



Ed Parsloe reflects on coaching culture and its benefits to organisations



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These days, L&D professionals are often asked about how to create a 'coaching culture'. But they don't always have a clear idea of what that means – or even why they might want one. Many organisations make a real effort to use a coaching approach as much as they can. So what is a coaching culture, why might an organisation want one and how do you go about creating one?

In a coaching culture, most staff use a coaching approach in their daily life: with each other, with external stakeholders and with customers. A true coaching culture is just 'part of the way we do things around here'. But it's not all 'motherhood and apple pie'. There's a hard edge to it. A coaching culture is about delivering results, improving performance and making the most of people's potential. The emphasis is on getting the right things done and making each other (and the wider organisation) stronger and more capable. It's not about having coaching conversations for their own sake, or as a diversion from hard work!

If you could be a fly on the wall in a place where there's a coaching culture, here's what you'd see:

- ▶ Managers looking for opportunities to help others to learn.
- ▶ People asking open questions.
- ▶ Employees at all levels having open, honest and supportive conversations with one another.
- ▶ People routinely giving one another feedback – both supportive and critical.
- ▶ Managers coaching team members to help them develop, rather than just to tackle poor performance.
- ▶ Coaching and mentoring relationships forming without people being told.
- ▶ Senior leaders with a clear vision that coaching and mentoring are at the heart of 'how we operate'.
- ▶ Teams working together with shared purpose and with clear goals, roles, processes and relationships (relatively few people will be playing politics).
- ▶ A pragmatic focus on delivering results and, at the same time, building the long term health of the business. →

Why create a coaching culture?

There are plenty of reasons why organisations benefit from a coaching culture. You will need to understand these drivers in order to create a strong business case.

Let's take a CEO's eye view. Fundamentally, a CEO would want to create a coaching culture because it supports the long term health and effectiveness of an organisation.

Of course, it's not a panacea. There are other things that need to be in place too: strategy, finances, operations and people. No one's focus will be on trying to change the culture if there are pressing, fundamental issues to address. But over the longer term, a coaching culture can give an organisation the edge over competitors and help its people to move the organisation forward.

How does this happen? First, through improved leadership and communication – leaders and managers having productive conversations with each other to solve business problems and capitalise on opportunities.

Then there's greater agility in the business. When people habitually use a coaching and mentoring approach, they are able to collaborate better to manage change and cope with complex, uncertain situations. And coaching and mentoring conversations often focus on developing people and tapping into the talent in the organisation so people with real potential are encouraged and supported to take on more senior roles,

CASE STUDY

One of the more unexpected benefits of a coaching culture is the impact on relationships with customers and stakeholders. While supporting a global top ten accountancy practice in their efforts to create a coaching culture, many of their partners were trained to have coaching and mentoring conversations. Over time they found that the trained partners and senior associates went on to deliver significantly improved sales numbers, client retention and client satisfaction ratings. And they performed much better than the partners and senior associates who didn't attend the training.

So, what's the catch?

Like many things in coaching and mentoring, a coaching culture is a simple idea but it can be challenging to put into practice. Developing and sustaining a coaching culture requires effort over time, and it's only sustained through support and a clear vision from senior leaders.

Senior leaders need to give up a fair amount of power to leaders and employees who report to them. And they need to do this consistently. Efforts to create a coaching culture most often fail because senior leaders are not comfortable with the amount of responsibility they need to give to their teams.

A coaching culture isn't utopia. A coaching approach just isn't right in all

the future. A healthy coaching culture is a challenging but stimulating place to work – but it's not a soft option.

Leaders get the best from their people over a sustained period without 'sweating the assets' too much for too long.

Are all coaching cultures the same?

A coaching culture in one place will look and feel quite different from another. Organisations have their own heritage, history, strategies and business models – and all of these impact on what a coaching culture looks like.

To bring this to life, let's consider an FMCG business and an engineering business. They have very different competitive environments, different levels of complexity in the manufacturing process; and crucially, one is business-to-consumer and the other is business-to-business. So the coaching cultures for each business must be quite different.

How to create a coaching culture

The first step is to create clear vision for the culture. It doesn't have to be a perfect picture but it does need to be inspiring.

How will the culture help you deliver your strategy? What's in it for leaders – and for all employees? How will it benefit your customers/shareholders? What risks will your people need to cope with?

In answering these questions and setting out your vision, it's important to think about how the organisation will evolve over time and here there are four areas to consider:

Strategy – the overall scope and direction of the organisation, and how this might change over time.

People – the people and the jobs we're asking them to do – and how these might change over time as the organisation evolves.

Money – over the next three to five years, revenue and cash position – and the impact that this will have on the culture needed.

Risk – the steps needed to mitigate the different risks: strategic, compliance, operational, financial and reputation.



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ensuring there's a good pipeline of talented people for mission-critical jobs.

Thinking about the benefits for individual employees, the organisation will be a more stimulating, fun and rewarding place to be. People will be more engaged and good people are more likely to stay with the company.

Of course, it's not a paradise for everyone – coaching and mentoring conversations are all about frank and open discussions about performance and potential, so consistently poor performers will be uncovered and exited.

situations. Organisations need to deliver results and there are times which demand 100 per cent focus on immediate delivery – where coaching isn't the right thing to do. You don't coach someone out of a burning building.

The most important aspect of a coaching culture is that leaders have a good sense of when to coach others and when not to. Leaders balance the need to deliver results now with the need to build a healthy business that can deliver results for



Getting down to practicalities, you'll need to set up a team to deliver the coaching culture. This team will need top-level sponsorship (ideally from the CEO – and certainly from someone on the senior leadership team).

It will also need team members from the line (ideally leaders with coaching and mentoring experience and enthusiasm for the project), and those with experience of leading and implementing change.

An enthusiastic, capable project manager is also critical. At the beginning of the project, you can consider drawing on external consulting support to help you shape the team and set them up for success.

Once you have your team in place, it's vital to know the starting point for the organisation. Conduct a 'readiness

audit' to find out how much coaching and mentoring is already happening in your organisation and how receptive people are to doing things differently. This will help you discover those people and teams where people are already coaching and mentoring each other – as well as those who are a long way from the culture you're looking for. These pockets of good practice are vital – they show you what's possible and what will work in your organisation. You can draw on these examples of good practice as you implement the programme.

And it's important to set out some first steps. In the early stages of creating a coaching culture, you may rely a lot on external coaches and support. But this soon drops away as you train a cohort of internal coaches and/or mentors – as well as

leaders who use a coaching approach in their daily lives. This trickles down to how employees treat each other.

Creating a coaching culture takes time but doesn't always take a lot of investment if it's done in a smart way. For an L&D professional, it's one of the most impactful programmes you're ever likely to implement. **TJ**

Ed Parsloe is CEO of The OCM – to find out more visit www.theocm.co.uk

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