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David Clutterbuck 11 July 2011

Middle East coaching and mentoring conference signals a change in mindsets

David Clutterbuck urges the UK coaching community to play its part

Amidst all the chaos and conflict in the Arab world, something happened recently that adds a note of optimism for the [Arab Spring](#). The first Gulf Conference on Coaching and Mentoring, held in Kuwait, was a relatively modest affair, with only 100 or so participants. But it is significant as a sign of change in mindset – and one that has implications and opportunities for the coaching community in the UK and elsewhere in Western Europe.

Awareness of coaching and mentoring is low in the Arab world, though they are relatively well established in some other Islamic countries, such as Malaysia. Coaching and mentoring are instruments of change – gradual, manageable and sustainable change – and it is this aspect that has begun to capture the attention of employers and governments (often the same thing – in Kuwait, 80 per cent of the population works for the government). Better evolution than revolution, it seems. Hence the call from Waleed Al-Haddad, a senior government official in Kuwait for a government department of coaching.

This sudden embracing of coaching and mentoring won't be easy. There are few models to emulate, either at individual or corporate level. There is an expectation among employees and managers in the Gulf that learning has to be a formal process, so there is relatively little experience of informal learning.

Cultural factors, such as tribalism and nepotism, and most importantly the difficulty people have in challenging the opinions of someone more senior to themselves, make this a steep learning curve. Yet, at the same time, the culture can also be a driver for coaching. One of the pillars of Islam is charity or [zakat](#). In an information society, knowledge is becoming as important as money as a source of capital. So the step from giving money to giving knowledge and insight is a small one and there is a growing acceptance that coaching is both compatible with and a reinforcement for Islamic beliefs and behaviours.

So how can coaches and mentors in the UK contribute to this process? The internet provides practical opportunities. For example:

- Becoming an online mentor or coach for the Cherie Blair Foundation or for Mowgli – two volunteer organisations working with entrepreneurs in Middle East countries.
- Building a co-mentoring relationship with coaches and/or HR professionals in the region (sort of learning pen pals!)
- Actively extending your online social networks to include people from the Islamic world.

Among the personal benefits for coaches in getting involved in this kind of activity is the learning they acquire – in particular, through challenges to their own perspectives and assumptions. There's also the satisfaction of contributing, albeit in a modest way, to achieving greater stability in a volatile part of the world, which has great impact on the global community as a whole. It may sound highly aspirational, but aren't coaching and mentoring about raising and pursuing great expectations?