

Coaching for Impact: Making leadership and management development more effective

About LMW

Leadership & Management Wales (LMW) is the centre for excellence for leadership and management skills in Wales. It is funded by government to benefit businesses of all sizes and sectors across Wales.

LMW was formed to support businesses in their leadership and management development (LMD), enabling them to increase efficiency and help grow the economy in Wales.

Leadership & Management Wales is part of the Enhancing Leadership and Management Skills (ELMS) programme. ELMS is part funded by the European Social Fund through the Welsh Government.

Our vision

To create an environment where every business in Wales is aware of, understands, engages with and can benefit from leadership and management development (LMD).

As a Wales-wide consortium, we benefit from the strength of partnership working — pooling expertise from lead partner Cardiff Business School, and other consortium members Aberystwyth University, Glyndwr University and Tattum Guest Associates Ltd to deliver unrivalled research insight and hands-on business experience.

With these centres throughout Wales, we provide a level of geographic coverage which ensures comprehensive knowledge and understanding of LMD activity, including regional distinctions, across the country.

We will achieve our vision through four aims:

- 1 Raising awareness of the benefits of LMD, explaining and promoting LMD in ways which are appropriate and meaningful to businesses and stakeholders in Wales;
- 2 Positioning LMW as Wales' destination of choice for all LMD information and resource;
- 3 Providing evidence of the impact of LMD on individual businesses;
- 4 Making the LMD in Wales the best it can be.

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Foreword

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Our research gives us a better understanding of the impact of leadership and management development but it is just as important to share that evidence and to act on its findings.

The issues associated with transferring learning in the classroom to practical application in the workplace were highlighted in an LMW study published in March 2012.

Our preliminary report, *The Impact of Leadership and Management on Organisations* (2012), identified the importance of coaching as a solution. The evidence suggested that leadership and management programmes were more effective when classroom learning was reinforced with organisation-wide coaching frameworks.

Acting on that evidence, we decided to explore the coaching process in more detail to find out how to maximise its potential to the business community and the economy of Wales. Our findings have led us to make recommendations that merit serious consideration.



Dr Barrie Kennard

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**Business Engagement Officer,
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Dave started his career as a research and development engineer for a Japanese manufacturing company, but since then he has worked mainly in the education sector.

He worked at Newport University, Cardiff Business School, and most recently Cornwall College, where he was responsible for demand-led training programmes in a range of business-related subjects.

He joined LMW in July 2011, bringing a wide-ranging knowledge of leadership and management theory and an interest in the use of innovative teaching techniques.

He holds a Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering and a Master's degree in Business. He is also qualified to use psychometrics for leadership coaching and is a member of the Institute for Learning.



Dave John

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Executive summary

Leadership & Management Wales carried out research into the potential of structured business coaching methods for developing leadership and management skills.

The research analysed semi-structured interviews with senior managers from five different organisations who had recently undertaken coaching with a qualified coach in order to build upon learning acquired during a leadership and management training course.

Expectations of the coaching varied according to how much previous knowledge the managers had of the coaching process. Some thought that coaching provided business advice while others recognised that structured coaching would achieve behavioural change and enhance their leadership and management skills.

The coaching relationship in each case identified a particular workplace issue and focused on how personal leadership and management behaviours could be enhanced to address that particular issue. Drawing upon the learning that each manager had undertaken during training, the coaches were able to translate that learning into leadership action.

Each manager was asked about the business benefits of the coaching experience. Responses included: devolved decision-making, wider staff engagement, sharing of knowledge and skills, inspiring trust, generation of ideas and strategy implementation.

These responses suggest coaching has a big role to play in producing business benefits by enhancing leadership and management skills.

Main findings

- Perceptions of coaching vary considerably and have an impact on the overall effectiveness of the process
- Many aspects of leadership and management development are enhanced by professional coaching
- The business benefits of coaching will be enjoyed in the longer term and the work done to achieve those benefits will deliver further value through enhanced leadership and management skills
- Defining the outcomes of the coaching process is key to realising business benefits through the coaching of leadership and management skills

Main recommendations

- 1 **There is a need to raise awareness and understanding in the business community of coaching in the context of leadership and management development**
- 2 **To fully benefit from leadership and management development programmes, business organisations should follow up with professional coaching to ensure that knowledge is translated into leadership behaviour**
- 3 **Businesses need to be helped to secure the most appropriate coaching services for their requirements**
- 4 **Coaching should form an integral part of an organisation's people development strategy in order to improve business performance**
- 5 **The Welsh Government should consider developing support for coaching as part of the programme to develop leadership and management skills**

Introduction

A definition of coaching:

“ Regular meetings between a business leader and a trained coach, designed to produce positive changes in business behaviour in a limited time frame. ”

“ People have very different ideas about what they understand by the term coaching ”

The aim of this report is to highlight the impact that coaching can bring to the development of leadership and management skills.

The report follows on from an important piece of research undertaken by Leadership & Management Wales (LMW) on the impact of leadership and management development for organisations (The Impact of Leadership and Management Development on Organisations, March 2012).

In that research, coaching was highlighted as a crucial element for training programmes, ensuring knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom were translated into effective leadership and management behaviours in the workplace. The findings presented here explore the coaching process in detail from the perspectives of both those being coached and that of the coach, providing insights into the benefits of coaching to businesses and the challenges associated with making the coaching process most effective.

Very often leaders and managers of businesses have no one back in the workplace to help them reflect on their own leadership skills and development; working with a professional coach provides that opportunity to enhance and develop those skills. However, when discussing the use of coaching for skills development in leadership and management development during this study, one thing became very apparent; people have very different ideas about what they understand by the term coaching.

For some, coaching was perceived as a form of advice and guidance, while others viewed a coach as someone who could act as a sounding board for their own thoughts and ideas. To give clarity to this report we have worked with the following definition for coaching “regular meetings between a business leader and a trained coach, designed to produce positive changes in business behaviour in a limited time frame.”

The key to understanding coaching is to think of it as a process that encourages us to re-examine the way we do everyday tasks in a critical light and that subsequently improves how we do things in the future. Instinctively we find this difficult to do as, more often than not, our brains look for familiar patterns in the tasks presented to us and then selects previously developed behavioural routines from our long-term memory. We tend to select previously developed behavioural routines simply because it is quicker and easier for our brain, rather than establishing neural connections needed to learn new behaviours. This tendency for all of us to default to familiar behavioural patterns is a self-reinforcing process. Coaching has the potential to overcome the tendency to default to the familiar and change our behaviour for the better.

So, for example, if someone were to ask how you might improve your driving skills, how would you reply? For many of us it has been so long since we learnt how to drive that we rarely, if ever, honestly consider how good our driving skills really are. Driving skills, as with leadership and management skills, are second nature to us and we do it subconsciously. We tend to only re-examine our personal skills when encouraged to do so by someone else who can take us through our own thought processes in order to think objectively about our capabilities and the practical steps we can take to improve ourselves.

A trained and skilled coach can take you through those thought processes and will challenge you to take steps that you might not have taken otherwise. A professional coach will also guarantee confidentiality and will act in your best interests, so if for whatever reason the coaching relationship is not working they would offer to stop the process. It is important to remember the role of a business coach is to help you produce better business outputs, not to provide subject specific advice, emotional counselling or social support. There are other professional advisors, counsellors and therapists who can do this for you.

“ The role of a business coach is to help you produce better business outputs ”

Section 1

Research methodology

The initial scope of the study involved two qualified coaches each working with three managers, from different organisations, who had recently undertaken a leadership and management development programme. Coaching sessions held over a six month period focused upon behavioural change that would help solve a particular problem or issue identified by the individual managers.

The coaches and those being coached were subsequently interviewed and asked about their experiences of the coaching process. The interviews were structured around a number of themes designed to draw out thoughts and opinions, covering expectations of the process, development of the coaching relationship, enhancement of leadership and management skills and the business benefits of coaching.

Participants for this research were sought largely through the contacts and networks of the coaches themselves. Although the aim was for each coach to establish three coaching relationships over a period of six months, due to the difficulty of identifying participants only five relationships were established and completed. The difficulties of establishing the coaching relationships appear to highlight misconceptions about the term ‘coaching’ and explain why businesses are sometimes reticent about participating.

Interpretation and analysis of the interviews provides a rich picture of the coaching process from which we were able to draw some conclusions around the benefits and challenges of coaching. The research presented here addresses the question “does leadership and management training backed with coaching provide a powerful and effective approach to professional development that can have real impact on business performance?”

The sample of the five coaching relationships is relatively small so we cannot attach particular significance to specific answers to questions asked in the interviews. What we can do is draw some general conclusions from the range of opinions expressed on the themes discussed. To ensure a consistent approach, a single interviewer was used for all of the interviews and subsequent interpretation of responses.

“ Does leadership and management training backed with coaching provide a powerful and effective approach to professional development that can have real impact on business performance? ”

Section 2

Findings and analysis

2.1 Expectations of the coaching process

The initial expectations of the managers coached did vary according to how much previous knowledge of coaching they had and what experiences of coaching they had. In some cases there was misunderstanding about the term “coaching” and what they could expect from the process. For some, coaching was perceived as a means of gaining advice and guidance, while others were fully aware of the personal behavioural change they could expect from the process.

For one business owner, coaching expectations were very much formed through his recent experiences on a leadership development course. He viewed coaching as an opportunity to provide a ‘sounding board’ for his business ideas, particularly around strategy and decision-making. In this case the expectation was about how coaching could be used to improve ideas, as opposed to reflection on personal leadership and management behaviour. While coaching can be used to develop and improve ideas, ideally it should also focus on the individual and their ability to formulate those ideas and commit to their implementation.

A senior manager from one organisation mentioned that he was initially sceptical about the value that coaching provided, explaining that he understood it to be about providing support and building confidence rather than providing immediate assistance. Commenting further, the manager explained that he did not understand the ‘structural’ parts of the coaching but found the process extremely fruitful. Here initial expectation was low, indicating that prior knowledge of coaching and of how coaching works can ensure the potential benefits are maximised.

Another manager said that he expected the coach would be there to draw out his thoughts and experiences, to help him create a plan to implement the learning that had taken place during a recent training course and to act as a conscience. This manager viewed coaching as an integral part of his professional development as a manager, linking classroom learning with implementation in the workplace. Here there was a clear understanding of coaching as a process that focuses on the development of the individual to produce positive behavioural change.

A human resources manager stated that initial expectations for the coaching were that it would involve some ‘tough questioning’. They were keen to understand the process before coaching took place, indicating that they had a number of questions that remained unanswered before the first session. Some strong expectations were expressed, indicating a desire to establish the purpose and format of the coaching process upfront. Being clear about expectations beforehand can avoid misunderstanding and time wasted in the longer term.

Key findings

- **Initial expectations vary depending on knowledge and experience of coaching**
- **Being clear about expectations beforehand can avoid misunderstanding**
- **Coaching as a process primarily focuses on the development of the individual not the business**
- **The focus depends on your willingness to question your own thought processes**
- **Think about which aspects of your leadership and management actions you want to work on**

“ In his view, a weakness of senior managers was to sometimes make decisions in isolation ”

A company director explained that his experiences of coaching matched his initial expectations, adding that he did not expect the coach to tell him things he did not know but to act as a ‘mirror’ to help him reflect on his own thoughts. He continued by saying that, in his view, a weakness of senior managers was to sometimes make decisions in isolation and added that coaching provided an opportunity to acknowledge to oneself that sometimes you don’t really know the answer to a difficult problem.

So we can see that people’s initial perceptions of the coaching process are varied and influenced by previous experiences. Some are open-minded about what the experience will bring, while others want to establish what will be involved before commitment. The focus for the coaching will also differ depending upon how willing individuals are to question their own thought processes; this can be an uncomfortable experience for some, and for others it will feel quite therapeutic.

It is important when considering coaching to spend time doing some research on what you can expect, what is involved and which aspects of your leadership and management actions you want to work on if you are going to get the most out of the experience.

2.2

Development of the coaching relationship

The initial stages of identifying coaches, establishing the coaching relationship and agreeing upon terms are critical to ensuring that the coaching is worthwhile and will ultimately deliver business benefits. Time spent at this phase is vitally important if the time invested is to be productive and also to avoid a breakdown in the coaching relationship.

One business owner stated that for him there had to be ‘chemistry’ between himself and the coach, adding that the initial stages of the coaching process were taken up with sharing past experiences and checking each other out. This process continued for some while without clearly establishing outcomes for the coaching. The coach admitted that he did not feel he was helping in any way; however, both agreed they would continue. Eventually a theme of coaching for succession planning was agreed and subsequently pursued.

A senior manager who had recently been promoted to a new position said that he initially found it difficult to set aside time for coaching. However, the initial sessions had provided him with confidence and reassurance on how he was developing in his new role, so he could instantly see value in the process. While he had been with the organisation for a long time, he did not gain a leadership and management qualification until recently. So, following a new qualification and promotion to a new position, the coaching came at the right time to allow him to apply the learning and gain confidence in his role.

One manager mentioned that establishing goals and outputs for the coaching proved quite difficult due to the changing circumstances of the business. Continuing discussion with both the coach and line manager provided a number of possible options for coaching outputs, covering relationships with reports and colleagues, which the manager was happy to pursue. The manager was encouraged to keep a journal detailing how elements of the management training course had been used in the workplace. This proved very useful to reinforce the learning and to provide a focal point for reflection on how the learning was implemented.

Key findings

- **The initial stages of the coaching relationship are crucial to the final success of the process**
- **Timing is a critical factor to ensure coaching is at its most effective; it is best to receive coaching when you are facing a specific challenge**
- **It is important to define the distinction between coaching and mentoring**
- **Coaching is not an open-ended process, it has to lead to a time-framed business output**

A human resources manager said of the coaching relationship that there was ‘decent rapport’ and the coach was someone they could talk to. This manager was keen to structure the coaching process quite carefully, agreeing to a schedule for the whole programme in advance. However, she did feel that the process was too self-directed and she would have preferred more direction and deeper questioning from the coach.

The important thing here is to clearly define the distinction between coaching, which is largely self-directed, and mentoring, which is largely directed. While it is possible to merge the two approaches, coaching involves having a one-to-one with someone removed from your work environment and is about the individual taking personal responsibility for their own development; mentoring is about accepting advice from someone who knows and understands the context in which the individual works.

A company director said that the timing of the coaching was good for him as he had just completed a leadership and strategy course that now had to be implemented into the business. He stated that the initial meetings with the coach featured discussions, not on what had to be done, but how and when they should be done. For him the coaching process prompted acknowledgement that, in addition to the everyday operational management at his level within the organisation, strategic leadership was also necessary. An important factor here was timing, coaching is at its most effective when used to provide solutions to problems that are uppermost in your mind.

The initial stages of the coaching relationship are crucial to the final success, or otherwise, of the coaching process. While it is worth persevering to agree upon a useful outcome for the coaching, equally if no value from the process emerges, both parties need to recognise this and agree to terminate the coaching relationship.

Referring back to our definition for coaching - positive changes in business behaviour in a limited time frame - we can see that coaching should not be an open-ended process and is so much more than just having a chat.

“ The coaching process prompted acknowledgement that... strategic leadership was also necessary ”

2.3

Enhancing leadership and management skills through coaching

Key findings

- **To benefit fully from coaching it is important to proactively engage with the process**
- **Coaching helps to translate academic knowledge to practical skills and workplace behaviours**
- **The structure of the coaching conversation will impact on the effectiveness of the process**
- **There must be opportunity to reflect on personal behaviours and personal commitment to action**

“ Coaching provided an opportunity to explore what being a leader was all about ”

The coaching experiences for all were preceded by some form of leadership and management training and development experience. Of particular interest during this study was how useful is the coaching experience for enhancing leadership and management skills developed during the training. Recent research published by Leadership & Management Wales reported that for leadership and management development to be truly effective it needs to be complemented by structured coaching (The Impact of Leadership and Management Development on Organisations, March 2012).

One business owner said of the coaching experience there were no ‘eureka moments’ for him but admitted that coaching provided confirmation of the direction he was pursuing. However, when pressed on how coaching might be used back in the business, he acknowledged that it highlighted the need for him to develop and distribute leadership skills among his staff, letting them take a more proactive role in making decisions and implementing strategy. To benefit fully from coaching it is important not only to understand the process, but also to proactively engage with it and to think objectively about your own leadership and management behaviours.

A senior manager said that it had complemented his leadership and management training as it provided support to embed new behaviour and prevented him from slipping back into old habits. Commenting on the training course, he said it gave a broad overview of leadership styles and tools, while coaching provided him with the opportunity to think about how his leadership style could be tailored to different individuals and contexts.

A newly promoted manager reported that his coaching experience teased out the difference between leadership and management, explaining that during his long experience with the organisation he had gained in-depth knowledge of the management role but had not fully defined for himself what was expected of a leadership role. For this person, coaching provided an opportunity to explore what being a leader was all about, exploring issues such as personal values, psychological blocks and emotional responses.

A human resources manager said that for her the coaching did not develop leadership and management skills but she thought coaching certainly had the potential to do so. Commenting on why those skills were not enhanced, the method of coaching was identified as not suitable for skills development and behavioural change. This response seems at odds with the others received and also with the views of the coach. However, examining the history of the coaching relationship in this instance reveals that there were changing personal and organisational circumstances that may have contributed towards the process failing to achieve the behavioural change intended.

A company director stated that the coaching had provided a 'focus point' that brought him back to thinking about the strategic objectives of the business. His role in the business was split between operational management and strategic leadership, which sometimes resulted in a clash of priorities in terms of his time. He spoke of coaching being a mechanism for 'forcing your mind back to things', demonstrating the capability of the coaching process to overcome the preference we have for thinking about the familiar.

It is becoming clear from the findings presented here and other research published by LMW that training will take you some way towards the goal of becoming a good leader and manager. But to ensure that academic knowledge on the subject translates to practical skills and ultimately workplace behaviours, coaching is the process that joins everything together. What makes this process effective is the structure of the coaching conversation, supported by opportunity to reflect on personal behaviours and personal commitment to action.

“ Coaching is the process that joins everything together ”

2.4 The business benefits of coaching

The process of coaching, as with any form of training and development, needs to prove its worth in order that both time and money invested has a business return. The leadership and management function in any business is concerned with optimising the performance of staff and equipment to deliver business outputs.

Clearly for coaching to be worthwhile it has to enhance that optimisation process and to have a defined business output. The interviews conducted for this report were undertaken quickly following the last coaching session received and, consequently, little time was allowed for business benefits to be fully realised. However, the questions around business benefits were asked of each of the coaching recipients.

A business owner stated that the business benefits of the coaching process were likely to be a greater capability of the business as a whole to respond to emergent business opportunities. During his leadership and management training he had developed some thoughts about re-organising the business in order to take on larger international projects. This entailed development of staff to take on management roles and the business owner relinquishing some of his responsibilities to focus on strategic-level decisions. Here coaching has provided the realisation for the business owner that for the business to grow and develop, distribution of the leadership function has to take place.

A senior manager identified personal development as the business benefit gained from the coaching received. Being a key member of the senior manager team whose technical expertise is much in demand, it was vital that his management style was approachable and accessible so that he could pass on that important technical knowledge to others. He stated that coaching enabled him to experiment with his leadership style in order to gain wider engagement with staff and allow them to make greater use of his technical knowledge. Good leadership is vital for making best use of the knowledge and skills that are distributed across the organisation, ensuring that they are accessed and translated into business outputs.

Key findings

- Coaching has to support the leadership and management function in delivering defined business outputs
- It is unlikely to demonstrate delivery of bottom line financial performance in the short term
- Examples of benefits include the ability of an organisation to respond to change, improved distribution of leadership, more engaged staff and a positive working culture
- Improvements can lead to a step change in business performance in the longer term, ultimately delivering the financial benefits sought

“ Coaching was highlighted as useful for maintaining both the learning and the ideas generated ”

One manager reported that the coaching had refreshed him as a leader, making him more confident and inspiring trust from staff. This has translated into a change in the vibrancy and atmosphere within the organisation. Additional benefits identified included improved relations with funders, customers and partners, through greater ‘gravitas’ enabling him to steer the organisation more successfully through the funding landscape and justify budget increases. An important point here is the need to have a credible leader at the helm of an organisation when asking customers, funders and stakeholders for hard cash.

Commenting on the benefits, the human resources manager said that it was too early to identify any hard business benefits. However, she did say that the coaching had kept her resilient in her aim to implement some of the ideas she had generated while completing the management course. In particular, coaching was highlighted as useful for maintaining both the learning and the ideas generated at the forefront of the mind and preventing things ‘dropping off the radar’. The important point here is that it was too early to point to the realisation of any business benefits but coaching provides the impetus to maintain a resolve to continue trying to make things happen.

A company director stated that the main business benefits were making him ‘do stuff’ that he already knew he had to do. Having been with his organisation for a long time he knew what was required of him to move it forward, but sometimes struggled to acknowledge the importance of addressing strategic-level decisions. For him, having a coach provided ‘a voice of conscience and reason’ that could when necessary force an issue to be resolved. He said that there was real value in having people with an external view of the organisation helping him to translate strategic choice into strategic action.

In terms of business benefits from coaching it is important to stress that it is unlikely to be demonstrated that coaching will deliver bottom line financial performance in the short term and therefore traditional return on investment calculations will reveal very little.

The benefits of coaching are more associated with subtle indicators such as the ability of an organisation to respond to change, more engaged staff and a positive working culture. These indicators are very often seen as ‘soft’ measures of improvement but, more often than not, improvements in these areas lead to a step change in business performance in the longer term, ultimately delivering those financial benefits that staff development budgets seek.

Section 3

Conclusions

The responses received during the semi-structured interviews indicate there is considerable variation of perceptions in terms of expectations of the coaching process. Those initial expectations impact considerably on how the subsequent coaching relationship develops, the enhancement of leadership skills and the business benefits derived. Each step is dependent upon the preceding step and any failure affects subsequent steps and the overall effectiveness of the coaching process.

The variation in expectations of the process implies a need for more awareness and understanding in the business community of what coaching is - in particular how it differs from business advice - and what people can expect from coaching in terms of longer-term business benefits, as opposed to short-term bottom line financial improvements.

While previous research published by LMW demonstrated the value of coaching for leadership and management development, the discussions during the semi-structured interviews were less emphatic about its value. However, during further questioning it was acknowledged by all but one of the interviewees that many aspects of leadership and management skills were indeed enhanced by the process, such as devolved decision-making, tailoring of leadership style, exploration of personal thinking and confronting unresolved issues.

The main point to make here is that behavioural change during the coaching process of an individual is sometimes quite subtle but nevertheless important when developing leadership skills. To fully benefit from leadership and management development programmes, it is really important to follow up with professional coaching. While people may fully understand the learning from such programmes, structured coaching ensures that knowledge is translated into leadership behaviour.

Key to realisation of business benefits through the coaching of leadership and management skills is clearly defining what the outcomes of the coaching process will be, defining how leadership and management behaviours will achieve those outcomes and agreeing upon personal development areas for behavioural change.

The research presented here suggests that the business benefits of coaching will be enjoyed in the longer term but ultimately the work done to achieve those benefits will continue to deliver further benefits indefinitely through enhanced leadership and management skills. The potential that coaching offers for improving business performance through leadership and management behavioural change is such that it should form an integral part of an organisation's people development strategy.

“ It was acknowledged by all but one of the interviewees that many aspects of leadership and management skills were indeed enhanced ”

Appendix

Research questions

Semi-structured interviews took place with each manager to discuss their experiences, observations and reflections on the coaching process. The research questions below formed the starting point for dialogue but did not restrict it; coaches were encouraged to give their thoughts on anything they felt relevant to the study:

How did you initially become involved with the coach?

What were your initial expectations of the coaching you were about to receive?

What do you understand by the term coaching?

How easy, or not, was it to establish the coaching relationship?

How did you find the coaching process?

How does coaching contribute to the further development of leadership and management skills?

What are the business benefits of coaching?

What difficulties are encountered when establishing coaching relationships?

How was the coaching relationship sustained during the coaching process?

How successful was the coaching process from both the perspective of the manager and the coach?

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Coaches

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