Spot-Coaching: A new approach to coaching for organisations operating in the VUCA environment

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Abstract

Objectives
This study evaluated the outcomes of a new delivery format for coaching in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. It reviewed the impact on individuals of making external executive coaches available for individual coaching conversations to all employees at the TalkTalk Telecom Group. The research objective was to identify the potential contribution of this Spot-Coaching approach to individual development in a complex rapidly changing business environment.

Design
A case study methodology was used to gather data from multiple stakeholders over a 3-month period by independent researchers.

Methods
The mixed method data collection included an online questionnaire, one-to-one interviews and a focus group.

Results
Findings reported by participants included increases in confidence and communication skills, the development of personal responsibility and enhanced resilience.

Results indicate that the Spot-Coaching model can be a valuable development tool for a wide group beyond the executive level. It also suggests that the delivery format common to executive coaching based on fixed and regular sessions with a consistent coach, may not be necessary or appropriate for all contexts in order to show positive results.

Conclusions
Adapting coaching delivery to a more flexible and inclusive format that is in greater alignment with the culture operating in such VUCA contexts can deliver enhanced skills to organisations. In this study it appeared to encourage individuals to take greater personal responsibility for their own contribution and learning thus becoming more agile workers who can thrive in a constantly changing environment.

Keywords

Business coaching, coaching outcomes, VUCA environment, individual development, organisational culture change.

Introduction

Coaching has become a core development strategy for many organisations and the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development reports that close to 80% of UK organisations now use some form of coaching to develop organisational talent (CIPD, 2010). However an external executive coach is frequently only made available to managers or senior leaders (Walker-Fraser, 2011) often in a structured programme of four or six sessions (Stokes & Jolly, 2014). In this case study we review how a new delivery format for coaching has been implemented at the TalkTalk Telecom Group plc and summarise some of the key outcomes. TalkTalk operates in a highly competitive and rapidly changing telecoms and media market in the UK. Such contexts are often referred to as Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014a). The aim of this study was to evaluate how the coaching approach chosen by TalkTalk meets the needs of the VUCA context and what outcomes were achieved.

This paper will start by describing the context for this case study with some information about the organisation where this research took place. This will be followed by a review of existing literature in relation to the VUCA context in relation to personal development. It will then move on to review literature about coaching outcomes that might be valuable in a VUCA context and to highlight the role of cultural fit in coaching provision. The paper will then summarise the findings from this mixed methods case study, including data from a variety of stakeholders and discuss the potential implications. The paper will finally draw together conclusions, address limitations and identify areas for future research.

The Context

In recent years TalkTalk[1] 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. This is a common issue for many organisations experiencing consistent technological advances (Schuchmann & Seufert, 2015). TalkTalk operates in what is often referred to as the VUCA context (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014a). The telecoms market is changing rapidly, creating volatility and uncertainty about the future. Technological change creates ambiguity and the telecoms market has expanded to include information, entertainment and shopping. Some argue that labelling their business context as VUCA can become a way to excuse a lack of strategic planning but that what is actually needed is action to better prepare for such an environment (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014b). One aspect of this is how staff can be supported to build the skills needed to meet the challenges of the VUCA environment, as traditional training is in danger of being out of date very quickly and will often deliver a single performance outcome (Stewart et al., 2008). In contrast, coaching has been shown to deliver both personal and performance outcomes (Stewart et al., 2008) and can create experiential learning that is current and responsive to the immediate needs of the business. It can be delivered flexibly around personal schedules and work commitments and provides individual customised development that is both efficient and targeted. Coaching has been described as a 'human development process' (Bachkirova et al., 2014, p1) and this brings a unique contribution to the VUCA context. By developing the individual, rather than just transferring knowledge, coaching can help workers to become more self-directed and better able to manage their own development so they ultimately become more agile and flexible to meet the constantly changing challenges.

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[1] Talk Talk have given permission to publish this article and to name the organisation.

At TalkTalk the desire to achieve cultural change in such a volatile context led to the launch of a bespoke leadership development programme. To support this programme an innovative coaching strategy called 'Spot-Coaching' (SC) was put in place to embed a coaching culture more widely within the organisation. We define Spot-Coaching as:

> …an ad hoc coaching conversation with an independent professional external coach, which is made available to all employees in an organisation.

Spot-Coaching was designed with two aims. Firstly, to democratise coaching and make it available to everyone, whatever their level within the organisation, thus widening the use and benefits of coaching and demonstrating inclusivity. The second aim was to increase personal responsibility by helping individuals across the organisation to take ownership of their own learning and development. By building this personal responsibility, it was felt that individuals would become more self-directed and thus more able to respond to business challenges. The aim was to create more self-sufficient and independent learners so that staff might become more responsive and therefore more agile workers, better able to thrive in a VUCA environment.

Professional external executive coaches were made available for ad-hoc coaching conversations with any employee based on a booking system. The organisation allowed each employee up to three coaching sessions in a one-year period, which the employee could book and take as required. The scheme was publicised as a positive opportunity to enhance individual personal and professional development. The Spot-Coaching model was therefore quite a fluid concept to mirror the culture that was being promoted within the organisation.

There was no formal assessment by the coach, no defined model that needed to be followed or implemented, and no regular follow up with a consistent coach. Each coach, once recruited as a suitable fit for the organisation, was asked to provide confidential coaching conversations and was able to use their own personal approach. The distinctive nature of this programme was therefore the lack of formal structure, availability to all, yet employing external professional coaches. External professional coaches are often engaged to provide long-term development interventions, with more informal coaching conversations provided by managers or internal coaches (Spaten & Flensborg 2013). Talk Talk felt that the confidentiality and expertise offered by external executive coaches would better support staff, if it could be delivered in a cost effective and timely way.

The objective of this case study is to evaluate how Spot-Coaching was received and what impact stakeholders reported on individual development in this complex rapidly changing business environment.

Literature Review

The VUCA Context for Development

The VUCA acronym has become popular in practitioner literature (Swarbrick & Stearman, 2012; Horner, 2013), but relatively little academic research has been conducted with this specific focus in mind. This study aimed to evaluate this new SC model that had been designed to meet the needs of an organisation operating in the VUCA context, and to assess if this model would deliver the outcomes required to support staff working in this environment.

Some argue that the VUCA term can be used to justify the complete futility of strategic planning. Yet Bennett and Lemoine (2014a) argue that the four words that make up VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) need to be clearly deconstructed and used to inform practice. It is not helpful in their view to generate vague solutions such as 'innovate' or to abdicate any attempt at planning for this context.

Bennett and Lemoine (2014a) suggest Volatility must be met with **agility** to generate flexibility in the system; that Uncertainty needs to be minimised with **information**; that Complexity of the context needs to be mirrored by the organisation so that **restructuring** happens regularly to meet emerging demands; and that Ambiguity needs to be met with active **experimentation** that allows new approaches to be tested when the 'rules of the game change' and no one is quite sure which is the best new approach.

The implications of such an approach are that the skills of the workforce also need to be re-evaluated and that the learning and development strategy needs to support individuals to develop the core competencies that are required to thrive in such a context. Table 1 suggests the attributes that might support the objectives proposed by Bennett and Lemoine (2014a) which might inform the development strategy.

	How to effectively address it	Skills required of the workforce
Volatility	Agility	Flexible mentality and the ability to see and hold alternative perspectives. The ability to take the initiative and responsibility for action, the ability to be accountable for their own development so that they develop more quickly the attributes required and respond to change more quickly.
Uncertainty	Information	Enhanced communication skills to ensure networks and information flow freely, the confidence to seek out information and to convey even difficult messages to all levels of stakeholders. Greater self-awareness of their impact on others and how to manage their behaviours to facilitate the flow of information. Willingness to collaborate with others.
Complexity	Restructuring	Resilience to deal with constant change and adaptability to new situations. To be self-reliant so that individuals do not rely on the hierarchy of command and are able to take responsibility for supporting change.
Ambiguity	Experimentation	Confidence to suggest new ideas and to question established approaches or hierarchy. High self-efficacy to motivate action towards testing of new ideas, the ability to set their own goals and to drive development conversations. Willingness to take risk.

Adapted from Bennett & Lemoine (2014a)

The development of such attributes can be addressed through training but coaching is another option that may better fit the VUCA context for two reasons. Firstly, coaching can be more flexible in terms of delivery and can be made available when it is both relevant and convenient. Secondly, coaching is well placed to offer the individual level of development that underlies many of the characteristics identified. Coaching has been shown to increase a number of the attributes mentioned (Grant et al., 2009; Stokes & Jolly, 2014) and may prove more effective for enhancing personal characteristics, such as confidence and self-efficacy where individuals may be less prepared to admit weakness, or to address such issues in a team or group training context.

Significant data already exists on the outcomes of coaching (De Meuse et al., 2009; Ely et al., 2010), however within organisations, external executive coaches are often only offered to managers or senior executives based on an intervention lasting a number of months (Stokes &

Jolly, 2014). The programme put in place by TalkTalk presented a new delivery format so it was unclear if this approach would show similar positive outcomes.

Outcomes of Coaching

Coaching has become a common development strategy in the organisational context (CIPD, 2010) and although many forms of coaching exist a working definition suggested by Bachkirova et al. (2014) is:

> *'Coaching is a human development process that involves structured, focused interaction and the use of appropriate strategies, tools and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the coachee and potentially for other stakeholders' (p1).*

Gathering data on the impact of coaching is also still an area of considerable debate, with no commonly accepted procedure for evaluating coaching (De Meuse et al., 2009; Ely et al., 2010). However numerous studies report positive outcomes from traditional executive coaching interventions that are aimed at managers and involve at least three formal sessions (Stokes & Jolly, 2014) with the same coach (Baron & Morin, 2010). In many cases the reported enhanced attributes are the characteristics that might be desired by organisations seeking to develop staff skills for the VUCA context, thus supporting the strategic aims suggested by Bennett and Lemoine (2014a).

Grant et al. (2009) reported increases in goal attainment, resilience and well-being in executives following four individual coaching sessions with external coaches based on a Solution-Focused approach. Yu et al. (2008) also measured increases in pro-activity, core performance, self-insight, well-being and goal-attainment although not all individual scales showed positive movement. Bowles et al. (2007) reported positive impacts on performance when middle managers received coaching from internal more experienced managers. Internal coaching has also produced increases in self-efficacy following a coaching programme over a two year period (Leonard-Cross, 2010).

In contrast, Sherlock-Storey et al. (2013) found no significant change in self-efficacy following three 90 minute coaching sessions over a six week period. However participants did report significant positive changes in resilience levels and confidence in dealing with organisational change following the coaching programme. This coaching programme delivered by external coaches, was specifically aimed at helping individuals facing organisational change and increasing their resilience. Coaching executives through times of organisational change has also been associated with 'increased goal attainment, enhanced solution-focused thinking, a greater ability to deal with change, increased leadership self-efficacy and resilience, and decrease in depression.' (Grant, 2014, p258).

The positive effects of executive coaching are therefore well documented, with positive outcomes reported using both internal and external coaches. However there is some evidence that perceived effectiveness is higher when using external coaches who are psychologically trained and have credibility with the target group (Bozer et al., 2014). Within the scheme being evaluated in this study, the use of external coaches was felt to bring greater credibility to the coaching and also ensured confidentiality.

The data available on the effectiveness of coaching outside the executive or managerial sphere is more limited (Jones et al., 2015). Most of the existing literature evaluates the impact of executive coaching delivered as a long-term intervention of often between three and six sessions. However, little work has established if similar effects might be seen with much shorter interventions or with non-executive groups. Blackman-Sheppard (2004) argue that 'the foundation stones for executive coaching – quality integrated thinking, confidentiality, trust – are equally important to all its people if an organisation is to perform well financially and sustainably' (p5). There may therefore be

substantial benefits in making coaching available to a wider population. In addition, Smither et al. (2003) did report positive impacts on managers who received coaching despite 45% of the sample meeting their coach only once or twice, resulting in an overall sample average of only 2.42 coaching sessions per participant. Others also advocate the value of brief coaching interactions (Szabo et al., 2009; Hicks & McCracken, 2013).

The common model based on executive coaching requiring extensive meetings with a regular external coach aimed at only top levels may therefore merit further investigation. The organisational culture required to succeed in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous context is one of agility and responsiveness. The organisation needs to support the development of adaptable, agile and innovative workers who are self-driven and able to respond to constantly changing demands. To try and achieve this with highly structured regular formal meetings aimed at only the elite top levels, seems a poor fit for the context, and fails to model the very behavioural profile that the organisation may be trying to promote.

Organisational alignment of Coaching

At TalkTalk the objective was to mirror the desired culture with the coaching offer by providing flexible, responsive coaching that was available to everyone. The aim was to demonstrate the cultural shift required in how the coaching was set up. The programme encouraged everyone to take part thus delivering a message of inclusively, and devolved responsibility: it was short term, agile and flexible - all the characteristics that TalkTalk sought to promote in the new organisational culture. HR took a minor role in the organisation of the scheme and simply provided the framework. It was the responsibility of individuals to take the initiative and to sign up, again a characteristic that the organisation was seeking to encourage in the day-to-day working context. Finally the organisation was not involved in the setting of goals or milestones known as 'Free-Agenda' coaching (Jarvis et al., 2006). Again, this was a clear indication to employees that the organisation was willing and able to support growth and development, but that individuals needed to take responsibility for moving forward and setting their own goals. This approach represents a clear application of the principles proposed by Fillery-Travis & Lane (2006) who advocate the need to ensure the coaching approach used addresses a coherent set of aims in a consistent way. TalkTalk therefore demonstrated alignment between the organisational context and the coaching framework set in place (Jarvis et al., 2006).

The purpose of this research was to identify if positive effects might be seen when coaching was not delivered in a formal programme and aimed at a far more diverse client group. The TalkTalk scheme was aimed at all levels of staff and involved no long term commitment. If this delivery format proved to be successful in such a complex, technologically driven and rapidly changing environment such as TalkTalk, it may become a suitable development option for other environments enabling the benefits of coaching to reach a wider population.

Methodology

A case study methodology was used to gather data from multiple stakeholders by two researchers who were independent of the organisation, although one had coached within the organisation. The data collected over three months was based on three sources.

1.   Internal documentation and intranet information

- A review of the on-line documentation from the organisational website
- Access to the post-Spot-Coaching internal survey

2.   On-line anonymous questionnaire to coachees

42 responses to an on-line questionnaire to coaches.

Between June 2012 and March 2013, approximately 219 employees from across the organisation had taken advantage of one Spot-Coaching session, 34 employees had received a second follow-up session. All 219 were sent an e-mail invitation to complete the anonymous questionnaire, of which 42 completed the questionnaire.

3. Interviews with a variety of stakeholders

    - One focus group discussion with all coaches used on the Spot-Coaching programme

       The four coaches involved were asked to take part in a focus group and all agreed.

    - 6 one-to-one interviews with members of HR and HR Business Partners (HRBP)

       The HR department identified individuals who had some experience of the programme and these individuals were asked to take part in a short interview. These individuals represented various levels and locations but participation was voluntary.

    - 11 one-to-one follow-up interviews with coachees across three sites.

       Questionnaire respondents were asked to add their e-mail address if they were prepared to take part in a subsequent follow up interview.

The objective of the research presented here, based on these three data sources, is to identify the potential contribution of Spot-Coaching to individual development in a complex rapidly changing business environment.

Spot-Coaching format

A cadre of four external coaches were made available on certain days of the month across all the TalkTalk UK office sites. These executive coaches had no specific SC expertise but the organisational selection process did try to identify coaches who would be happy to work in such an unstructured way. Coaches were then briefed on the organisational context at Talk Talk and how the scheme would run. Any member of staff could book a one-to-one session lasting an hour and a half. All staff could book up to three sessions a year but there was no guarantee of meeting the same coach. In creating this flexible and immediate format for the delivery of coaching, TalkTalk aimed to align coaching with the desired culture of the organisation. The organisation would support and provide development opportunities that staff could take advantage of, but individuals had to take the initiative, the intervention was short term and staff were expected to set their own goals. There were no boundaries regarding which workplace issues could be discussed and the coach worked completely independently with no line manager/HR report back required.

SC was advertised on the company intranet together with general information about coaching. Any individual could then book a session with the available coach on a set day of the month through HR. The often late confirmation of clients meant that spot coaches were not able to prepare for sessions, therefore any benefits would be gained purely from the coaching conversation as the use of assessment, tools and psychometrics was limited. Following the session there was no commitment to a second meeting and no guarantee that a follow-up session would be with the same coach.

Research Participants

All interview participants were given a Participant Information Sheet to read and asked to complete a consent form before the start of the interview. The on-line questionnaire also included participant

information at the start that confirmed participation was voluntary. This was clearly understood as the return rate was 35%, meaning 65% opted to not take part. The questionnaire was completed by 42 coachees from four divisions and all office locations. It included responses from four different grade bands and covered a cross section of ages, 48% were between 25-34 years, 27% were between 35-44 years and the rest declined to say. There was a slight bias towards male responses (54%) to female (43%) that is in line with the company profile. Only 22% of respondents had been with the company less than one year, 54% 1-4 years, and 24% more than 5 years.

The coaches were asked if they would be prepared to attend a confidential focus group, which all four agreed to do. No member of the organisation was present and the session was recorded and transcribed.

Members of HR staff were asked to volunteer to take part in confidential interviews with the researchers. Volunteers came from every level of HR giving a broad cross-section and were contacted independently by the researchers to arrange an appropriate time and venue. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

All coachees who had taken part in the SC programme were sent the research questionnaire link that was held on an independent platform. Responses were anonymous but the last question asked if they would be prepared to take part in a follow up interview. Those who were prepared to take part added their e-mail to be contacted directly by the researchers. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Following data collection the interview data was analysed using NVivo software for thematic analysis. The questionnaire data was then linked with the emerging qualitative themes to provide the multiple perspectives appropriate to case study research.

Questionnaire

The self-report questionnaire included ten qualitative questions such as:

- *Can you describe one example of how the coaching has had an impact? What, if any, feedback have you had that might relate to the impact of the Spot-Coaching?*

It also contained 25 Likert-style questions in which respondents had to rate the degree to which they Agreed or Disagreed with a statement on a five-point scale e.g. The Spot-Coaching I received helped me to….

- *Build my confidence*

- *Deal more effectively with uncertainty and change*

The questions focussed on five key areas:

1. Self-Managed Learning: The degree to which SC had influenced their ability to take charge of their own development.

2. Behaviour/Attitude/Skills: The degree to which they felt any of these attributes had changed.

3. Reactions: How they felt subjectively about the scheme

4. Organisational commitment: How the programme had influenced their commitment to the organisation

5. Process: Feedback on the process of implementation and communication

Interview Questions

In order to ensure come consistency of structure all three participant groups (coaches, coachees, HR) were asked similar questions during the interview, grouped into four categories. The categories were:

1. Best Practice – this covered aspects of what worked well and included procedural and logistic topics.

2. Support for Personal Development – this section asked for perceived changes experienced or seen.

3. Contribution to Organisation – this section asked for examples of how the programme might be linked to the strategic or business environment.

4. Reactions – here participants were asked for feelings about the scheme.

The interviews therefore followed a semi-structured format with key areas for discussion and specific prompt questions. However participants were encouraged to elaborate where necessary.

The quotes below are anonymised according to the following annotations: C denotes a coachee response, followed by I,W or L to represent their work location, plus a number. For example 'CL2' is coachee participant number two, based in London. Central HR are coded as 'HR' plus a number and all HR Business Partners are identified by 'HRBP' plus a respondent number. All coach responses are labelled 'Coaches'.

Findings

All of the survey respondents felt SC could be useful for everyone and was something they would like to continue. Many felt the experience was invaluable and often described it as life changing or an 'epiphany'.

Quantitative survey results from SC attendees highlighted a significant number of positive outcomes that were further supported by the qualitative data from interview participants. These included an increase in confidence and communication skills, the development of personal responsibility and accountability and an increase in taking responsibility for their own personal wellbeing. The main themes that emerged in relation to personal development will be discussed below and were:

- Confidence
- Improved interactions and communication skills
- Enhanced self-awareness
- Greater Personal Responsibility and Accountability fuelling action
- Clarifying a Career Development Path
- Wellbeing and Resilience

Confidence

Of the survey respondents, 95% agreed that SC had helped build their confidence and many coachees gave examples of how they felt their confidence had increased.

> *It's certainly having the confidence to go out and do. Sometimes you stop yourself doing things for all the wrong reasons rather than all the right reasons, so it's recognizing that some of the things you're doing are for the wrong reasons. So it's highlighting those and giving you the confidence to get on and do it. CI3*

Some coaches, HR and the HRBP's, had also noticed these changes in confidence.

> *… they begin to feel really important, it's a boost to low confidence and low self-esteem. Coaches*

> *From being one of the quieter members of my employee reps, he's probably been one of the more prominent members in that he nominated himself to become one of the national members so I think it was related to that – could be – but I've certainly noticed a change in him. HRBP1*

This increase in confidence manifested in the business in a number of ways. Firstly it was increasing self-awareness and helping employees deal more effectively with feedback they received.

> *It's made me more confident, made me aware of how I deal with people, made me aware of how I take feedback. I might have taken things personally before but I am more aware of communication styles now. CL5*

Secondly it improved interactions between people.

> *Confidence – definitely beneficial – I think, I have built a relationship very quickly with someone who I think will help me with my development so it's about facilitating that conversation. So from starting to try and construct this process last year, coaching has now helped me develop that conversation and that process so now I can talk around it and ask those people "what do you think about it?" so it's a growing idea. CL4*

Thirdly it helped employees to have a voice and develop the confidence to be heard with regard to suggesting and making improvements in the business.

> *I think its confidence …because I'm more confident. People are sitting up a bit more …so now if I was to say something that actually we should do XYZ, I am able to vocalise and people actually listen. Now I have the confidence to say, "actually I CAN make a change" so I am motivated to come in and actually say I think this will be better so let's give it a go and see if we can make improvements. CL3*

This increased confidence gave some individuals the ability to question the status quo and to enhance performance and working processes. In addition, it gave them the confidence to have potentially difficult conversations with others. Ultimately this made an impact on decision making because employees were more open to ask about the opinions of others without feeling threatened, and to put their own thoughts forward for debate.

> *Now I would go to my boss or my bosses boss and say "you asked me to do this but I think this is more important" and I would not have done this before… so it impacts my ability to make decisions in my role. CL2*

Improved interactions and communication skills

The enhanced confidence was explained by participants as helping to drive better communication. There also appeared to be a cyclical relationship whereby improved communication skills precipitated better interactions, which in turn, fuelled an increase in confidence.

> *Feeling invested in has made me feel more positive in myself. It has made me think about when I'm communicating with people, the need to communicate in a different way depending on who it is - alter communication styles to overcome some of the frustrations, which I certainly had in the way I've been communicating information. So making it more short and succinct has helped me to form better relationships with some senior people... has reassessed their opinion of me which in turn has made me more confident and I feel better about myself and the contribution I'm making –it's self-perpetuating. CL5*

Over 75% of survey respondents agreed that the SC had improved their communication skills and 80% agreed that they were more able to effectively deal with difficult situations or people.

> *I was really struggling with this person - couldn't approach them, couldn't get on with them. We were constantly clashing and now I haven't got the best relationship in the world but I can speak to them and deal with the business issues that arise with that person. And that was me realising that I would have to change my behaviour to get this relationship to work. I couldn't just blame x, I had to change my own behaviour around x which I did. CW2*

Some also reported having received positive feedback on the changes they had made.

> *Thoroughly worthwhile and given dealings I've had with one person as a result of the session and the positive feedback I've had from him, yes I'm pleased. CL1*

Overall, 73% of the survey respondents believed that SC enhanced skills relevant to their job and much of this related to developing better interaction skills with others.

> *It promotes better teamwork. If I can get a team of 10 people to do something by just being nice to them, it is better utilisation of resources and links to better customer service. CL2*

In summary, it appears that communication skills were perceived as having improved and this helped create better working relationships, which could potentially drive productivity.

Enhanced Self Awareness

Some of the improvement in communication was driven by enhanced self-awareness. Nearly 88% of survey respondents agree that their self-awareness had increased.

> *It has made me more self-aware than I was before... I am very, very blunt and do not think I understood how my bluntness came across to people, especially those lower down the organisation than me... I came across as rude but I was just trying to direct. I am much more self-aware of how I come across and spend more time reflecting on how I say things. CL2*

There were consistent reports that this self-awareness was making people more aware of their own emotions and behaviours. Once they developed this awareness they started to appreciate the impact these behaviours had on others and on their own potential career prospects.

I didn't understand the effect - that those around me could have an impact on my career development - I didn't get it. My boss tried to explain it but I didn't understand it ... those people were just there... I got that completely wrong.' CL2

SC appeared to help people take a new, often more objective perspective in situations. This development of emotional control was reported as supporting better interactions and often contributed to solving business problems.

It's that ability to step back, to take that moment before you jump in with both feet and see it from the other person's perspective. CI2

Ultimately an important element in this is when people say "I've been working on this and really struggling with this but I'm now coming at it from a different angle because I've thought about it with my coach and I've unlocked it…" – it's about getting an 'outside looking in' perspective and getting people to reflect on that and we're ultimately helping them to achieve some tangible things that they've been working on. HRBP1

Self-awareness therefore appeared to increase, and this was in line with the strategic aims of the programme.

Greater Personal Responsibility and Accountability fuelling action

One of the primary goals of the Spot-Coaching (SC) programme was to encourage personal responsibility for learning and it would appear this goal was realised by survey respondents.

- 98% of survey respondents reported that SC had helped them to appreciate their own role in their personal and professional development.
- 92% of the survey respondents agreed that SC was valuable in helping them take charge of their personal development.
- 92% had subsequently taken positive action towards their own professional development as a result of the SC experience.
- 90% agree that they are now more confident to manage their own personal development

It probably made me more accountable – made me feel like I own my personal development more. CW3

Definitely more ownership for learning – that sort of subconscious thing I was referring to – that's the bit that has changed I guess because I've realised that if anyone is going to do anything about it, it's me not somebody else. How much I go down that road is dependent on time etc. but it is still there – it's in my thought processes – it's stuck there now. CL1

HR also noted this impact.

There are a couple of people who are 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 HR2

In taking responsibility for personal development many coachees also took steps towards greater personal responsibility in other aspects too.

As soon as I realised that was what I didn't like, it was right then – "what can I do to change that?" …being much more proactive about it… and now I know that if I don't

like a situation I have to stand back and say "right what is it that isn't right?" and "how do I take control of that?" I can't sit there and be a victim. CL3

Coaches also noted this change in responsibility that manifests as empowerment enabling greater pro-activity.

I think what I tend to find prior to working with them is resignation and I think what tends to happen as a result of the session or when they come back is that they tend to feel enabled, empowered or able to actually take responsibility for what they need to do in a way that feels hopeful – not hope just to make them feel better but something constructive and I think that effects the spirit. Coaches

This is in line with what HR wanted to achieve. In supporting personal responsibility for learning, this was cultivating a cultural mindset that supported responsibility in other areas of the business.

Getting them to think differently, to take more responsibility of themselves as individuals… Our philosophy is that we want people to take ownership and to drive the development agenda themselves so we will put the support and the tools in place to make that happen. But part of that coaching session is getting people to think really differently and to take more ownership themselves and that can flow into other things, not just development but across the organisation. So for me that is a critical cultural mindset change as well. HRBP2

Once people appreciated and accepted their personal responsibility they felt empowered to take action to make things happen. Many reported examples of how they had gone on to take specific action. For some this related to taking action on future development.

So my objective is to learn about a new area of the business, so I have the motivation for that engagement… yes the same thing – a personal ownership for learning – I have created a structure and this allows me to go back to my manager and to say this is what I want to do before the next session. CL4

However for others the action taken was a business related idea.

It has prompted me as well – I've got a big idea about new project development – I'm in research so it's helped me think about the people I need to go and talk to and how I'd approach them. CL4

Overall there were many examples where coachees felt an increased sense of control and were able to convert this to action.

These people go out and they make a difference – they go out and they change the way they operate – they communicate differently with their team. And those difficult relationships they have going on can be made different or they cannot be made different or they decide how they want to progress – where they're going to go for help with their need, you know which department they would really like to be in. Coaches

Feedback highlighted that the SC scheme had acted as a catalyst for taking action in a number of ways: Firstly, personal responsibility for making changes that created the attitude, energy and desire to take action. Secondly, building the confidence to engage with others to facilitate the change required, through appropriate conversations and interactions. Finally supporting the motivation to become more proactive and engaged in the change process because individuals were more hopeful and believed their actions were more likely to succeed.

Clarifying a Career Development Path

The personal responsibility for self-development was also having an impact on potential future career paths. 97% agreed that SC had helped them focus on what they were working towards in the future. 70% agreed that the coaching had given them permission to manage their own career and learning, and 87% said it had helped them appreciate the next steps to take their career further.

Others reported that the SC had given them space to think about short and long-term options, and to highlight or discuss possible career paths with others. For some, this resulted in more suitable career paths being identified that could ultimately aid retention.

> *There's one guy who was in a team lead role who was really struggling and was at breaking point. He had two coaching sessions and after the second session he decided he did not want to be in a team-leading role, it was not for him. So there are changes being made within his team and he is feeling so much better about it. HR2*

Wellbeing and Resilience

In line with previous findings (Grant et al*., 2009) coachees reported that coaching was supporting their well-being and resilience.

> *It has increased my resilience. For me I'm not as impacted when people treat me in a way that I don't want to be treated. So when that happens my resilience will be "if you're treating me like that now, what can I do to change their behaviour towards me?" So I put more ownership on myself rather than blame others. I'm in a role where I have to have relationships with a lot of different people so if I don't have this approach I'm never going to get anywhere in my job. CW2*

This seems to link back to the concept of having more control, self-awareness and emotional intelligence that had enabled self-management. Many used the SC to help them develop personal tools and techniques that had enabled them to notice and deal with triggers that could cause stress.

In total, 95% agreed SC has increased their personal resilience and 78% agreed that it had helped them more effectively deal with uncertainty and change.

Overall the SC programme was perceived to have had an impact on many individuals across the organisation. Reported impacts included building confidence, improved communication skills, enhancing self-awareness and greater personal responsibility. For some it was also helping to define future career paths and was identified as instrumental in supporting resilience and well-being. Many of these skills will be of direct relevance in better equipping staff to deal with the VUCA context and align well with skills potentially required to support the Bennett and Lemoine framework (2014a).

Discussion and Conclusion

Like many organisations TalkTalk is challenged with operating in a fast paced environment. In this context people development can prove challenging, yet the organisation has been able to implement an effective, innovative, on-demand coaching scheme that supports the personal development of all staff in line with the strategic goals of the organisation. That strategic goal was to develop the skills, attitudes and behaviours required for staff to thrive in the VUCA context. Below we will highlight how some of the findings might relate to the aspects identified by Bennett

and Lemoine (2014a) as valuable in the VUCA context, namely, information, agility, restructuring and experimentation.

This case study found reported increases in confidence that helped people take the initiative and speak up. There were also specific examples where this allowed new ideas to be discussed and new communication routes to be opened. Enhanced communication skills were a key feature of many of the examples reported that would clearly facilitate the flow of **information** around the company. This coupled with improved self-awareness was supporting more successful interactions that also helped build and maintain information networks that could help to reduce uncertainty.

Coachee participants reported better resilience in dealing with change, together with enhanced well-being that helped them deal with ambiguity and volatility. By becoming more self-reliant and embracing personal responsibility for career choice and development, it could be argued that workers can develop the **agility** required in this context, and may be better equipped to deal with the potential **restructuring** that is often the result of change.

In a number of cases individuals reported now having the confidence to suggest and generate new ideas that could also help contribute to future change. This confidence also extended to taking action on new ideas that may help contribute to the culture of **experimentation** that supports growth in the VUCA context.

Overall outcomes therefore appear positive following the implementation of this programme: Bringing professional external coaching to a broader population beyond just the executive pool, 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 environment. The outcomes reported are therefore likely to support the tactical imperatives suggested by Bennett and Lemoine (2014a) as ways to effectively deal with the VUCA context.

This SC programme was delivered in a format that was felt to be more appropriate to the VUCA context, with fewer sessions, booked at short notice with more immediacy and less formal assessment. The positive outcomes reported suggest that such a format could be appropriate for the VUCA context and can deliver results in such a format. It also demonstrates that coaching provision may not need to follow a formal pattern of assessment followed by 4 or 6 sessions with a regular coach. It appears that coaching can deliver dividends even with one-off coaching conversations. This supports the work of de Haan et al. (2011) who found that specific interventions are less helpful to clients than the relationship and empathetic understanding that a coach provides. This means that professional external coaching delivered in this more cost effective format might have a much wider application and be a valuable development route for staff at all levels in the organisation.

This case study represents an initial attempt to evaluate how professional coaching can contribute to an organisation in the VUCA context. Such contexts present challenges in people development to identify approaches that not only develop appropriate skills, but that can also be delivered in a way that maximises cultural fit. The results of this study are therefore valuable to development professionals who may be looking at innovative ways to deliver a people development strategy that is in-line with a highly volatile and changeable context. It also contributes to the development of the coaching profession by expanding the potential applications of coaching and by proposing how coaching can adapt to meet the needs of the changing workplace.

Limitations and future research

This study was carried out by two independent researchers, however the questionnaire contents were agreed with the company before distribution. In addition, the organisation sent out the initial e-mail asking for participants, which meant that anyone taking part knew that the study had

organisational approval. Although participants then contacted the researchers direct and were never known to the organisation, this does mean that participants with more negative views may have chosen not to take part because they may have assumed the organisation would have access to named data. It is also clear that the positive impacts reported are based only on those who agreed to engage with the process so it cannot be assumed that similar effects would be found on a larger scale or for a broader population. It may be that the group who signed up for coaching were already in a developmental frame of mind and might have achieved change without the aid of a coach even though participants attribute changes to the SC intervention.

It should also be remembered that much of the data is based on self-report or is from stakeholders with a vested interest in the programme. Coaches and HR would clearly want the scheme to show success so may not be free from bias in their assessment of outcomes. A future trial of such a format would therefore benefit from additional objective performance data to support the current findings. In addition, all the data was collected over a relatively short period. A subsequent longitudinal collection of data would clarify if the outcomes are as enduring as those produced by longer term coaching relationships.

While the research does suggest that the SC model can produce benefits, it is not possible to equate if the benefits are of a similar order to those reported following longer term interventions. Future research may be able to pursue a matched study to more carefully assess the potential scale of respective benefits.

This programme used professional executive coaches who are likely to have the training and credibility that Bozer at al. (2014) suggest enhances coaching effectiveness. Therefore the relative contribution of the coaches versus the delivery format would merit further investigation. It may be that internal coaches being made available for on-demand coaching may also show benefits. At this stage the relevant variables that contributed to the positive outcomes reported, are relatively unclear. A future study might investigate more fully the elements that are the essential ingredients of a SC programme.

This scheme was designed to support a very specific organisational culture, reflecting in its operation the same attributes that the organisation sought from its staff; namely, flexibility, responsiveness and personal responsibility. Therefore the cultural fit of the programme to the context is likely to have had a significant effect on the reported outcomes. As a result it is unclear if the positive outcomes are due to the specific format, or to the cultural alignment. This might mean that a similar scheme in another organisation may prove ineffective if the cultural alignment is missing. The SC format would therefore need to be evaluated in a broader set of contexts before it could be said to be an effective intervention.

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