

Preserve of the few

Too many organisations still see coaching as an exec-level perk. Cost is a major factor but there are signs that the benefits of creating a universal coaching culture are starting to be recognised. By Peter Crush

Mention the words 'business coaching' and invariably it is preceded by another word – 'executive'. According to Erik de Hann, Ashridge's director of the Centre for Coaching, exec-level coaching is where the majority of the estimated £2 billion market is. "In the past 10 years, coaching has steadily moved away from its original remedial role to become a status symbol for those having it," he says. "This has seen it sit much more comfortably at the top while, in parallel, more coaches have been seeing their role as one of supervision rather than leading people to their own devices."

The impact of these trends can be seen in human capital consultancy HDA's latest Executive Coaching Survey, 2008, which reveals more than one third of organisations (35%) only offer coaching to senior-level employees/managers. It shows that less than half (46%) of businesses offer it to all employees at all levels, leaving coaching, for the majority of workers, as something they can only aspire to. Of those companies that provide coaching, only 41% do so to employees at all levels. So why is it still only readily available at the upper echelons? Is there something about the concept that makes it elitist? And will it ever be something that becomes mainstream for employees?

Views differ on just how all encompassing coaching should be. "Coaching requires people to seek out their own solutions so it is less fast-paced," says Joe Adams, director of the Executive Association of Great Britain and one of the chairmen of the Academy for Chief Executives. "This means it is more time-intensive and so costs more. An hour of coaching from the Institute of Directors for non-members costs £500. This inevitably positions it as the preserve of executives."

The rising cost seems to show no sign of slowing down. According to Catherine Sandler, a founder member of the Association for Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision (APECS), more coaches are recognising the importance of receiving coaching themselves. She says about 44% have their own coaches – mainly to ensure they are supplying their clients with the best advice. While this is a diligent way to double-check standards, this cost will also be passed on to clients indirectly – about one hour of coach-coaching for every 35 hours of coaching they do.

With statistics like these, it may feel that the coaching sector is conspiring to stay an executive-level enterprise. If this truly is its market, maybe it is no bad thing but, according to Adams, the coaching industry is a victim of its personnel – something he says does not help in making it more mass market. ▶

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Erik de Hann, director, Centre for Coaching, Ashridge





Fitter for purpose

It was in 2006 that the then home secretary, John Reid, famously declared the Home Office to be "not fit for purpose". But since that bleak proclamation, the civil service department, headed by HR director Kew White (pictured), has made significant strides through a programme of executive-level coaching. "A poor capability review left us in no doubt that the leadership needed to transform the way we went about our business."

When the Home Office's top 200 leaders were put through a series of 360° reviews White says a clear picture about what needed to happen emerged. "Leaders were academically sound," he explains, "and good at articulating what our real issues were, but what they lacked was the ability to make things happen through their people. They needed help in enthusing and engaging people."

White partnered with leadership and engagement consultancy Stanton Maris to develop a coaching programme aimed at this top layer and a further 57 below that. Sessions focused on giving feedback, engagement skills, and personal coaching and took place in blocks

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of three hours, over six months in 2007 to 2008.

Although coaching focused on the top level, White says the point of it is to create a coaching culture that spreads through the lower ranks. "We do provide access to coaching further down the organisation, but it is an expensive solution. What we want to do is make it normal for all our leaders to be coaching the people who are immediately below them."

Stanton Maris's managing director, James Fulton, says the role of coaching was very much to "connect leaders with the requirements of their role. Most people don't change their habits by being exhorted to do so," he says. "The challenge was how to make the programme be something that people wanted. Part of this was about finding out what was going on below them, and we encouraged these people to coach each other."

According to White, the coaching culture he wants the whole of the Home Office to demonstrate is not one of self-help. "I prefer it to be about helping people to grow themselves," he says. "It's about realising what is important to us and making a concerted effort to improve one area of organisational performance."

PHOTOGRAPH

"The coaching community is full of people who have gone from redundancy into coaching, and these people are themselves senior-level execs who seek out other senior-level execs to coach," he argues. "To an extent this gives the industry a bad name."

Change could be afoot, though. Newcastle Business School recently launched a programme of coaching for SME owners, while Lancaster University Management School has introduced a new series of qualifications for individuals to take up coaching. "There's a point to executives getting coaching, because they have specific issues and secrets that cannot always be discussed lower down the organisation," says Gill Schwent, coach at the Bath Consultancy. "But my view is that increasingly coaching won't be the preserve of this group of people. Ironically, this is down to the execs themselves. They have found coaching to be so useful, it is they who sometimes push HR for the people under them and below them to realise its benefits too."

The Bath Consultancy is one organisation that has worked with clients, including the BBC, to introduce coaching to employees at all levels. It has developed a model for how coaching should be conducted at different company strata – such as more skill and performance development for frontline staff. Since 2006 more than 80 BBC staff have been trained by Bath as coaches. All have ordinary day jobs but, says Schwent, are just as capable in terms of the results they generate as any professional coach.

This 'creating internal coaches' idea is a trend Kate Lanz, executive director at coaching specialist Sandler Lanz, thinks will accelerate the rate at which coaching spreads down the organisation. "It makes more sense to coach those identified as having high potential, but internal coaching helps create a coaching culture and a sense of openness. Here I think line managers get the idea of what coaching can bring, and the whole organisation benefits."

According to HDA 59% of line managers act as coaches (see line management feature p34), but what could hamper the spread of multi-level

Everyone benefits from coaching



Blaire Palmer, creative thinking coach

"Typically coaching is a perk reserved for senior management. In theory, when you coach at this level you are basically

getting to the heart of transforming business performance. However, to an extent this is closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. By the time senior leaders get access to coaching they have already established a leadership style, full of bad habits as well as good habits. They may never have asked themselves why they respond to problems the way they do and why they get the results they tend to get. The earlier high potentials are challenged to become more self-aware and more conscious of the choices they make every day the better. If we can work with them early on they can drive a change of culture through the business as they progress up the organisation. Earlier on in your career you are more open-minded and more able to learn. One problem is that companies usually save their best coaching and training for people high up the organisation and pass their junior staff off with lower quality – dare I say – cheap, off-the-shelf training courses. As a result employees learn that training and development is a waste of time and doesn't result in sustainable change. When those same individuals reach the top of the organisation they have a belief that professional development is of limited value and resist the offer of coaching. Cheap training isn't cheap at all if it achieves nothing. Investing in good quality coaching may appear more expensive but if, as a result, changes of behaviour stick and create better results for the company, that cost was simply a wise investment."

coaching is the fact that most of it is still reactive. Of those organisations offering coaching to address a specific problem or set of skills, 46% do it for reactive reasons; only 24% do so proactively.

Another problem with extending internal coaching within organisations is the very real problem individuals might have around opening themselves up to what could be their everyday colleagues. One organisation has nipped this problem in the bud. West Midlands Local Government Association is working in partnership with the Office of



Aparna Uberoy, operations director, Blue Edge

"If you think coaching is only the preserve of top executives, think again. Consider the tools that the

'exemplary' manager uses to motivate and develop team members: setting goals and objectives, finding out what make staff tick, identifying strengths and weaknesses, giving feedback and recognising successes. Coaching skills are an essential part of the manager's toolkit, used alongside other managerial styles to get the best from staff. While the standard approach to coaching – delivering one-to-one sessions – is less usual for non-executive staff, this is not to say that staff organisation-wide cannot profit from coaching. Many organisations have discovered a cost-effective and sustainable way of offering coaching to staff at all levels is to train managers in the skills to be able to coach their teams. For managers, coaching offers solutions to questions such as: how do I get the best from my staff during tough times? How do I provide constructive yet motivating feedback? How will I retain high-calibre staff? For staff, the benefits include a more positive and energising experience of work, improved relationships with their managers and greater opportunities to play to their strengths. It can also help them to build a stronger connection between their personal aspirations and the organisation's goals. The notion of focusing on employees' strengths and opportunities is gaining currency. In current times particularly, where organisations are faced with achieving more with less, getting staff to 'go the extra mile' and unleashing their potential is a real result."

Internal coaching helps create a coaching culture and a sense of openness

Kate Lanz, executive director, Sandler Lanz

Public Management to create a pool of coaches each council belonging to the group can tap into. It ensures internal coaches will not be talking directly to people they know. "There will be no charge if, say, Coventry calls Birmingham for coaching," says Bath's Schwent. "It's a great idea, and open to anyone who wants coaching."

The days of coaching being an executive-only perk may not be quite over yet, but the time when it becomes something the rest of the workforce can tap into may still be some way off. ■