a coaching and mentoring culture

Every significant study of effective managers concludes that those managers, who get the most out of their teams, spend a high proportion of their time and energy coaching or mentoring others. Effective managerial coaches are able to delegate more, to create a stronger sense of purpose within the team and to motivate the performance of others. Even more important, perhaps, they free up time so that they can focus on the most important tasks, instead of fire-fighting or doing jobs that could be done by their direct reports.

Where the performance focus of coaching is paralleled by well-designed mentoring programmes, which take a more holistic view of the employee's development and support career self-management, quite radical changes occur in the way that people communicate, the quality of personal and organisational decisions and levels of employee retention.

Hence the growing interest by companies across the world in creating sustainable coaching and mentoring cultures. But how would you recognise a coaching and mentoring culture, if you saw one?

Some of the characteristics that emerge from international research include the following:

- Personal growth, team development and organisational learning are integrated and the links clearly understood
- People are able to engage in constructive and positive confrontation
- People welcome feedback (even at the top) and actively seek it
- Coaching/mentoring is seen as a joint responsibility of managers and their direct reports (something done with people, not to them)
- There is good understanding at all levels about what effective developers and developpees do
- Coaching/mentoring is seen primarily as a opportunity rather than as a remedial intervention
- People are recognised and rewarded for their activity in sharing knowledge
- Time for reflection is valued
- There are effective mechanisms for identifying and addressing barriers to learning
- People look first inside the organisation for their next job (a typical average would be that only one in five does so!)
- There are strong role models for good coaching/mentoring practice



- Managers and professionals are willing to spend quality time with people from other teams, acting as a mentor to help them think through how they manage careers and broad personal development goals
- There is sufficient formal (supported) mentoring, with well-trained participants, to provide the conditions, where informal mentoring flourishes as well
- People see mentoring and coaching as a natural part of “the way we do things”

So how do you create a coaching and mentoring culture? Nearly two decades suggest that some of the answers are:

- By ensuring that all managers have at least the basic skills of coaching/mentoring
- By equipping all employees with the skills to be coached/mentored effectively
- By providing an Advanced Coaching Skills programme for senior managers and HR staff
- By developing a cadre of mastercoaches – people with a natural talent for developing others, who are willing to take on the additional tasks of being a role model, coaching less able peer managers in coaching skills and, in some cases, being an upward coach to more senior managers
- By providing opportunities to review good coaching or mentoring practice
- By recognising and rewarding managers who demonstrate good coaching behaviour and commitment to coaching/mentoring
- By measuring and providing feedback on the quality, relevance and accessibility of coaching/mentoring
- By ensuring that top management provide strong, positive role models
- By identifying cultural and systems barriers to developmental behaviours
- By ensuring that all mentoring initiatives are aligned to the International Standards for Mentoring Programmes in Employment

### **Ensuring that all managers have at least the basic skills of coaching / mentoring**

Just running a training course isn't enough. Managers need to put what they have learned into practice. Initial training needs to be reinforced with opportunities to review each coaching/mentoring session and to reflect upon feedback from the coachee/mentee. Good practice typically involves either follow up group sessions, or the use of a mastercoach/mastermentor to sit in on coaching/mentoring sessions and provide immediate feedback.



### **Equipping all employees with the skills to be coached/ mentored effectively**

CA's research indicates that coaching/mentoring works best when the coachee/mentee is both a willing and an informed participant. The more the coachee/mentee understands about the process, the easier it is to help the coach/mentor help them. For example, effective coachees and mentees learn how to phrase questions in ways that will elicit the kind of help they want.

Greater impact can also be gained by regarding coaching as a team activity (most coaching is actually done by peers, not superiors, anyway) and engaging the whole team in learning how to make coaching a day to day activity.

### **Providing an Advanced Skills programme for senior managers**

The more senior an employee is, the more important it is that they coach and mentor well – the costs of mistakes and lost talent rise exponentially the higher up the organisation one goes. An Advanced Skills programme builds on their existing knowledge and competence, providing a range of techniques and approaches that broaden their portfolio of responses.

### **Developing a cadre of mastercoaches/ mastermentors**

Typical programmes last a year and aim to equip these internal managers and HR professionals with a wide enough experience of coaching and mentoring to tackle most problems they may encounter, and provide a valuable resource of experience to support less experienced people developers.

The core process is action learning – participants share the learning burden and explore issues together in a series of one-day meetings. There are also opportunities for contributions of knowledge from outside experts. At the end of the programme, they have the confidence and competence to act as real champions for the coaching and mentoring culture.

### **Providing opportunities to review good practice**

Bringing coaches or mentors – of all levels of experience – together from time to time helps to spread good practice and remind people of what is expected of them. This is particularly true around the time of annual appraisal. A coaching practice review can help managers prepare direct reports more effectively for their appraisal, and thus extract much greater value from it.

### **Recognising and rewarding managers who demonstrate good practice**

If managers, who do not coach/mentor or invest significant effort in developing others, still receive promotions and high rewards, it sends a very negative message. Some organisations are now making developmental performance an integral part of their succession planning and annual bonus systems.



### **Measuring and providing feedback on the quality, relevance and accessibility of coaching and mentoring**

It's important to have a clear picture of what coaching/mentoring is happening, and how effective it is, especially from the perspective of the coachee/mentee. Identifying pockets of good and poor practice allows for remedial action. Similarly, tracking the progress of mentoring relationships makes it possible to provide extra support, if needed, and acts as a stimulus for mentor and mentee to review their relationship.

### **Ensuring that top management provide strong, positive role models**

Top management can choose to be coached or mentored by a professional external resource, by a peer, or by someone more junior, who can educate them in other perspectives. (This is especially useful when the more junior person comes from a different gender or racial origin.)

A positive example from the top is critical. Unless people see that top managers are investing in their own development, and in coaching/ mentoring others, their own motivation to do so will inevitably be muted.

### **Identifying cultural and systems barriers to developmental behaviours**

The excuses managers give for not devoting sufficient time to coaching/ mentoring or to encouraging coaching between members of the team are many. Top of the list is usually inadequate time and much can be achieved by helping managers develop better skills of prioritising, general time management and establishing regular and sacrosanct periods of reflective space.

**Other barriers to coaching behaviour are often more subtle** – for example, a general reluctance to address difficult behavioural issues, or to admit to weaknesses. Initial research to establish these most common such barriers can prove invaluable. From this understanding, it is possible to conduct educational and motivational campaigns and to coach managers to overcome their own specific barriers.

Also highly relevant is the perception by managers of overall supportiveness of the organisation towards development activity. Again, this is something that can be measured and used as a broad benchmark of progress towards a coaching and mentoring culture.

### **Ensuring that all mentoring initiatives are aligned to the International Standards for Mentoring Programmes in Employment**

The positive outcomes from ISMPE-compliant programmes tend to greatly exceed the average. It seems to be particularly important to make sure people understand the purpose of the programme and their roles within it, that they have sufficient initial and subsequent training, and access to further support, if needed.



### **The need for a coherent approach**

Establishing a coaching and mentoring culture, then, requires a much more concentrated, integrated approach than most companies have applied. For real change to happen, managers need a progressive level of skills improvement, just-in-time sources of advice, pressure from coachees and mentees, positive role models and a supportive environment.

Cost-wise, however, such an approach may be less expensive than continually training and retraining managers, who continue to behave largely as they have always done. It is certainly more likely to produce results.