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Coaching Works! A Qualitative Study Exploring the Effects of Coaching In a Public Sector Organization

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Abstract: Professional development has become an important tool in the development of individual working in a public sector organisation. A crucial part of professional development is mentoring and coaching employees. The aim of this paper was to investigate the effects of coaching in the workplace, specifically whether coaching or being a coach is related to job satisfaction and psychological empowerment and whether being in a culture of coaching is related to job satisfaction. The research was carried out by undertaking a series of qualitative structured interviews. It was found that coaching has a positive effect in a public sector organisation.

Keywords: Coaching; Empowerment; Satisfaction; Public Sector.

1. Introduction

Coaching is a multi-faceted term, ubiquitous, and is typically context specific. The lack of uniformity and consistency in coaching practice suggests that professionals are working from different definitions reflecting different perceptions (Bono et al., 2009). A broad definition states that “Coaching is the art of improving the performance of others” (Eaton and Johnson, 2001). Ellinger (2013) asserts that coaching is a process that improves the performance, skills and personal development of individuals (or “coachees”).

Joo (2005) further asserts that coaching is a short term process that focuses on a problem or an issue with the aim to improve performance through self-awareness and explains that it is conceptually similar to mentoring. The distinction, is in coaching, individuals explore options to develop solutions themselves, whereas a mentor is more likely to advise upon which solutions they believe it is best to take.

Feldman and Lankau (2005) further explain how the purpose of being a coach is not to act as an advisor, and show how coaching requires no expertise in the business, as it is not the prerogative of the coach to come up with solutions. In order to enable coaches to find these solutions, techniques such as guided inquiry and active listening are used (Cummings and Worley, 2009). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, coaching is defined as a short term process, utilising techniques enabling coaches to solve problems by generating solutions. Hence, the aim of this paper is to examine the contemporary debates on coaching and how coaching has a positive effect in the public sector. The paper has three sections. The first part of the paper will explore the conceptual debates on coaching in today's society. Then, moving on from this, the paper explains how the research was undertaken. Finally, the paper will present the qualitative findings and analysis of this research.

2. Coaching in an Organisation

The positive effects of coaching are well documented. Jacobs and Washington (2003) show how employee development programmes are positively related to Organisational performance. This suggests that for Organisations to be successful, it would be in their interests to invest in employee development, as employees are key to success. Perhaps the most common and most researched method of employee development is training, which was found to improve creative problem solving (Birdi et al., 2008) can bring about behavioural changes such as reduced procrastination (Schmitz and Wiese, 2006) and is moderately positively correlated with measures of Organisational performance (Russell et al., 1985).

The benefits of training are well known. However, there are other methods of employee development that are under-researched, with many Organisations oblivious to their benefits. This study seeks to investigate how coaching, an area of employee development with gaps in the literature, can benefit Organisations and employees. Coaching is an area in need of research as there is little uniformity in current practice (Bono et al., 2009) suggesting there may be construct validity issues in the current body of coaching literature, as different studies purporting to measure coaching may actually be using different standards and measuring wildly different concepts. According to Joo

(2005) many Organisations are investing in coaching, though there is little research on its benefits. From an Organisational standpoint, if investment in certain employee development programmes (such as training) can have positive Organisational outcomes, then it would be in the best interests of Organisations to become more informed about other methods of employee development.

Whilst there is limited empirical evidence into the effects of coaching (Joo, 2005) there is still a sufficient body of research based on the definitions of coaching that suggests Organisations using coaching practices in the workplace experience benefits, as do the individuals engaging in coaching.

Ellinger (2013) suggests that one of the purposes of coaching is to improve performance; there may be some evidence to suggest that it has been successful in this aim; however, the literature provides mixed results. Liu and Batt (2010) found coaching predicts objectively measured performance improvements; however, their definition of coaching does not match the definition found in the majority of the literature above. Agarwal et al. (2009) found that performance in sales workers was influenced by their coach's effectiveness: the more effective the coach was judged to be, the higher the performance levels of the person being coached, though perhaps this cannot be generalised outside of a sales setting. Relating to performance is productivity, and Olivero et al. (1997) found that coaching dramatically improved productivity, more so than training could account for. Additionally, Smither et al. (2003) found that managers who had received coaching improved performance (measured using multiple sources of feedback) more so than managers who had not. However, as the effect size was small (Cohen's $d=.17$), it is questionable whether coaching had such a great impact on performance ratings here. Further evidence comes from Thach (2002) who reported that executives and managers who had received coaching had greater levels of effectiveness, which included ratings from peers. Some studies in this area can be criticised however, such as Ellinger et al. (2003) where manager ratings of general staff performance were used instead of more objective measures of performance.

Whilst there is literature suggesting coaching in the workplace can lead to higher performance and effectiveness measures, the research is not infallible. It may be that there are other factors that mediate the relationship between coaching and performance related measures, or it may be that the link between coaching and performance is weak and other variables need to be studied to gain a greater understanding of the effects of coaching in Organisations.

3. Method

A large public sector organisation of approximately 14,000 staff, in which the effects of coaching was studied, has the typical responsibilities of many British local Organisations: overseeing areas including, but not limited to, social care, housing, waste disposal, leisure services and public health. Semi-structured interviews provided the qualitative data, designed in order to provide a great depth of data (Robson, 2008).

The interview was semi-structured and was set out in bullet points with each point representing a point of discussion, with some suggested questions that could be asked for each topic to aid the interviewer, as opposed to specific rigidly worded questions. The interview was created in order to collect deeper, more descriptive data that related to the research questions, and the interview questions reflect this. The principles of the Critical Incident Technique as described by Pearn and Kandola (1988) was utilised to achieve this.

Only trained internal coaches were selected for the semi-structured interviews as it was known that they had definitely undertaken coaching, unlike those who had been on the Coaching as a Leadership Style programme who may not have proceeded to actually coach people in the workplace. All trained internal coaches were emailed asking whether they would consent to be interviewed. There were 12 interviewees in total, 3 of whom were male. Due to the nature of who has been selected by the Organisation to become trained as an internal coach, the participants were predominantly residing in middle management positions.

4. Results of the Qualitative Research

The dominant theme, as evidenced in nine out of the twelve interviews and many of the answers to the open questions, was that coaching improved confidence levels:

"Since his first meeting to the third he's entirely changed, his attitude to it and his confidence levels...and it's been brilliant." – Interviewee 7

"A lot of ones I've had have been about confidence, so for someone to stand up and do a presentation in a meeting, that's a big massive deal for some people." – Interviewee 9

It is clear therefore that people are visibly noticing positive changes in people's confidence levels. There was also some evidence that coach confidence improved:

"It's given me a lot more confidence; I wanted to improve my interpersonal skills in the face of a lot of redundancies." – Interviewee 2

This relates to the research question in that one of the main impacts coaching has is improved levels of confidence on both the coachee and the coach. This has Organisational benefits, as can be seen in de Jong et al. (2006) who found that task-specific confidence has a direct causal relationship with financial performance and customer feedback. Therefore, when coaching increases employee confidence in how to do their job, or task-specific confidence, then the evidence suggests that this has positive financial implications, and as the qualitative data suggests that within the Organisation there was improvements in task-specific confidence through coaching (for example the improvements seen in the confidence of a person who needed to present in a meeting as part of that person's job), then based on the research, coaching can be said to lead to financial benefits in Organisation.

Many interviewees commented that it was difficult to measure any Organisational benefits:

"The direct bottom line benefits for that business, I can't point at." – Interviewee 10

However, this appears to be related to the difficulties in measuring business benefits, as opposed to there being none. This is evidenced in the fact that Organisational benefits kept arising within the answers; the most common being that coaching has led to the improved performance and productivity of coaches:

"What I can recognise is people doing work which is more value orientated for that business, which arguably means they are getting a better return off the investment of the salary cost." – Interviewee 10

"I'm much more productive in my work." – Coachee response to questionnaire

"I'm more efficient, more productive, working in an environment that supports coaching feels great." – Coachee response to questionnaire

Additionally, 53% of coaches reported noticing an improvement in performance in the people they have coached.

The next most common theme that arose that relates to the research question, in terms of impact on the individual and the Organisation, was the fact that coaching directly led to coachees getting new jobs and promotions within the Organisation:

"Two of them came about them wanting a certain sort of job, and they both ended up getting those jobs...they've put that down largely to coaching." – Interviewee 9.

"Succeeded in gaining a promotion." – Coach response to questionnaire.

However, there was also enough evidence to suggest that coaching has resulted in people changing careers and obtaining jobs outside of the Organisation:

"Two staff have achieved their career goals and are leaving the Organisation, which is an acceptable goal as we move towards New Organisation." – Coach response to questionnaire.

It is evident that coaching has directly resulted in people deciding to try and gain new jobs, which clearly impacts the coachee, but also the Organisation, due to personnel changes, or people changing positions within the Organisation, which may have an effect on the overall business aims of the Organisation. For example, coaching encouraging people applying for promotions means that the Organisation can make use of internal talent, instead of using up resources searching for talent from outside of the Organisation, which would result in less detrimental financial effects for the Organisation in a time when they need to make large savings. Additionally, the fact that coaching may encourage people to change careers, as seen in one of the quotes above, can provide benefits to the Organisation in that people who wish to change careers may be unhappy in their current career, and as seen previously, people with lower job satisfaction will not have the positive impact on Organisations that people with higher levels of job satisfaction bring as can be seen in the likes of (Diestel et al., 2014; Judge et al., 2001).

One of the most salient themes that arose from the answers was the fact that being coached has the potential to have deep and meaningful benefits in the wider lives of the coachee:

"She was at breaking down point...I feel as if those sessions were very life changing for her, because it took her to a different place." – Interviewee 12

This was also observed in coaches:

"I tend to approach things with my family in a different way, definitely." – Interviewee 1

This evidences that, in some cases, coaching has a strong impact on the coach and the coachee. The findings suggest that beyond the benefits coaching is traditionally said to have, there are benefits that one might expect to see in counselling. A classic definition of counselling comes from Gustad (1953) from whom we can see counselling is similar to coaching, in that it is a one-on-one process in which the person on the receiving end learns about themselves and is based on realistic goals, yet is different to coaching in that it requires a professionally, psychologically trained professional with the aim to make the person receiving counselling happier and better at functioning in society. This is similar to the methods seen in Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) where intentions aimed at improving happiness was found to enhance well-being and reduce depressive symptoms. These effects are similar to the deeper personal impacts coaching is found to have in the current study, meaning that the present study shows that coaching has effects usually associated with counselling and with interventions aimed at improving happiness.

A recurrent theme unexpectedly arose from the qualitative data that did not pertain to the research question: peoples' reactions to coaching in the midst of wide-scale Organisational change, and the behaviour this leads to from both the coach and coachee. Participants have positive opinions surrounding coaching. However, there is evidence to suggest that its reach and potential impact may be hampered by the fear of Organisational change currently faced by the public sector:

"When we put forward any initiative, there is a level of disengagement...they go, 'All I really want to know is will I have a job.'" – Interviewee 9

The evidence therefore suggests that whilst coaching is, in itself, a positive thing, it may fall off the agenda and not be perceived to be necessary by some employees during times of uncertainty and Organisational change. However, it has been shown that coaching has benefits relating to increasing happiness and reducing strain, and, as Bordia et al. (2004) show, that uncertainty is related to psychological strain, then it is recommended that in times of uncertainty and change coaching should be used by Organisations, in order to reduce psychological strain in the workforce that comes during these times of uncertainty.

Another theme not pertaining to the original research question, but that was repeatedly discussed in the qualitative data, was how management behaviour influences the impact that coaching can have. Where managers were seen to promote coaching, respondents perceived the idea of coaching to be well-received:

"In my particular service I think it's very well supported and well received...quite a number of my manager's team have done the programme, so it's well received at those sort of levels and I think it's known throughout the directorate." – Interviewee 5

Incidentally, this was not the case where managers were not seen to encourage coaching:

"I don't know that they (colleagues) even know this programme exists...the leadership team of the Organisation have been having coaching, but nobody's out there up there at that level and saying 'I've had it and it's been good for me.'" – Interviewee 8

This provides evidence to suggest that management bear some responsibility as to the promotion of coaching, and that employee behaviour surrounding coaching may be influenced by management cues. Research such as Giberson et al. (2009) and Schein (1983) shows the importance of company leaders influencing Organisational culture. Therefore, if people at a senior level of Organisation were seen to actively engage in and encourage coaching, it is likely that a stronger coaching culture would be developed, which would bring benefits to the Organisation and which, according to the qualitative data, is not currently apparent.

5. Conclusion

This research has found that coaching increases confidence in both the coachee and the coach, increases performance and productivity in the coachee, can result in changes in jobs (in a positive sense) for the coachee, and can have a deep positive impact on the life of the coachee in a way that is normally associated with counselling. Moreover, it was found that it is difficult to pinpoint many benefits to the Organisation, though the increase in performance and productivity that coaching can lead to has tangible benefits to the Organisation, and people gaining internal promotions will also benefit Organisations. However, it was found that whilst coaching has the potential to have Organisational benefits, its effect can be minimised depending on the context.

Qualitative evidence also suggests there are many benefits coaching can bring to Organisations and their employees, and, though times of uncertainty may hinder the use of coaching, it is in the best interests of Organisations to use it, and managers should take the lead in strengthening coaching cultures. The implications for research are that as coaching is currently not prominent in the literature, this study adds to the body of knowledge on a multitude of facets and addresses gaps that exist.

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