

Coaching the Coaches: A Coaching Development Program within a Hong Kong Organisation

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Purpose

To report on a case study of a 15 month coaching development program within a Hong Kong based organisation. The article outlines the purpose, processes and outcomes of the coaching program.

Design

A single organisational case study. The analysis is conducted by the appointed external professional coach and draws on the material obtained from internal coaches through structured interviews and focus groups that were held throughout the coaching program

Findings

The internal coaches reported that the coaching program improved their skills and enhanced their capacity to assist others and develop managerial talent within the organisation.

Practical Implications

A well designed, long term and continuously monitored coaching program utilising an external moderator/facilitating coach can develop professional managerial and leadership skills, and support talent management within the organisation.

Value

A coaching development program is outlined that has potential to be applied in organisations that are faced with talent management and recruitment challenges.

Coaching and Organisation performance

Coaching has emerged as a significant corporate support tool in leadership development, talent management strategic and culture change initiatives. Executive coaches are external professionals who assist in developing and improving the performance of executives and potential managers. In 2013, two reputable coaching organisations report extensive growth in professional coaches: over 20,000 members in the International Coach Federation; and more than 13,000 members in the International Association of Coaching.

Coaching is intended to assess and improve individual and team performance, thus enhancing organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Employees develop stronger occupational commitment because of professional support and advice in a developmental environment in the coached organizations. Coaching involves both directive and reflective processes. Directive coaching is led by the coach and is structured. Reflective coaching encourages the empowerment of coachees so they are capable of finding solutions to their own problems. The abilities in reflection for improvement; reflection for transformation and reflection for understanding a process are also in line with the GROW coaching model. The GROW model is widely used in coaching sessions; it involves a structured program that incorporates the Goal of coaching, Reality checks, Option generation and Wrapping up.

The Coaching processes in a Hong Kong Organization

Through the services of an externally appointed professional coach the purpose was to develop an internal coaching program and developmental process within a Hong Kong organization. Out of this process the organization would have its own internal coaching program that supported ongoing leadership development goals. An External Coach was employed to establish a systematic and formalized coaching program. The client company is a service organization, with over 50 years' history and around 1,000 employees. The coaching program was a new management development program, with an aim to build up the management team and to support succession planning. Initially seven senior managers were selected to participate in the coaching development program that operated for 6 months. They would then in turn act as personal coaches for seven line managers within the organization. This internal coaching development process took 9 months. The program operated over 2013 and 2014. The process is set out in table 1.

Table 1 Details of the Coaching Development Program

Stage	Participants	Coaching Process	Purpose
1 6 months	7 senior managers and directors external coach	External coach as facilitator DISC personality tests. Structured coaching training & development programs; leadership, succession planning, coaching. 4 monthly meetings and 2 quarterly meetings between coaches and professional coach	develop coaching skills and processes within the organization develop coaches within the organisation
2 9 months	As above plus 7 line managers	senior managers act as coaches and mentors to the line managers DISC personality tests Formal training programs in leadership, teamwork, coaching 5 monthly meetings with personal coach and 3 quarterly meetings with other coaches and professional coach external coach as facilitator and advisor	develop and support the management team identify talent for future development embed the coaching process with the organization expand the pool of internal coaches

The coaching process began with a DISC personality assessment to interpret the strengths and weaknesses of the managerial style and skills of the coachees. DISC is an acronym for the four primary dimensions of behaviour: Dominance, Influence; Steadiness; and Control. This was

followed by 12 one hour training programs on leadership, succession planning and coaching. A 6-month coaching program with 7 senior managers was conducted by an External Coach. This involved both directive and reflective coaching. The monthly meeting was directive with structured discussions on work related issues. At the same time, reflective coaching occurred as the coachees were encouraged address their own challenges. The GROW coaching model was used throughout the coaching process. After 6 months the coachees were required to report on work improvement and reflect on the results of coaching process in a final quarterly group meeting. They were also required to submit their reports to the HR Manager and the external coach. After review, the participants were invited to become internal coaches.

The second stage of the coaching program involved 7 managers being invited to the Coaching Program; each was assigned a coach who had completed stage one of the program. Stage 2 started with an 8 training programs on leadership, managerial skills, teamwork and coaching, followed by DISC personality assessment. What followed *was* a 9-month coaching period; with monthly meetings with assigned coaches and quarterly meetings meet with other coaches and coaches. On completion of the program a second pool of internal coaches were available to support managerial development within the organization.

On the completion of the 15-month coaching program, the External Coach conducted interviews and focus groups with all the participants. The purpose was to evaluate the effectiveness of the program, reflect on the personal experiences and consider how it could be further developed and embedded within the organization. The following section reports on the feedback from the participants.

The managers saw coaching as being instrumental and linked to organizational development. Senior Managers aimed to build a company-wide coaching culture.

“We want more colleagues to join so we can cultivate a coaching culture within our Company.”

The coachees translated the objectives into actions and adopted the leadership competencies learnt from the training workshops for the purpose of developing and applying skills.

“It is important to integrate daily work processes so as to add value.”

The structure of the coaching program was regarded as being effective and reasonable in terms of its organization and meeting schedules. The participants said:

“The duration and meetings were appropriate as it gave enough time to establish trust and bonding; and understanding of the organization and resources available.”

"I like the mixed mode of communication such as monthly lunch or dinner meeting, sharing via social media that is casual but insightful; and via email for sharing of printed materials."

It was suggested by some respondents that the training programs be delayed so that the participants had the opportunity to better appreciate the purpose and process.

"There are a lot of management theories and models that take time to understand and to apply at work."

"Perhaps, the training program can be run at interval so that it is easier for coachees to apply what they have learnt at work."

What makes for Effective Coaching

- ❖ Trust is built up through time.

"At the initial stage, my coachee sets her own boundary; and now, she is able to initiate creative solutions."

"I have never come across with such serious interpersonal conflicts in my career. What I learnt from the Coach is very valuable to me. Instead of instructing me, my coach hints me to think of the effectiveness of different approaches to conflict resolution. She shares with me her experience and opinion."

- ❖ Being a good listener makes the coaching process effective.

"My coach pays much effort in understanding my difficulty from a peer's point of view."

"My coach enables me think out of the box. With his guidance and experience sharing, I have another ways of dealing my tasks."

- ❖ Empathy was important in supporting effectiveness. A *coaching community* was formed for sharing management practices, resources and providing support.

"We can share the Organization culture and rationales behind the work practices; also access to other staff in the Coaching program."

"It is a good opportunity for me during discussion and to learn from a senior management. I learn a lot of things in the management skills, and have a review of my management style."

- ❖ The External Coach is effective if they guide, advise and keep the coaching program on track.

“I learn a lot on coaching from the External Coach; her input was highly appreciated.”

“The External Coach guides, plans and manages the processes well. She is a good coordinator in directing the coaching program.”

Benefits of Coaching

The Coaching program was a satisfying experience for personal growth and professional development.

“Better communication is enhanced and allows the coachees to think from a new perspective.”

“There is new way of thinking and communication, with better rapport and to put one’s work into practice.”

- ❖ Reflection or self-awareness is an important element contributing to the success of the program.

“I like the process of self development and continuous reflection.”

“I enjoy and learn a lot through self-reflection. I want to continue to be coached and will definitely recommend to other colleagues.”

- ❖ The Coaching program was considered as effective.

“I have improved time management, communication skills; able to build a network with other coaches.”

“I use the suggestions and see the improvement in my daily work.”

Challenges to the Coaching Program

There were 4 issues that were identified as being barriers to effectiveness. First, having sufficient time within the organization to fully develop and embed the program.

“It was difficult to find time to meet and it becomes a burden.”

Second, having sufficient time for each individual to effectively participate in the program.

“I always find that I am running out of time and resources since there are a lot of management theories and models that take times to understand and to apply at work.”

Third, issues linked to internal coaching – about the reluctance of subordinates to fully participate in a program that involved reflection on senior managers and the organization (especially where these were negative evaluations).

*"I try to avoid to discuss work related problems that they considered as being sensitive.
I may be seen as finger pointing or not competent in handling their employees."*

Finally, while this was seen as an ongoing process the organization had no systematic development plans beyond the 15 months of the program. There is a danger that the coaching development process, instead of being viewed as a longer term strategic process, could be seen as a short term fix to one or two issues, such as staff retention.

"it is difficult to measure the deliverable of projects. So we don't know what and how to sustain the coaching culture after the formal Coaching program."

Evaluation of the Program

Coaching processes requires time. Coaching programs are effective in terms of organizational development when the sequencing and programming are planned, with clear objectives and a 2-way learning process for coach and coachee. The role of External Coach as a moderator is essential in the application of uses both hypothetical and existing organizational challenges. An overall evaluation suggests that the outcomes of the program were satisfactory but there is room for improvement. The program was challenged with time and work pressures and by the limitations inherent to an internal coaching development program. Finally, the process was not embedded into a longer term strategic development process.