

# Creating a coaching culture

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to summarise the author's recent research into what is involved in creating a coaching culture.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Based on a series of organisation cases six dimensions are identified and four sub-dimensions within each, and an instrument is developed that assesses the level of development of organisations across these dimensions. More work remains to be done in validating the instrument, but it has already been found to provide a framework for consideration of the issues in creating a coaching culture in a number of international organisations.

**Findings** – The study finds that addressing the organisational dimension by exploring the agenda for creating a coaching culture is one way to direct attention and energy towards the business benefits. The fuller findings of this study are published as in *Making Coaching Work: Creating a Coaching Culture*.

**Practical implications** – The article provides an agenda for practitioners – both business leaders and development advisors, and also offers a framework for future research.

**Originality/value** – This article seeks to highlight the paucity of previous research in this area and to outline what can be done in practice to enhance the impact of coaching so that it affects the organisation culture, not simply the behaviour of individual managers.

**Keywords** Coaching, Culture (sociology), Case studies, Mentoring

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

What is the role of measurement in developing and sustaining a coaching culture? While it is generally true that “what gets measured, gets done”, measurement has a much wider role to play. In particular, it helps business leaders and coaching coordinators to identify areas for improvement in both process and performance of developmental practice. You have measures in many of your other programmes that connect with measures of the impact of coaching culture development – for example student and staff experience surveys. The tool outlined in this article measures the overall progress towards developing a coaching culture.

## The four stages – measuring progress towards a coaching culture

We have based our coaching culture diagnostic on two principles. The first is that it should reflect the issues identified in our research; the second that, given that the achievement of a coaching culture is a lengthy and gradual process, any diagnostic instrument should allow your college to see progress over time. We have therefore arranged our indicators in four levels, representing progressive stages on the journey.

These four stages we have named nascent, tactical, strategic and embedded.

At the nascent stage, an organisation shows little or no commitment to creating a coaching culture. While some coaching may happen, it is highly inconsistent in both frequency and quality. Top managers present poor role models and coaching behaviours tend to be abandoned in the face of more urgent, if less important, demands on managers' time. Any

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executive coaching provided is uncoordinated and typically the result of severe performance problems with a few individuals or a status boost for senior managers incapable of (or unwilling to engage in) self-development. People tend to avoid tackling difficult behavioural or ethical issues, out of embarrassment, ineptitude, fear, or a combination of all three.

At the tactical stage, the organisation has recognised the value of establishing a coaching culture, but there is little understanding of what that means, or what will be involved. Top management sees the issue as primarily one for human resources (HR). There are systems in place to train coaches and/or mentors, and there are numerous discrete HR systems such as succession planning and appraisal, but the links between these and the coaching process are at best tenuous. There is a broad understanding among individual contributors and managers of the potential benefits of coaching, but commitment to coaching behaviours as integral to management style is low. People recognise the need to tackle difficult behavioural or ethical issues, but will only do so in environments where they feel very safe.

At the strategic stage, there has been considerable effort expended to educate managers and employees in the value of coaching and to give people the competence (and therefore confidence) to coach in a variety of situations. Managers are rewarded/ punished for delivery/non-delivery of coaching, typically linked to formal appraisal of direct reports. Top management have accepted the need to demonstrate good practice and most, if not all, set an example by coaching others. They spend time getting across to employees how coaching behaviours support the key business drivers. However, while the formal coaching process works well (in part because it is measured), the informal process creaks at the joints. There are plans to integrate coaching and mentoring with the wider portfolio of HR systems, and, at a mechanical level, these largely work. People are willing to confront difficult behavioural or ethical issues on an *ad hoc* basis and there are good role models for doing so with both resolution and compassion.

At the embedded stage, people at all levels are engaged in coaching, both formal and informal, with colleagues both within the same function and across functions and levels. Some senior executives are mentored by more junior people, and there is widespread use of 360° feedback at all levels to provide insights, into areas, where the individual can benefit from coaching help. Much, if not most, of this coaching and mentoring is informal, but people are sufficiently knowledgeable and skilled to avoid most of the downsides to informal mentoring. Coaching and mentoring are so seamlessly built into the structure of HR systems that they occur automatically. The skills of learning dialogue are sufficiently widespread that people are able to raise difficult or controversial issues, knowing that their motivations will be respected and that colleagues will see it as an opportunity to improve, either personally, or organisationally, or both.

### Measuring progress towards dimensions of a coaching culture

This questionnaire seeks to assess the question, “To what extent is your organisation as a whole (or the part of it that you are interested in) moving to integrate coaching into its deep processes of performance and renewal?”. The questionnaire is built around the four stages outlined above and the six dimensions of our model with their 24 areas listed below:

1. *1 Coaching linked to business drivers:*
  - 1.1 Integrate coaching into strategy, measures and processes.
  - 1.2 Integrate coaching and high performance.
  - 1.3 Coaching has a core business driver to justify it.
  - 1.4 Coaching becomes the way of doing business.

**“ Much, if not most, of this coaching and mentoring is informal, but people are sufficiently knowledgeable and skilled to avoid most of the downsides to informal mentoring. ”**

2. *2 Being a coachee is encouraged and supported:*
  - 2.1 Encourage and trigger being a coachee.
  - 2.2 You can challenge your boss to coach.
  - 2.3 Extensive training for both coach and coachee.
  - 2.4 External coaches used to give coaches experience of being coached.
3. *3 Provide coach training:*
  - 3.1 Integrate coach training for all.
  - 3.2 Coaches receive feedback on their use of coaching.
  - 3.3 After their training coaches are followed up.
  - 3.4 Coaches are accredited, certificated or licensed.
4. *4 Reward and recognise coaching:*
  - 4.1 People are rewarded for knowledge sharing.
  - 4.2 Coaching is promoted as an investment in excellence.
  - 4.3 Top team are coaching role models (who seek and use feedback).
  - 4.4 Dedicated coaching leader.
5. *5 Systemic perspective:*
  - 5.1 Assume people are competent.
  - 5.2 Organic, not process driven.
  - 5.3 Initiatives decentralised.
  - 5.4 Constructive confrontation.
6. *6 The move to coaching is managed:*
  - 6.1 Senior group manages move to coaching.
  - 6.2 Line takes responsibility for coaching culture.
  - 6.3 Integrate coaching and culture change.
  - 6.4 Coaching supports delegation and empowerment.

The questionnaire can be used in a range of ways in exploring the development of a coaching culture. We give below some examples, and you are encouraged to develop your own ways, to suit your context and purposes.

### Source of the dimensions

All companies were assumed to provide widespread coach training and to pay attention to how external coaches were used. In addition they adopted some of the practices outlined in Table I. The items in italics were seen as crucial across the range of potential case studies we identified and we selected the companies to be core cases from those which scored a yes (Y) for at least three of these core items.

### Ways of using the questionnaire

- Respondents can answer by circling the item in each row that most corresponds to their experience of their organisation. They can then allocate points to each area – 1 if nascent description is circled; 2 for tactical; 3 for strategic and 4 for embedded. They can then tot up the scores in each of the six dimensions of the model and make comparisons as to which areas are more fully addressed and which have substantial scope for development. If a group are completing the questionnaire, then their scores on the six dimensions or the 24 areas can be compared and, through dialogue, a position agreed, and its implications for action worked through.

**Table I**

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>ABN</i>	<i>HBoS</i>	<i>IBM</i>	<i>Kg's</i>	<i>KPMG</i>	<i>SBS</i>	<i>Voda</i>
A <i>Integrate coaching into way of doing business (5)</i>	Y		Y	Y	Y		Y
B <i>Feedback on use of coaching</i>	Y						Y
C <i>Encourage or trigger being a coachee (5)</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		
D <i>Follow-up practice supported</i>	Y						Y
E <i>You can challenge your boss to coach</i>	Y						
F <i>External coaches integrated</i>	Y						
G <i>Senior group manages move to coach</i>		Y					
H <i>Line takes responsibility for coaching culture</i>		Y		Y			
I <i>Integrate coaching and high performance</i>		Y					
J <i>Integrate coaching and culture change (5)</i>		Y	Y	Y	Y		Y
K <i>Integrate coaching into other measures and processes (4)</i>		Y		Y		Y	Y
M <i>Accredit, certificate, licence coaches (4)</i>		Y	Y	Y		Y	
N <i>Have a core business driver</i>			Y			Y	
O <i>Integrate coach training for all</i>				Y			
P <i>Assume people are competent</i>					Y		
Q <i>Organic – not process driven</i>					Y		
R <i>Dedicated coaching leader</i>					Y		
S <i>Initiatives decentralised</i>					Y		
T <i>Coaching supports delegation and empowerment</i>						Y	
U <i>Coaching linked to strategy</i>						Y	
V <i>Extensive training for both coach and coachee</i>						Y	
W <i>Coaching is promoted as an investment in excellence, not simply remedial (7)</i>	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
X <i>People are rewarded for knowledge sharing</i>			Y				
Y <i>Top management coaching role models (including for seeking and using feedback)</i>				Y			
Z <i>Constructive confrontation</i>	Y		Y				

- Some will want to burrow down into the detail of the dimensions. They can use materials we can provide to inform their thinking about the issues to be addressed.
- Others will want to build a broad-brush picture and perhaps take a series of measures over time as a way of monitoring and focusing the development of a coaching culture.
- The questionnaire can also be used, less mechanistically, as a basis for the start of a conversation rather than as a number-crunching exercise. A top team or a steering group could use it to develop an agenda for the culture that they want. In many cases a set of circled answers in the “Embedded” column will not be what they are looking for. An agenda can be developed taking into account what is desired and a consensus on what the current situation is.

These ways of using this tool are all of help in measuring the move to a coaching culture, and they are also dispensable. What is essential is that wide ranges of the parties involved have conversations where they review the state of the coaching culture. It is too important to be left to HR specialists alone, or, even less usefully, to external advisors (see Table II).

## Conclusion

Coaching is a hot topic in HRD, but the obsession with individual relationships among the coaching community means that the connection to organisational imperatives is often

**Table II** Coaching culture questionnaire

<i>A Nascent</i>	<i>B Tactical</i>	<i>C Strategic</i>	<i>D Embedded</i>
11A Coaching happens without reference to strategy and process 12A Coaching is used to correct poor performers	11B Coaching is referred to in strategy documents 12B Coaching is used to contribute to performance of all	11C Managers are measured on the effects of their coaching 12C Coaching is used as the main driver of performance	11D Key organisation performance measures include coaching outputs 12D Coaching is the way of performance managing individuals, teams and the organisation
13A A coach is seen as "nice to have"	13B Coaching is compatible with core business drivers	13C Core business driver articulated and coaching is the means of delivering it	13D The more urgent/ important/ mission-critical a project, the more coaching is used
14A Coaching is a specialist activity separate from normal managing 21A People are coached only if their boss is keen on it	14B Coaching is used by bosses one-on-one to improve performance 21B Coachees are coached as part of performance management processes	14C Coaching is widely used as a way of working in teams and projects 21C From induction to retirement people expect to be coached	14D Coaching is used in all settings from shop floor to boardroom 21D Staff seek coaching internally and from customers/suppliers/outside benchmarks
22A Staff accept it if their bosses cannot or will not coach 23A Learning to be coached comes from being lucky to have a coaching boss 24A External coaches used as the stage before outplacement	22B Staff frequently ask for coaching 23B Training of coachees has as much attention as coach training 24B External coaches widely available to support a range of development issues	22C The right to be coached is accepted throughout the organisation 23C The coachees' drive to learn and perform stimulates coaching 24C External coaches support supervision/development of senior managers as coaches	22D Coachees will coach their coaches in coaching if they need it 23D Coaching seen as one of many alliances to be managed by coachees 24D External coaches work with internal leaders to steer coachee-led development agenda
31A Managers do a range of coach training or none at all	31B Coach training is widely available	31C Different coach training offerings are integrated	31D Coach training pervades development opportunities and agenda
32A Coaching is a private concern, not noticed or commented upon 33A Once trained, coaches are left to their own devices	32B Coaches get feedback from staff on whether they coach 33B Coaches get follow-up support from tutors after training	32C Coaches get ongoing feedback from coachees on how they coach 33C Coaches get feedback between and after training workshops from peers, coachees and tutors	32D All managers get 360° feedback on how they coach 33D Coaches have ongoing support for their practice from peers and tutors
34A The organisation does not recognise or certificate coaches 41A Knowledge is used as a source of power	34B Coaches are recognised for their contribution to the performance of others 41B Knowledge sharing is common from experienced staff to new colleagues	34C Coaches have opportunities to deepen their learning through certification 41C Knowledge sharing is used, recognised and valued	34D Accreditation widely used as part of CPD of coaches 41D Knowledge sharing upward, downward and between peers is a way of life
42A Having a coach is seen as a fashion accessory	42B Coaching helps to improve performance	42C High performing team members coach one another	42D Coaching is widely used to develop a high performing organisation
43A Top team members who are coached do not talk about it	43B Top team members talk about their coaching	43C Top team talk about challenges in their coaching/being coached	43D Top team seek and use feedback on their coaching
44A Coaches encourage coachees to take responsibility 51A Coaches focus on plugging skills gaps as seen by the coach	44B Coaching is led as an HR/development project 51B Coaching begins from development goals of coachees	44C Line people take significant leadership of the move to coaching 51C Coaching is fuelled by learners' dreams or aspirations	44D Dedicated line staff are committed to developing coaching 51D Coaching integrates individual dreams and shared organisational vision

*(Continued)*

**Table II**

<i>A Nascent</i>	<i>B Tactical</i>	<i>C Strategic</i>	<i>D Embedded</i>
52A Coaching starts from individual needs	52B Coaching involves shared learning and dialogue	52C Networks of coaches develop together, using co-coaching	52D Learning agendas and aspirations are widely shared throughout the organisation
53A There are several different initiatives on coaching that are not connected	53B Coaching initiatives have their own life and are linked to each other	53C Coaching is used to develop an enquiring stance towards organisation agendas	53D Autonomy and co-operation equally valued in widespread coaching between divisions/functions
54A Coaches are often blunt and abrasive	54B Coaches are often candid and forthright	54C Mutual dialogue about tough issues – coach and coachee open to learning	54D Organisation blind spots and weaknesses addressed in coaching relationships
61A Coaching is an HR/development initiative	61B Senior group endorse the move to coaching	61C Senior group demonstrate the use of coaching in achieving goals	61D Senior group integrate development of organisation with use of coaching style
62A Some individuals are enthusiastic about being a coach	62B Line managers lead coaching initiatives in their own areas	62C Line managers take responsibility for coaching throughout the organisation	62D Coaching is used to manage projects and in a wide range of meetings
63A Coaches are conscious of the need for culture change	63B Coaches use coaching to advocate culture change	63C Coaches make the link between management style, coaching and culture	63D Coaches live the link between management style, coaching and culture
64A Coaches encourage coachees to take responsibility	64B Coaches provide or create opportunities for coachees to perform	64C Coachees and coaches actively manage mutual support and challenge between them	64D Coachees take responsibility for their own performance accountably and in a no-blame way

neglected. We have found that addressing the organisational dimension by exploring the agenda for creating a coaching culture is one way to direct attention and energy towards the business benefits.

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