

Coaching: It's a culture thing

Episode 128: We explore the development of the coaching culture and how coaching is becoming the new norm for real-time performance management

Philippa Lamb: Jeremy Snape knows all about delivering excellent results under pressure. He used to be an international cricketer, now he's a performance coach.

Jeremy Snape: Yeah it's really interesting since I retired I've had an interesting niche certainly...

PL: Jeremy's working with the England Rugby team right now having been performance coach for the South African Cricket team and Shane Warne's victorious Rajasthan Royals. And he also coached Crystal Palace to their FA Cup victory back in 2016. But he doesn't just deal with athletes, nowadays he coaches corporates too.

JS: The world of both business and sport has got huge volatility and uncertainty and unpredictability in it and I think rather than trying to take away that volatility we should be equipping our performers in sport and business to become more steady, more confident and more resilient.

PL: So it's easy to see how this translates into the corporate world and you consult with corporates, BMW, Centrica, Barclays – big names – what are the parallels there?

JS: Well I think ultimately in sport and business you've got to deliver results and I think in the business world we see often there's a lot of downsizing, people are being asked to do more with less on the backdrop of technology, disrupting business models and all sorts of change is going on. When you get leaders feeling that they're under pressure to

deliver results they can have so much of their ego involved in those results that they become very tense and very blinkered. They probably rely on less and less 'go to' people and they rely on previous strength. So it changes their communication style to be very short-term focused and very directive. And that's obviously the exact opposite of what we're trying to do when we create a coaching culture which is about creating a partnership so they can cope with whatever the future throws at them.

PL: Coaching isn't new but the way it's delivered and used is evolving all the time and embedding a coaching culture is something that Jeremy has thought about a lot.

JS: Sport is a fantastic metaphor where, you know can you imagine an Olympic athlete waiting a year for the feedback on how they've got on on the various training days or performance? We have these live feedback, there's live reinforcement of the good things that are going on. The coaches themselves are having hot debriefs right after those coaching sessions so that there's a very agile learning environment that's being created so that we can pivot between what we've just delivered and what might need to be relevant tomorrow.

PL: Jeremy's not alone in thinking that continuous coaching and mentoring is a far more effective development and performance management tool than the annual appraisal. Giants like Deloitte and Accenture have already scrapped annual performance reviews opting for a more fluid and interactive approach instead. Many other organisations are inventing their own systems from scratch and River Island is an interesting example of that. The family owned retailer was born 60 years ago, now it has 350 stores across the UK, Ireland, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. In London two of their L&D team are spearheading a completely new way of managing performance right across the business.

Chris Britton: So my name is Chris Britton and I'm a learning and development manager at River Island.

Nebel Crowhurst: And I'm Nebel Crowhurst and I am head of talent at River Island.

PL: Okay so Nebel shall we kick off with how you made the move from annual appraisals, usual thing that everyone used to do, into a whole different way of dealing with it now?

NC: Yeah so back in 2015 we had a real good look at whether a traditional appraisal approach was working for us. It was clear to see from the participation in people across the business and the feedback that we were getting that actually a traditional approach was not right for our business. So our HR director, Karen Bevan, decided to embark on really understanding what would work better for us and to move us away from a traditional appraisal situation whereby of course you have an appraisal at the end of the year and perhaps an interim review and very little in between, which encourages a kind of peaks and troughs in terms of people's performance. So what we looked at was what's going on in the external market, what's going on in other organisations and we also had lots of conversations with our people to really understand what they wanted and how we could improve on the way in which we manage performance across the business.

We introduced a new way of working which we refer to as our career development and performance approach and that encompasses a series of things. So the first part being the focus around in the moment feedback and the way in which that's delivered to people and the encouragement and that feedback is delivered at all levels across the business and in all directions.

PL: They don't believe that managers need lots of training to deliver good feedback; they just need to learn to observe, to ask questions and to listen to the answers they get.

NC: We then looked at effective 1:1s and what that means and the

regularity of those and the fact that having regular 1:1s as opposed to twice yearly appraisals helps to drive performance more effectively.

PL: 1:1s or coaching sessions free up employees to share their ideas, their frustrations and career hopes with their managers in private.

NC: And the third part being employee-led career development conversations and the encouragement around employees owning their career development and the fact that managers needed to be able to support that in a very different way to how they would have experienced having a traditional appraisal.

PL: Next we got into the detail of how it works but first I wanted to know how they sold their new approach to the board.

NC: We are a family-owned business. Whereas in some very large corporate businesses there is a lot of bureaucracy and red tape and processes that you need to go through to introduce a new way of working, for us here actually we can do things in a way that's a bit more organic and we can have conversations with people and explain how things can work and if it sounds like a good way of trying things, we're quite entrepreneurial in spirit, we will try something new, see how it works and learn from what we experience and progress through our journey gradually.

PL: So is that what you did with this idea just sold the notion of it in the first place and then grew into it?

NC: Yeah very much.

PL: Okay so Chris tells me how it works on the ground. How do people experience this?

CB: Well it was very important for us to begin with we didn't want to take something that was quite processing and traditional and just rebadge it

and call it something different so we really ripped it up and just started with a blank canvas talking with our people and we decided to focus on three core elements which really encourage human to human interaction, actual conversations between people which is quite a novelty in big business, certainly in my experience anyway. So the idea on the ground is that our line managers take responsibility for performance in their teams but they do it in a way which is nurturing, which is conversational, in a way which is encouraging development of their teams as opposed to here's a rating, here's my opinion, so if you don't like it tough luck.

PL: But this is all new for them, so all these people had to learn how to do this?

CB: They did, well they not only had to learn how to do it they had to unlearn how to do it the old way which is probably quite tricky because actually in traditional appraisals, and a lot of businesses I'm sure are finding the same thing, is people do it that way because that's the way it's always been done and if you don't know any different then it can be quite a move into the unknown, what do you mean I don't have a form to fill in or a box to tick, I'm out on my own with my own skills, my own confidence. But that was the bit that was really important for us in learning and development is building confidence in our line managers, people managers, to manage their people.

PL: I mean this sounds great and I can see from a line manager's point of view, busy line manager's point of view, this is a thing that's going to take more time than the thing they used to do which was more of a tick box exercise. So how did you go about embedding that idea that this was time well spent and that they needed to invest in it?

CB: I think for us in the beginning, just because it is something that's new, something that's changed, something they're not used to then sure there's always a bit of trepidation, there's a bit of hang on a minute that's going to feed into more time that I don't have already, however at one

point we saw a tipping point, there was a tipping point where people started to realise actually by removing this clunky traditional way of scrambling around for evidence and putting in ridiculously long meetings and submitting forms to HR or not and doing all these processes which were not really adding any value, by removing that cumbersome way of doing things actually you are freed up to have more conversations with your team and we did see a tipping point where as confidence grew in the new way of doing things people managers were like, well yeah that's obvious why haven't we always done it this way?

PL: And that moment when Nebel and Chris realised their new approach had reached a tipping point where line managers really began to see its value and where coaching culture started to become self-sustaining that moment is something the CIPD's own research found that a lot of organisations go through. How long did it take to get to that tipping point?

CB: Well for us actually we learned as we went along so in hindsight the bit we missed when we first changed this is the education piece of that what's changing and then importantly why we changed it. When we went back and we reviewed and we revisited that and had more conversations and introduced programmes to support that we saw the tipping point happen pretty quickly as people started to realise the why which is quite important. I think with traditional appraisals it's always been there but no one really understands why, for us once we started educating and helping our line managers, and senior managers and directors, the whole business is on this journey, as everyone started seeing the value and the why we're doing it and they started thinking, yeah that's common sense of course I'd want to have a conversation. So it happened pretty quickly for us we just needed to get the message out there.

PL: It's one thing selling the idea to line managers who actually do most of the coaching, and by the way our Coaching at the Sharp End report

looks in more detail at the role of line managers on this, but senior managers they need to be behind it in the first place so how did River Island get them on board?

NC: Yeah so from a senior point of view one of the key things from my point of view with that particular population of people is increasing their own self-awareness around their leadership and management skills.

PL: So they introduced an emotional intelligence assessment, various psychometric tools and coaching for senior managers to help them deal with the new approach.

NC: That's something that again even at that level the idea that, well how am I going to fit this in with everything else that I've got to do, and the mindset around realising that investing in your own self-development and allowing that to happen within your teams and across your departments actually is so valuable that we've seen a significant change in opinion and mindset around how much time is invested in people development and the encouragement of career development meetings and career development conversations and the desire and the appetite for more development is just building and building to the point where actually from an L&D point of view we're almost a victim of our own success because the team currently, we've only really been established for the last 18 months to two years within the business and we're already at a point where we are so inundated with demands from people across the business around wanting support around their career development and coaching that we're going to need to grow and expand and really think about how then we can work with people within the business that can be an extension of our department.

PL: Three years ago Nestlé decided they wanted to embed a coaching culture Rhonda Howarth is the woman who led the campaign and she knew that C Suite buy in had to be her starting point.

Rhonda Howarth: Get your senior leadership buy in and that for us is exactly where we started.

PL: How do you do that? It's quickly said but how do you do it?

RH: Well that was probably also one of our biggest challenges so we tried at senior leader level and we got the buy in in terms of yes we think it's a good idea. It probably wasn't until one person in particular took a real stand, had a personal experience and then was able to tell the story and bring the colleagues on board at leadership team level.

PL: And that's what it took?

RH: Yes.

PL: First principles, how did you start to try and convince them that this was a good idea, data?

RH: Yeah. So we used I guess a business case that started to bring to life some of the benefits that coaching could bring for an organisation, very much the anecdotal it will help drive performance, it will help you with engagement for your people across the organisation.

PL: At Nestlé now coaching is tightly woven into their communications and performance management strategy. Rhonda sees it as a key performance driver, a way to enable change and an opportunity to personalise development for the people who work there. It happens at all levels so how does it impact say on a mid-ranking employee?

RH: We have an everyday coaching model which we use and that's really trying to encourage employees and line managers to coach in every situation that's available. We have more formal processes like our performance review process of which we've shifted our programme and approach to that just this year. So much more of the smaller, more frequent conversations, what we call check-ins.

PL: And your line managers find time for that?

RH: Yeah we had probably a more formal process in the previous years whereby it was a fixed start of year setting of goals, a mid-year review point and then the end of year.

PL: Something you could diarise?

RH: Yeah definitely. And that did happen but it felt quite forced whereas now the check-in conversations, and we've got the technology to be able to support it that's really helped those conversations be much more focused.

PL: Are you able to put your finger on where you see the biggest impact from coaching?

RH: We've actually seen some fantastic impact around the peer-to-peer at the other extent of our organisation where we've got 60% of our employees who are based in factories, what we've been doing through some work processes and different ways of working has been encouraging our line operators to coach each other and line managers in that environment to start using a more of a coaching approach rather than a tell approach. So yes some fantastic gains in that space.

PL: So you've got an absolute textbook approach to coaching you've done it all.

RH: We've done it all!

PL: Yes it's all there. It's impressive you've obviously spent a lot of time and resource on doing this, embedding it, how do you know that you're actually getting wins from it, that it's not just people having those conversations as lip service, box ticking?

RH: Yeah I guess probably one of the key measures that we use would be

our engagement survey and that is every two years it's a full survey and then we've had pulse checks along the way as well. So we've seen over the course of our introduction of some of the coaching initiatives an increase of about 4% up to almost 70%. So an increase but still room to move I guess in terms of how we continue that journey forward.

PL: So you directly ask and then there will be behaviours that you're attaching as an outcome, what sort of behaviours do you look for to build your confidence that it's really in the DNA?

RH: Coaching is an interesting dynamic in the organisation where we've actually seen almost like it is taking a life of its own in a sense, so we've seen a much more wider pool of ambassadors and people who are wanting to become involved in facilitating or coaching in our programmes as well.

PL: Where's that coming from? Is it because it's worked well for them individually?

RH: Absolutely yeah. And I think we've had, certainly at the senior leader level, the experience that leaders themselves have had with coaching and the benefits that they've realised through coaching has helped them be able to promote that to their other team members.

PL: Now over at River Island they too had to think about how to evaluate the difference that coaching makes. So how did they measure it?

NC: We've not. We don't feel we need to.

PL: That's bold.

NC: Yeah it is bold but the whole approach is that we're treating our employees like adults. It is a question that comes up often, when we give the answer quite often what you see is lots of raised eyebrows and surprise in people to think, oh how can you possibly performance

manage and understand what's happening in your business if you're not monitoring how often conversations are happening? Well what we can do is we can see very clearly from our employee engagement survey that the scores have increased significantly around the management area of the survey and so that gives us enough of an indication to know that this is the right way forward, not around how many forms are being submitted and monitoring how many meetings are happening.

PL: Well that was my next question.

CB: Yeah because interestingly when we actually did look at it in the old way how many people were doing their appraisals and submitting it across head office there was only 7% of forms that were being submitted anyway.

PL: So it wasn't working anyway.

CB: So it wasn't doing it anyway but for a while we persisted, a lot of companies I'm sure are doing the same thing actually and why persist? Be brave, take a different step and why track it if we're treating people like adults, as Nebel rightly says then it'll grow itself.

PL: So for any of you who are feeling tempted to dump the annual appraisal where should you start?

NC: Talk to people. Have conversations. Move away from it being a HR thing and encourage the business at all levels, in all areas to feel like they can be contributors to whatever you move into.

CB: Yeah and I would just add to that it's be brave, if it's not working for you then don't keep repeating it and trying to get something different out at the end of it.

PL: And be prepared to fail a bit along the way?

NC: Yeah.

CB: And fail lots and I don't think that's a bad thing.

NC: Yeah and learn from that, be open to that, have a really progressive mindset and constantly challenge yourself around how you're doing things and challenge yourself inwardly within HR and L&D but then also across the business and get people to really think about how they're doing things.

PL: There's lots more about coaching on the website so jump in and have a dig around. Looking ahead ethics and what can happen when businesses ignore them has been much in the news this year. We've looked at this subject before but we think there's more to discuss now so next month we're planning a round table about ethics at work. We'll hear from experts and we're going to hear some of your stories about what you did when you had to choose between serving the business and sticking to a more ethical path. Join me then.