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Developing coaching cultures: a review of the literature

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This paper provides a review of the literature on coaching cultures. It offers a frame of reference for future research to build on existing knowledge and understanding in this field. The review included literature from industry and education perspectives. The key terms ‘coaching’, ‘coaching cultures’ and ‘coaching in organisations’ were used to search the following sources: PsycINFO, Academic Search Complete and Business Source Complete. Additional texts were consulted and included to ensure a broad contextual basis for the discussion. The review is presented in five sections: definition of coaching cultures; the use of coaching to support organisational change; training staff within organisations to become internal coaches; coaching cultures in educational settings; and ways of creating coaching cultures. A review of current literature suggested that the creation of coaching cultures in organisations required the following: promotion through the organisation and targeted efforts by its senior leaders; coaching should be presented as an integrated part of the organisation or system; role modelling is essential and leaders should demonstrate strong personal commitment to the development of their own capabilities. Finally, some directions for further research are proposed.

Keywords: coaching; cultures; organisations; review; education

1. Introduction

This article provides a review of the literature on ‘coaching cultures’. Although this phrase is used regularly by coaches and purchasers of coaching services, there is no shared understanding of what constitutes a ‘coaching culture’. In response, we offer a frame of reference for future research to build on existing knowledge and understanding in this field. The review will include literature from both industry and education perspectives. Education has been chosen as an example case study because of the specialism of the authors and growing interest within the sector.

The sources for the search together with the key terms can be seen in [Table 1](#). Additional non-academic texts were consulted and included to ensure a broad contextual basis for the discussion. This review is presented in five sections: definition of coaching cultures; the use of coaching to support organisational change; training staff within organisations to become internal coaches; coaching cultures in educational settings; and ways of creating coaching cultures. Finally, we propose a revised definition and suggest directions for further research.

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Table 1. Sources consulted.

Source/key terms	PsycINFO	Academic search complete	Business source complete
Coaching	3820	3753	1730
Coaching cultures	29	68	37
Coaching in organisations	49	35	23

2. Defining coaching cultures

Before we attempt to define coaching cultures, it is important to recognise that there is currently no agreed definition of coaching. However, as one of the authors has noted, there is a broad agreement that coaching is an intervention that can help people to achieve their goals or improve performance through structured conversations (van Nieuwerburgh & Passmore, 2012). Cox, Bachkirova, and Clutterbuck (2010) discuss the nature of coaching, stating that:

coaching could be seen as a human development process that involves structured, focused interaction and the use of appropriate strategies, tools and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the coachee and potentially for all stakeholders. (p. 1)

In a well-known quote, Whitmore (2009) defines coaching as ‘unlocking people’s potential to maximise their own performance’ (p. 10). Grant (2007) provides a more detailed definition, suggesting that ‘coaching is a robust and challenging intervention, is results driven, delivers tangible added value, is typically a short-term or intermittent engagement and enables the attainment of high standards or goals’ (p. 23). In an attempt to create a broadly acceptable definition, the International Coaching Federation (ICF) proposed that coaching is a ‘professional partnership between a qualified coach and an individual or team that supports the achievement of extraordinary results based on goals set by the individual or team’ (2005). Both the ICF and Whitmore (2009) emphasise the application of coaching to individuals and teams. According to Whitmore, the basis of ‘coaching to improve team performance is not imposing but increasing individual and collective awareness and responsibility’ (p. 147).

Building on these definitions and focusing on coaching cultures, Hawkins (2012) has recently proposed that:

A coaching culture exists in an organisation when a coaching approach is a key aspect of how the leaders, managers, and staff engage and develop all their people and engage their stakeholders, in ways that create increased individual, team and organisational performance and shared value for all stakeholders. (p. 21)

He emphasises the importance of a strong foundation on which to build and develop a sustainable and meaningful coaching strategy and culture. This includes a coaching strategy that is developed collaboratively, grounded in the business strategy and aligned to the wider organisational culture. Significantly, Hawkins describes the need for a ‘coaching infrastructure’ which includes governance and management aspects and a requirement for integration of coaching interventions within an organisation and an evaluation of impact.

Anderson and Anderson (2005) had previously taken a similar view, proposing that ‘coaching is more than a set of skills; it is a rich, holistic approach for releasing the

potential in people and in organisations' (p. 127). According to them, integrating coaching within a management or leadership style can be done through the 'right mix of coaching support and personal development'. They see one of the critical success factors being the involvement of highly regarded and influential leaders. In a connected study, Anderson, Frankovelgia, and Hernez-Broome (2009) found that creating coaching cultures can lead to changes in the organisation and that the benefits and outcomes of coaching cultures are worthy of investment.

Waldman (2009) proposes that organisations that offer coaching are demonstrating a belief in managers' abilities and actively investing in their continuous professional development. Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005) concur when they suggest that coaching cultures are characterised by 'a commitment to grow the organisation' alongside a parallel 'commitment to grow the people in the organisation' (p. 19). Hardingham, Brearley, Moorhouse, and Venter (2004) describe a coaching culture as one in which 'people coach each other all the time as a natural part of meetings, reviews and one-to-one discussions of all kinds' (p. 184), highlighting the way in which frequent coaching meetings can strengthen relationships. Hart (2005) supports this view adding that 'coaching behavior motivates people, increases job satisfaction and morale, and strengthens bonds between individuals' (p. 7). McComb (2012a, 2012b, 2012c) explores the motivational dimensions of establishing a coaching culture in more depth, highlighting the importance of an organisation's leaders demonstrating a commitment for developing themselves through coaching. Based on his research, he recommends a high level of participation by those in senior positions, open communication and staff members experiencing coaching (as coaches and coachees). The critical role of leadership when developing coaching cultures is highlighted by Lindbom (2007), when he insists that a 'culture of coaching requires commitment, consistency, and dedication from leadership' (p. 102). For example, Anderson and Anderson (2005) point out that a generally accepted approach for creating a coaching culture is to train managers in coaching skills. According to Anderson and Anderson (2005), 'coaching is more than a set of skills; it is a rich, holistic approach for releasing the potential in people and in organisations' (p. 127). Leonard-Cross (2010) is equally positive. According to her, 'the pursuit of a coaching culture can have benefits; with widespread quality, coaching an organisation can learn new things more quickly and adapt to change more effectively' (p. 37).

Within the broadly positive and optimistic views proposed above, Whybrow and O'Riordan (2011) sound a note of caution when they point out that organisations have multiple and shifting cultures. According to them, it is critical that a predetermined notion of a coaching culture is not imposed onto an organisational system. Evans (2011) in his study 'sought to understand the organisational impact of a coaching programme ... through the lens of organisational culture' (p. 73). Therefore, rather than placing coaching as a focus of the individual, he places it within 'a messy and complex social system of connectedness and situatedness' (p. 80). His study also highlights the central role of leadership in managing change and the integration of coaching. It is important for us to take these complexities into account as we seek to understand coaching cultures and ways in which they can be introduced into organisations.

In summary, it has been proposed that coaching cultures exist when groups of people embrace coaching as a way of making holistic improvements to individuals within their organisations through formal and informal coaching interactions. This can mean a large proportion of individuals adopting coaching behaviours relate to support, and influences one another and their stakeholders. Formal coaching engagements or relationships, whether

with professional internal or external coaches, and training programmes are only part of a larger system.

Based on the review above, we have been able to identify a number of common and consistent themes relating to the concept of coaching cultures:

- It is proposed that coaching can form an integral part of how organisations develop their people.
- It is suggested that coaching can be embedded within the existing performance management and feedback processes of organisations.
- The literature suggests that coaching can provide a holistic approach to unlocking the potential of individuals and their organisations.
- There are indications that coaching can create increased performance within organisations.
- It seems that coaching can be a good way of demonstrating a clear commitment to grow individuals within an organisation.
- There is a general agreement that creating coaching cultures can take time.
- Finally, there is a broad agreement that creating coaching cultures can lead to changes in organisations with rewards for staff, stakeholders and clients.

3. Coaching to support organisational change

In this section, we will consider the frequently mentioned use of coaching to support organisational change. As coaching is said to support change in individuals and teams, it is fair to assume that coaching cultures will have organisational implications. Whitmore (2002, pp. 127–133) emphasises the use of a coaching style by all managers and offers some useful guidelines for using coaching to effect organisational change:

- Do not redesign the structure too radically or too quickly.
- Do not impose the redesign on staff.
- Encourage staff to experiment with new behaviours with coaching.
- Managers and leaders should lead by example.
- Members of staff need the opportunity to choose how to change.

Evans (2011) argues that ‘if coaching changes people and people create organisations by their social interaction, then coaching should change organisations’. In his survey of executive coaching, organisational development and psychology, he highlights many models of organisational structure that may be helpful for embedding coaching within an organisational landscape. However, this contradicts Louis (1983) who argues that ‘these static models provide less insight than a holistic cultural approach that illuminates the dynamic nature of human social systems’ (p. 71). Katz and Miller (1996) focus on the coaching of senior leaders as a key component in changing organisational culture. To learn new competencies, leaders need the support of skilled coaches who can support them to consider the need for cultural change. Rock and Donde (2008b) look at using coaching as change agents and ‘driving the leadership pipeline through integrated coaching solutions, shifting culture by transforming the quality of every conversation and lifting performance by improving retention and engagement’ (p. 11).

There are various views about how coaching can support organisational change. The literature suggests that just as coaching changes people, it similarly changes organisations.

Coaches can provide leaders with the support they need to inspire cultural change with their organisations.

4. Training internal coaches

An increasing number of organisations are starting to train and develop internal coaches. In 2011, the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) reported that 83% of surveyed organisations sourced their coaches internally. In 2012, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development Learning and Talent Development Survey showed the trend towards line management coaching at 52% compared to 46% in 2009. In a recent report published by ILM (2013), coaching was highlighted as having a positive impact on performance. The report concludes by suggesting that coaching should be offered to new managers. These trends may be due in part to financial considerations. Building a cadre of internal coaches has the benefit of containing cost (McKee, Tilin, & Mason, 2009). Interviews of leaders at UniCredit Banca who were coached by internal coaches revealed five tangible results:

- An increase in the speed of managers' leadership growth
- An increase in managers' loyalty to the company
- Improved communication among employees
- Increased ability to resolve conflicts
- Renewed passion and awareness of an ability to develop others.

McKee et al. (2009) also noted that internal coaches can 'organise coaching around company values and leadership competencies, and provide coaching deeper into the organisation' (p. 61). Internal coaching programmes can also develop the leadership skills of managers and retain them. This effect is supported by Leonard-Cross's (2010) research which found that training managers to be coaches was beneficial to the coaches themselves. A recent case study of an internal coaching intervention aimed at building leadership capacity in a large production company in India showed clear benefits for the coachee in terms of leadership development (Mukherjee, 2012). The study suggests that there are a number of benefits (both direct and indirect) gained by managers when they act as coaches. Mukherjee (2012) concludes that 'coaching is one of the most effective tools in building leadership capacity within the organisation' (p. 85). Rock and Donde (2008a, 2008b) discuss internal coaches and their use by organisations hoping to embed a coaching culture. They usefully consider factors for training internal coaches and also highlight how internal coaching can provide a framework for connections within an organisation. In a survey of 86,000 people across 15 global organisations, it was found that internal coaches could produce the same positive results as external coaches (Goldsmith, Morgan, & Ogg, 2004).

One local authority organisation in the UK has been using a contingent of internal and external coaches. Warwick District Council has implemented coaching as one strand of their learning and development offer for staff as part of a large programme of transformation called 'Fit for Purpose'. The programme offers employees access to a choice of external and internal coaches which enables manager-coaches to share their skills and knowledge and help develop a dynamic coaching culture. From the external evaluation completed by the Institute for Employment Studies in 2008 and in subsequent reports, the impact of coaching and mentoring is very positive: 'Coaching and mentoring is becoming an effective and integral part of the Council's Management Development programme,

and where this has been implemented, interviewees have witnessed improvements' Investors in People Review Report 2011 (Warwick District Council).

In conclusion, there are some clear benefits for training employees to become internal coaches. It can provide a sustainable model to improve performance as well as delivering benefits for both the organisation and the individuals concerned.

5. Coaching cultures in educational contexts

The creation of coaching cultures has recently attracted interest within the education sector (van Nieuwerburgh & Passmore, 2012). We will consider the creation of coaching cultures in educational contexts as a case study. In 2005, the National College for School Leadership in the UK identified 'strong evidence that coaching promotes learning and builds capacity for change in schools' (Creasy & Paterson, 2005). In fact, there are a number of collaborative strategies of schools learning together which include Networked Learning Communities and Learning Powered Schools (Claxton, Chambers, Powell, & Lucas, 2011). These and other collaborative initiatives can be considered as related to the concept of 'coaching cultures' as discussed in this article.

In their study, van Nieuwerburgh and Passmore (2012) explore the creation of 'coaching cultures for learning'. In their consideration of the potential of coaching cultures in schools, they identify the characteristics of effective coaching: mutual trust, timeliness, awareness of the need for change, ownership of goals, supportive relationships, genuine care and a positive outlook. It is suggested that these characteristics could inform a school-wide 'coaching culture for learning'. They define a coaching culture for learning as one in which coaching 'is used consistently by all partners across the school community, to help develop learning, understanding and personal responsibility in others from staff, to parents and from students to governors and wider stakeholders' (p. 159). They propose a number of ways of introducing a coaching culture within educational settings. One of these is a model developed by Passmore and Jastrzebska (2011), which will be discussed later in this paper. Another is through the use of an appreciative approach, based on the pioneering work of Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987).

Van Nieuwerburgh and Passmore (2012) propose that the essential element of trust is nurtured through the joint creation of a safe learning environment in which to start developing a coaching culture for learning. The first step is to engage people in the organisation with the concept of a coaching culture for learning, 'discovering' and celebrating what is already going well within the organisation. The next stage is to explore the possibilities. This encourages staff within the organisation to 'dream' about the potential outcomes that may emerge from a coaching culture for learning. The 'design' stage follows. School leaders and staff should now identify practical steps that will take the organisation in the desired direction. The final 'destiny' stage involves everyone in starting to translate their 'dream' into a reality. Throughout all these stages, it is important that everyone experiences and celebrates the changes.

Tolhurst (2010) contends that the best way of ensuring successful implementation of coaching is to include such initiatives in a school's improvement plan with clear goals and allocated time and resources. According to Tolhurst, the chances of success are heightened if school leaders have experienced coaching for themselves. Tolhurst considers two case studies and analyses the implementation of coaching cultures. In one school, coaching was not high enough on the agenda and therefore did not develop into a coaching culture. The second case study presents an example of the excitement and energy around coaching and

how well things can then progress. Based on this, Tolhurst notes the following critical success factors (p. 85):

- School managers had very positive experiences of coaching;
- Time was invested in planning and agreeing outcomes;
- The strategy had the full backing of the head teacher; and
- All staff understood the ‘big picture’ of why coaching was being introduced.

There are some parallels to the staged process for creating a ‘culture of coaching’ proposed by Creasy and Paterson (2005):

- To develop a system, first develop yourself
- Make sense of the whole
- Create systems
- Focus on principles
- Equip staff with coaching skills
- Review and reward good coaching practice
- Use and build external links and networks.

In an endorsement of Creasy and Paterson’s work, the Training and Development Agency for Schools concluded in 2008 that coaching encourages a collaborative learning culture in organisations (Lord, 2008).

In conclusion, we have considered above, some ways in which coaching cultures can be embedded and sustained within educational contexts. The term ‘coaching culture for learning’ can be helpful when distinguishing the purpose and uses of coaching within the educational sector.

6. Creating coaching cultures

Having considered the definition of ‘coaching culture’ and its application within corporate and educational contexts, we will conclude by considering the practical issue of how coaching cultures can be developed within organisations more generally.

At a strategic level, Bersin and Associates LLC (2011) recommend a three-pronged approach for cultivating a high-performance coaching culture:

- Targeted efforts by senior leaders
- Creation of a conducive environment for coaching to thrive
- Measurement of the impact of a coaching culture.

This clearly provides an indication of what should happen at a strategic level. There are also some further factors that may need to be considered within each area. One of these is the involvement of the human resources function. It is important to consider the desired outcomes at the onset of introducing a coaching culture so that it is possible to measure its impact. In an early exploration of the topic, two leading writers (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2005, p. 96) in this field proposed the following process:

- Nascent – where the organisation ‘shows little or no commitment to creating a coaching culture’. Coaching activity is occasional and uncoordinated.
- Tactical – ‘recognised the value of establishing a coaching culture but there is little understanding of what it means’.

- Strategic – invested resources into educating staff about the value of coaching as well as training. Top management accepts the need to demonstrate good practice.
- Embedded – ‘people at all levels are engaged in coaching’ – the organisation can tackle difficult issues and focus on improvement.

More recently, Hawkins (2009, p. 15) has proposed that there are four steps for developing a coaching strategy:

- Identify the organisational outcomes that the business is trying to achieve to which coaching can contribute.
- Gather the right mix of internal and external resources.
- Create a coaching culture where coaching is part of how things are done internally and externally.
- Capture and process the learning from the coaching conversations taking place.

Through the survey of approaches discussed in this paper, it seems essential to identify desired outcomes at the outset of the process. Both internal and external resources can be used to set up and maintain a coaching culture.

Hawkins and Smith (2006) outlined a seven-step process for developing coaching cultures. This has subsequently been amended slightly based on further research (Hawkins, 2012, p. 28). The seven stages are: procuring external coaches, developing internal coaching capacity, leaders supporting coaching endeavours, developing team coaching and organisational learning, embedding coaching in human resource and performance management processes, coaching becoming the dominant style of managing and coaching used to do business with stakeholders. Hawkins adds that this process should be linked to the wider organisational strategic and cultural change processes. Coaching should not be an isolated activity and it needs to engage with the development of the whole organisation or system.

Passmore and Jastrzebska (2011) present a model for the development of a coaching culture as part of a ‘journey’ which has five stages from: informal external coaching, more strategic use of external coaching, coaching for all staff, coaching for all stakeholders and lastly coaching externally to the wider community. The concept of this journey is particularly helpful as it allows individuals and organisations to understand the creation of a coaching culture as a developmental process.

Providing a valuable additional insight into how coaching cultures can be created, Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005, pp. 22–23) consider the conditions necessary:

- People’s previous experiences of coaching will be significant to their expectations about coaching, so this needs to be taken into account.
- Coaches and coachees being able to practise coaching in a relatively safe environment.
- A focus on the beliefs, values and thoughts of individuals and their willingness to coach and be coached.
- To maximise the impact of coaching and other developmental behaviours, they need to be linked to existing human resource systems and processes
- Individuals within the organisations should feel comfortable about speaking openly.

Hardingham et al. (2004, pp. 199–202) also highlight the necessary requirements for creating a coaching culture:

- Build experience of and belief in coaching among the leaders of the organisation
- Capitalise on any experience of and belief in coaching

- Get people talking about how coaching has helped them
- Clarify what a coaching culture means
- Explain the link between coaching and business
- Provide evidence that coaching has an impact on performance
- Acknowledge the difficulties of coaching people you work with.

Based on research on what led to the successful creation of a coaching culture, Anderson et al. (2009, pp. 21–22) identify five themes:

- Seed the organisation with leaders and managers who can act as role models on coaching approaches
- Link coaching outcomes to the business
- Coach senior leadership teams in creating culture change
- Recognise and reward coaching culture behaviours
- Integrate with other people management processes.

Finally, Hart (2005) suggests six strategies on how to cultivate a coaching culture (pp. 9–10):

- Ensure and promote alignment of organisational strategy with the use of coaching behaviour;
- Establish planned, formal, structured and long-term programmes for promoting coaching behaviour;
- Seek to create a cascade effect by developing internal coaching capacity through training programmes and follow-on coaching;
- Incorporate coaching behaviour as a job performance competency and link it to systems for advancement, rewards and incentives; and
- Use external coaches as a positive developmental tool.

The authors above are remarkably consistent when proposing the prerequisites and requirements of a coaching culture. These are summarised below:

- Promotion throughout the organisation and targeted efforts by senior leaders
- Coaching should be presented as an integrated part of the organisation or system (rather than an isolated activity)
- Role modelling is essential. Leaders should demonstrate strong personal commitment to the development of their own capabilities. Leaders and managers should participate in coaching as coaches and as coachees.

7. Conclusion

There is a considerable amount of literature that addresses the notion of coaching cultures and how such cultures can be used to support change. It would appear that coaching-based initiatives are being leveraged and developed to support and change organisational cultures strategically and with positive results. It is clear that it is important to take a holistic view beyond the coaching skills being developed.

Undertaking this review of the literature has convinced us that it is essential for leaders and organisations to carefully reflect on the purpose of introducing a coaching culture. The literature suggests that coaching cultures can be used to develop the quality of leadership, increase resources and encourage innovation. Two key questions have emerged as a result of this review of the literature: ‘What are the foundational elements that need to be in place

before a coaching culture can be developed?’ and ‘Does the development of coaching cultures increase cooperation and collaboration within organisations?’ As a result, we would like to suggest that research is required in order to address these questions. We are also curious about whether particular ‘pre-conditions’ would facilitate the development of coaching cultures. Furthermore, questions remain about the best methodology for measuring the impact of developing coaching cultures. Studies focusing on the return on investment (ROI) of coaching cultures are urgently required.

Finally, it seems evident that there are initial indicators that coaching cultures can produce good results, although there is still a need to be able to convert these into measurable ROI figures. However, it is important to bear in mind a point made by Sherman and Freas (2004):

When you create a culture of coaching, the result may not be directly measurable in dollars. But we have yet to find a company that can't benefit from more candor, less denial, richer communication, conscious development of talent, and disciplined leaders, who show compassion for people. (p. 90)

This review of the literature has shown that the term ‘coaching culture’ has been used and understood in slightly different ways. We believe that it is difficult to develop this area of work without a clear and shared definition of the term. In order to support further research and study, we would like to propose the following definition.

A coaching culture exists within an organisation when it has embedded a coaching approach as part of its strategic plans in a transparent way. Coaching cultures should motivate individuals and facilitate cooperation, collaboration and connection within the organisation and with its external stakeholders.

Having reviewed the existing literature and developed a definition of ‘coaching cultures’, we are convinced that the development of such cultures promises to create more positive and supportive organisational climates for personal and organisational flourishing.

Notes on contributors



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