

Your Call

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Coaching has seen significant growth in recent years with the CIPD reporting that almost 80% of organisations now use some form of coaching to develop talent within their organisation (CIPD 2010)¹. Traditionally coaching has been reserved for senior executives (Walker-Fraser 2011)² but in this article we review how coaching has been made available to all employees, regardless of their seniority within the TalkTalk Telecom Group plc., resulting in significant benefits.

TalkTalk operates in a highly competitive and rapidly changing market in the UK and in recent years has experienced high levels of expansion and change, driven by both growth and acquisition. As a result of this rapidly changing, technologically driven context it became clear that the organisation's learning and development strategy would also need to change to support the skills needed in the new business environment. The HR team defined that they needed to increase individual professional development to encourage greater personal responsibility and saw coaching as a potential vehicle for achieving this objective. The aim was to 'democratise' coaching so that a wide diversity of individuals from across the organisation could take advantage of its benefits. The aim was to use it as a positive learning and development strategy and to encourage individuals to take ownership of their own learning and development. However, this needed to be achieved in a cost effective way as explained by Nicola Woods, TalkTalk's Talent Consultant, *"...we spent a lot of money on one-to-one coaching for our senior leaders but what about nurturing our talent throughout the organisation to help develop the right culture – a culture where people take responsibility, who are accountable, who have an understanding of what they want to do, because development starts with the individual..."*

But to support the aim of increasing ownership for development, it was vital that coaching was itself a choice, requiring employees to exercise personal responsibility for their commitment to the coaching process. Nigel Sullivan, Head of HR recalls *'I'm a convert to coaching, it makes a difference to people's performance and if the individual drives it they'll get more benefit from it. That's why we haven't forced it on people.'* The way the programme was introduced therefore signalled a clear cultural message that individuals needed to take the initiative and thus clearly demonstrated one of the main aims of the programme.

Typology of coaching

The traditional model of coaching in organisations focuses on the development of senior leaders (ICF 2014)³ where external coaches are used to provide specialist confidential support to address individual development needs. Typically, these engagements span many months and achieve good outcomes, but can be prohibitive for wide scale use. One potential solution is to train employees in the skills of coaching, thus widening the application of coaching to gain the benefits reported from internal resources.

The most common approach to bringing coaching 'in-house' has been to train managers as coaches but it is often difficult for managers to devote the time required to formal coaching meetings. In fact, the effectiveness of coaching by line managers appears to have fallen from 51% in 2010 to 39% in 2013 (CIPD 2013). While managers can be trained as effective coaches they occupy in the minds of employees a particular role that limits the coaching relationship. This is not

to undervalue the skills of managers, but to highlight that managers can never offer the same independent relationship as an external coach.

We know that the coach/client relationship is a key determinant of coaching success (de Haan, 2012)⁴, and the manager's ultimate position of power and authority inevitably affects the coaching interaction. The employee is unlikely to want to express their real fears and failings with the person who may do their appraisal, no matter how good the relationship or the coaching skills of the manager. The manager also has ultimate accountability for the performance of their whole team, so may find it hard to prioritise the development needs of the individual if it may impact on this month's trading figures in favour of long term succession planning.

Such issues mean that expecting managers to coach their staff in a formal structured way may be unrealistic and ultimately a poor use of managerial time and effort. At TalkTalk it was also felt that managers were not yet ready to drive coaching due to the extensive restructuring and organisational change that was taking place.

To deliver effective internal coaching some organisations have therefore added coaching to the services offered by learning and development or HR specialists. However there remains a potential concern by staff that the relationship may not be entirely confidential and it can become confused with performance management and remedial or disciplinary processes. At TalkTalk the HR team was relatively small so was unable to support individual coaching throughout the organisation.

One way to address this issue of neutrality and capacity in larger organisations is to train specialist internal coaches from a broad set of departments (ILM, 2013)⁵. These are then offered as coaches to other teams or areas of the business with which they have no contact. This brings a degree of separation and independence to the relationship and can significantly increase the coaching resources available. However such schemes require a large pool of employees and can still suffer issues. Those within a similar cultural frame may collude rather than challenge thinking, and confidentiality can still limit uptake by coachees.

Jo Taylor, Head of Resourcing and Talent Management at TalkTalk, has designed a more innovative coaching solution for nurturing and leading talent through organisational change called 'Spot Coaching'. The idea was to make coaching accessible on an ad hoc basis to all employees within the TalkTalk group, by providing experienced external coaches to anyone in the organisation for up-to three sessions per year. External spot coaches are available on site on specific days and anyone can book a 90-minute session to discuss relevant personal or developmental issues. The coaching topic is client driven and coaches focus on confidential positive personal development. This means the coach can remain client focused and is seen as independent. This gives a high calibre of coaching support across the organisation, but limits the financial exposure.

Nicola Woods described the aims of the scheme: *"its intention was to get in touch with as many people, a cross section of individuals, as possible to help them be better in their roles and to help them take more responsibility for their own development because once you start having coaching you are taking responsibility and you start changing"*

The scheme has proved a huge success. In the initial ten months of the scheme over 219 employees took part, many of whom had never experienced coaching before and the demand took the HR team by surprise as commented by Taylor, *"it just took off and we just couldn't keep up – the demand outstripped the supply."*

Evaluating the programme

Despite this apparent popularity TalkTalk were keen to carry out an independent evaluation before the first anniversary of the launch. We were asked to assess the schemes contribution to the business and recommend enhancements. The aim was to identify the key elements that were the drivers of success and to define how it had contributed to the business change initiative. This would help decision making about future investment in the programme.

Using a Case Study approach we gathered data over a three month period from a wide variety of stakeholders in order to measure aspects of the spot coaching programme. The stakeholders included spot coaches, coachees, HR, HR Business Partners and managers.

We gathered both quantitative and qualitative data from an on-line survey, followed by one-to-one interviews and a focus group. In addition, internal documentation, communications and processes were reviewed. This generated extensive data that has informed best practice for the continued expansion of the scheme.

Spot Coaching: A new approach?

Feedback from all stakeholders has been very positive. Taylor reports that coachees gain *“a sense of empowerment. They feel really, really excited afterwards. They feel that the experience has been really invaluable. It gives them real food for thought on how to approach things differently or how to take a difference stance on something”*.

Quantitative survey results from spot coaching attendees also highlight the positive outcomes achieved. 100% of survey respondents felt spot coaching could be useful for everyone and is something they would like to continue. Many felt the experience was invaluable and often describe it as life changing or an ‘epiphany’.

Introducing spot coaching across the organization has certainly succeeded in meeting the aims of increasing personal responsibility for professional development. 98% of survey respondents reported that spot coaching has helped them to appreciate their own role in their personal and professional development. 90% feel more confident to manage their own professional development and over 92% have subsequently taken positive action towards their own professional development.

One HR business partner reflected that *“There were a couple of people who were really negative about where they were going and about their career and what was available to them. They were probably of the mindset of ‘why bother?’ They were very much not taking responsibility for their own destiny. Following coaching you can see a significant change in their mindset”*.

A number of other significant individual and organisational outcomes were also reported, including increased confidence, improved communication skills and enhanced resilience.

Learning from the Spot Coaching Scheme

The first year of the scheme proved a great success in achieving the desired objectives and gaining staff engagement. In addition, much knowledge was generated about how to best manage a scheme of this type.

Firstly, having an effective process in place is key to gaining commitment and to ensuring efficient use of the coach’s time. Nicola Woods was managing the scheme at the launch and explains *“my advice in a nutshell would be to be prepared to spend time on it, to invest in it. It’s not just about sending communications out and individuals scheduling sessions. What makes the difference is HR actually investing time in it, listening to people.”*

Secondly, not all coaches are suited to this type of work. Many coaches expect to build a long term relationship and to use extensive tools or psychometrics. The spot coaching approach is far more immediate and coaches need to be happy with that style of working. One of the TalkTalk spot coaches commented that *‘you need to be comfortable to work without a long term agenda and without knowing the eventual outcomes of your work’*. In addition, strategic alignment with the organisation is vital. Jo Taylor explained that *“the quality of the coaches is critical because you*

need to be able to have very honest conversations with the coaches and you need to feel that when they're in the room they understand your business".

Thirdly, because these coaches are external and independent they are well placed to gather information about the 'temperature' of the organisation. Since they see a broad cross-section of individuals across all the TalkTalk office locations, harvesting themes from spot coaches proved valuable. The common patterns identified can inform HR policy and practice. TalkTalk have gained essential information about how managers are perceived, about how individuals feel about the organisation and how well staff are adapting to working in the rapidly changing environment.

Conclusion

Like many organisations today TalkTalk is challenged with operating in a fast paced results focussed context. Despite this, they have been able to implement an effective, innovative, on-demand coaching scheme that supports the growth and transformation of the organisational culture. By providing independent professional coaches across the organisation they have been able to support individual personal responsibility for learning and development in a cost effective and inclusive way. Bringing professional coaching to a broader population in this way has delivered enhanced skills to the business and encouraged individuals to take greater personal responsibility for their own contribution and learning. In doing so, employees are learning to become more agile workers who can thrive in a constantly changing workforce environment.

REFERENCES

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