

Coaching in the workplace helping UN staff

Identifying what you want from your future, why you want it and how to achieve it

Often when we think of a coach, what comes to mind is an athletics, tennis, basketball or football coach developing young athletes to perform to their full potential in winning teams. But a new type of coaching is entering the workplace with many similarities, but some key differences too.

VERONICA RIEMER, WHO

This kind of coaching is all about developing individuals in their personal and professional lives, working with people to identify, target, and plan for performance improvement throughout their careers.

Coaching in the workplace is delivered by external coaches, internal coaches or managers who have integrated coaching skills in their leadership style. An organization is said to have a “coaching culture” when everyone uses it as a way to communicate and learn.

Saba Imru-Mathieu is an Executive Leadership Coach and Senior Trainer and is a Founding Partner of Leaders Today. Formerly leading the Human Resources & Administration Unit at the Standards Bureau of the International

Telecommunication Union (ITU), she trained at the *Institut de Coaching* in Geneva and subsequently became a teacher at the school. As an ex-international civil servant, she is well-known in the UN system and the wider Geneva community. Her knowledge of the work environment and understanding of its challenges places her well to give training in coaching to UN staff and her many presentations, seminars and workshops have been well received.

During the last quarter of 2017, Saba was invited by the WHO Human Resources Department (Global Talent Management team) to conduct a series of workshops to provide staff with a better understanding of coaching concepts, with a view to adopting such a posture in their professional

environment. It was part of the overall objective of introducing a coaching culture in WHO, where more open communication and trusting relationships are formed among staff with the ultimate goal of generating a more empowered and motivated attitude in staff members. The mini workshops offered by Saba were complementary to a series of half day sessions on coaching skills for managers and for staff, which were offered from September to December.

“I am absolutely passionate about seeing people develop their full potential and supporting them to engage with each other in a constructive dialogue” she explained. “It is essential to create an enabling environment for this to happen, so to me personal, leadership and organizational development go together.”

Working mostly in global organizations, her work focuses on three main areas:

- developing international leaders
- fostering collaboration in multicultural workplaces
- training manager coaches and professional coaches in advanced coaching skills.

She recognises that coaching in the workplace can be a difficult skill for managers to master as most managers are used to directing work rather than

achieving it through employee development. She sees coaching as a conversation driven by strategic inquiry that stimulates novel thinking. “Conversing is something that anyone can do. By asking questions, we stimulate reflection and by asking **good** questions we cause entirely new avenues of thought to open up” she explained. The role of the coaching manager is to enable the supervisee to find solutions for themselves, so that they become more effective, more accountable and more satisfied. The goal is to help employees recognise opportunities for improvement by asking probing, and often tough, questions, challenging the person to think about their goals as well as how to achieve them. When managers discover that a consequence of coaching is empowering their staff, they free their time from micro-managing to focus on strategic thinking instead”.

What Coaching in the workplace is NOT

Saba explained that there are a number of misconceptions about coaching, and the three most common myths are described below:

Myth #1 – Coaching is for people who do not perform well and coaches are brought in to fix problem behaviour. – In reality, executive coaching is usually offered to top performers to help them excel and achieve even more. So having

a coach should be a source of pride and not embarrassment!

Myth #2 – Coaching is simply a dynamic and practical way of teaching. Some managers might be convinced they already coach, so why learn something they already know?

– In reality becoming a manager or leader who coaches requires learning specific skills that must be practiced extensively until they become a natural part of their behaviour as leaders. Some of these skills are counter-intuitive at first, such as asking questions rather than jumping in to give advice.

Myth #3 – Coaching is a fad – Far from it, in fact it's here to stay! Coaching is a recent profession with multidisciplinary roots which has now built its own research-based body of knowledge. It is recognized in academia and in business world as having a high positive impact on work life, and on personal well-being.

Saba often hears that "command and control" is out, it no longer works. "Today, employees expect to be respected and to experience work satisfaction. But few know what to do instead of commanding! Is it just about being nice? Some people are afraid of becoming "too nice". How can you be a democratic leader and still keep

control? I believe that learning coaching skills is the answer because the methodology itself unravels the complexities around motivating employees, creating accountability, helping them develop".

Coaching can also play a positive role in conflict management in the workplace. Firstly, it can decrease the level of fear and stress experienced by parties in conflict thus helping them to develop a strategy for resolution. By giving each party concrete communication tools to approach the sensitive situation, it provides a pathway to understanding and awareness which leads to more tolerant interactions in the future. Strategic coaching questions will help the person understand what triggers conflict, what is really at stake, and what they really want as an outcome.

Saba recently worked with a manager who had taken on a team of people who were all at least 15 years his senior and had worked for the company for many years. The young manager was a graduate of a prestigious university and had made a quick, stellar career progression. His arrival had been greeted with much scepticism by his team and after a

bumpy start where he unwittingly offended many people, he was keen to correct the course and establish good relations with everyone.

For several months he worked on increasing his self-awareness, understanding how he might affect others, practising new ways of writing emails, talking with his staff and leading meetings. He also experimented with tools that helped him build the team strategy in a participatory manner. The results he produced were outstanding in terms of his own confidence and relaxed approach and at the same time he was able to build a strong team spirit where staff felt respected and much more satisfied at work. "Most of the time it's about people changing perspective" said Saba "seeing themselves or others in a different way, and on this basis, undertaking new behaviours".

Put simply, coaching is a process that aims to improve performance and focuses on the "here and now" rather than on the distant past or future. The coach is there to help the individual improve their own performance: in other words, helping them to learn. Good coaches believe that the individual always has the answer to

their own problems but understands that they may need help to find the answer. ■



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Given the success obtained at WHO by this new initiative, the Global Talent Management team plans to offer coaching as a way to create – an enabling working environment where staff are more motivated, engaged and willing to learn.

For more information on coaching initiatives at WHO, please contact Sara Canna at cannas@who.int.

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