

COACHING IS A KEY SKILL FOR MANAGERS

Author and coach **Matt Somers** is committed to helping managers develop their coaching skills. He is the author of a new *Instant Manager* book on the subject and talks to **Sue Mann** about why it is a win-win skill for managers and what the pitfalls are

How do you define coaching?

There are the various official definitions, some of which are quoted in the book on coaching published by Hodder Education and the Chartered Management Institute. I talk about it in general terms as 'managers helping people to be the biggest and best that they can be in a work situation'.

When managers coach in this way everybody wins - it's good for the individual, the team and the organisation.

It is hard to see any downside to it. Line managers need coaching skills alongside the other abilities they must possess to carry out their management role.

What makes a good coach and could anyone do it with the right training and experience?

Let me answer the second part of the question first. I think that anyone can do it but whether everyone should do it is a different question.

Coaching ability has nothing to do with age, rank, seniority, gender or anything like that. The personal qualities required are the same as those that enable people to get into positions of management responsibility in the first place, i.e. the ability to listen, empathise and ask very good questions that get people to think. These are the three main qualities.

How do you define the difference between mentoring and coaching?

I say to people 'watch which way the wisdom flows'. If it is going from the wiser to the less wise then it's mentoring,

whereas coaching is a process of extracting wisdom from the person being coached, making them more aware of their own learning and experience – making it apparent to them.

If I am mentoring someone, I am saying 'if you want my advice this is what you should do'. If I am coaching a person, I am saying 'well you tell me what you think? Reflect on that, what did you notice, what can you learn from the experience?'

So, mentoring is input, coaching is extraction.

What can coaching be used for in a business/organisational context?

In a nutshell, anything that requires a forward step. Typically, coaching is going to be used to improve performance - driving up sales figures, generating leads, containing costs, hitting quality standards, making work more appealing to improve staff retention and reduce sickness absence - those sorts of things.

The core needs are coaching people to restore or improve motivation and to help them cope with change.

When did you first become interested in coaching professionally?

I worked for a number of years in high street banking and then, because I had a lifelong interest in personnel and people, diverted into Human Resource Development. In 1994 I had the opportunity to meet and train with the coaching guru Sir John Whitmore.

I don't want to sound all misty-eyed about it but it was

a real turning point in my professional life. I finally understood what coaching was all about and how it offered an explanation as to what managers who were good at the people side of their work were doing.

I often say that we've had coaching as long as we have had bosses managing people but it is only recently that the word coaching has been applied to the art of doing this well.

Are there any misconceptions about coaching in business because of the high profile of coaching in sport?

In many ways coaching in business is ahead of coaching in sport, perhaps because business has more resources to throw at the development of such initiatives. An awful lot of what we think of as coaching in sport is actually rooted in instruction and is not the more person-centred coaching that we are more familiar with in the workplace.

One of the barriers to the more widespread adoption of coaching is the short-term mindset. If managers were encouraged to take a longer-term view they might find it more appealing to invest time in the development of their teams.

Which methods do you use in coaching and why?

Coaching is about dealing with people at work and that doesn't lend itself to a black and white, one size fits all approach. People are very, very different and our approach to coaching them needs to be similarly flexible.

In my consultancy practice, we teach a core model but invite people to disregard it almost as soon as they have learnt it and move on and try to be a bit more imaginative and flexible. Probably the most important thing is to learn to deal with the person in front of you and that is what we encourage our clients to do.

Why is there sometimes resistance to coaching?

The media has latched on to the flakier life coaches who get wheeled onto breakfast TV and that can seem all very glamorous and jazzy. If that is people's expectation; that they are going to get life-coached and invited to do bizarre visioning exercises and what have you, then they are quite understandably going to be resistant to the idea.

Another possible reason is that too much emphasis is put on coaching as a remedial activity rather than a developmental one. When people feel they are being sent to 'special lessons', so to speak, they are understandably going to be resistant but we are not good at recognising these sorts of issues in this country.

One of the reasons I was pleased to have the opportunity to write the book was to help dispel some of these myths about coaching.

For me the argument for using coaching skills to manage and develop people is compelling and I believe it is beginning to gain acceptance in everyday management circles.

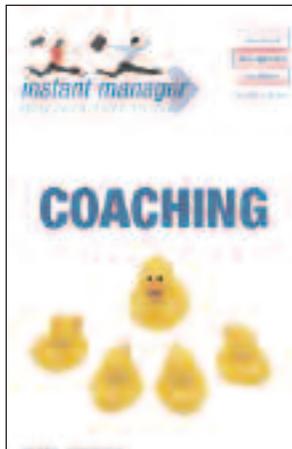
One sees coaching being a set requirement in general management adverts too, whereas previously it was only

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ever referenced as a skills requirement for training and development professionals.

So I think there is a growing need to recognise that coaching is not a stand alone activity which we undertake as and when there is a problem. It should actually be a core part of what it is to be a manager of people.

What advice would you give managers who are interested in working with professional coaches to tackle organisational issues?

I would suggest to anybody looking for a coach to get round the table with some prospective people. Have a coffee with them, keep it all fairly informal and low key to begin with and see if they are people you feel you could get along with.

You need to be sure that those providing professional coaching services are people you can trust, talk to openly and honestly and who will be able to help you articulate your thoughts and find some clarity in the way forward.

How can the impact of coaching be measured?

It is nigh on impossible to prove definitively a causal link

between coaching and improved results. There are so many other variables. But what you can do is first of all ask people ‘does it make sense to train managers to help people become bigger and better at what they do?’ The answer, of course, has to be ‘yes’.

Then perhaps you could turn to your HR department, which will have some existing methodologies that they use for general training evaluation, and adapt some of these tools. For example, Kirkpatrick levels can be applied to get people’s immediate reaction to coaching and gauge the amount of learning that has taken place. Use feedback tools to understand the impact on management style and so on.

There are lots of mechanisms that can be invoked to do something along the lines of evaluation but I do believe an absolutely robust scientific cause and effect measurement is beyond our reach at the moment.

Are there any drawbacks or pitfalls to employing coaching techniques in business?

We need to respect the power of coaching and recognise that if we are going to sit people down and start asking some questions, then we can’t legislate for what answers we might get. Some uncomfortable home truths may come out and in some ways, from the manager’s point of view, that’s good. It means that we are earning the trust of our people but we must be prepared to deal with the things that are raised in a coaching conversation.

Don’t coach unless you are prepared to properly deal with what emerges from those conversations. You can’t do it in a superficial way or pay lip service to it. I don’t want to see managers just doing coaching because it says they have to do it in their job description. We need to be far, far more honest in its deployment than that. **pm**

Further information

Matt Somers is a leading voice on coaching in the UK and has trained hundreds of managers to achieve results through others over the years. He holds an MSc and is a fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Instant Manager: Coaching is published by Hodder Education and the Chartered Management Institute. The book costs £8.99 and is available from bookshops and from Hodder Education online at www.hoddereducation.co.uk

The new series was introduced last year with five titles and more are being launched this month, including *Instant Manager: Coaching*.

The other titles in the series are on time management, overcoming information overload, the balanced scorecard, body language, business plans, finance for non-financial managers and neuro-linguistic programming.

Information about coaching is available to Chartered Management Institute members at www.managers.org.uk/subjectsearch

The Institute has developed a new qualification for managers, called the Introductory Diploma in Coaching and Mentoring.

For further information about Institute qualifications, approved centres which offer our qualifications or details about how to become an Institute approved centre, please call 01536 207453, e-mail qualifications@managers.org.uk or visit www.managers.org.uk/qualifications

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