

Coaching: To each according to their need

Posted by Dr Anton Franckeiss in [Coaching](#) on Mon, 03/28/2011 - 09:38



More than ever before, coaching isn't a one-size-fits-all discipline. Dr Anton Franckeiss elaborates.

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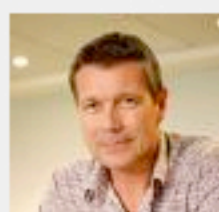
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The role of coach should, by now, be understood. Although complex, it needs to embrace a range of activities: encouraging self-awareness and awareness of impact and relationships; providing feedback; posing questions and setting challenges that encourage and that raise the sights to perform better and achieve more; identifying barriers and hurdles, and helping the coachee to overcome them. While these roles are generic (in the sense that they apply in any coaching situation), they cease to be generic when we consider the circumstantial framework within which the coaching is taking place. When the needs of the coachee are specialised, the coaching offer needs to match the specialism if the need is to be truly met. General coaching may provide a general tonic, but a specific difficulty requires a specific, targeted, well-matched response.

Life coaching

At a general day-to-day level, many of these are tasks that we might hope would be performed free of charge by our proverbial best friend or even, perhaps, our mum. Where our lives are out of kilter to a greater degree – and our friends can't or won't help – we can turn to general or 'life' coaches. Like most things, they have their place. But like most places, these have boundaries. Much has been made, for example, of Ed Miliband's family background, and its members are better qualified than most to advise him in stepping up to the role of Labour Party leader, but the demands are both great and specific. No doubt his mum has plenty of advice to offer, but I'd also hope she's not his only source.



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Indeed, our political leaders provide an interesting viewpoint if you consider yourself in their shoes. All are relatively newly in fresh roles: Cameron as Prime Minister rather than leader of the Opposition, having to implement rather than merely contest and critique; Clegg having to lead a party not just in power but in coalition with those fought against before the result was declared, and Miliband the Younger having not just to lead, but to lead a party newly out of power and having to redefine itself. Even without the economic situation, these are demanding personal challenges.

Your own shoes might walk less demanding corridors, but your concerns are not simply those of the manor woman whose mid-life angst has not been salved by the self-help publishing industry or the golfer who can't quite get into the swing of things. They are specific: they require not just well proven skills in the different aspects of coaching (if you employ a generalist/life coach, have you checked their credentials?), but in-depth experience and understanding of the situation. No matter how well-qualified in coaching the former equestrian, the former football player will have more to offer – and more credibility with – the national first eleven. That ability to provide is not just in technical mastery, but in context: business is business and sport is sport, but a rider and horse is not the same as a team.

Mainstream coaching skills

The skills and challenges of the newly-appointed manager, or the manager facing a requirement to lead or champion a major change management initiative, for example, are undeniably real but relatively general: much of what they know, understand, demonstrate and model is sufficiently 'mainstream' in contemporary working life that the combination of coaching ability and personal working experience is not especially rare in a coach for it to be a difficult role to fill. (Although it's worth underlining that the experience may be outside the scope of many 'generalist coaches': while the experience may not be rarified, the requirement goes far beyond listening or an approach that can be classified as being in any way 'therapy'.)

The most demanding coaching environment – and the most demanding situation for both coach and coachee – comes at the highest levels of an organisation. The pressures on the individual – in terms of available time, delivery timescales, and the opportunity cost of non-delivery or under-performance are great. The coachee is also, importantly, someone who has risen to a position of some status and authority without the intervention or assistance of the chosen coach: while they may be receptive to external challenges, they may equally be highly resistant or even plainly dismissive.

But if the coaching process is to be productive, a senior leader or director being coached must respect and value not just the coach but also their skills and the personal experience that they bring to the relationship. If the coachee is to respect or value their inputs, the coach must be able to bring extensive experience of operating at senior level in major organisations.

Finding the right person

While breadth matters, depth matters increasingly and in direct correspondence to the seniority of the coachee. To provide an executive coach who lacks this level of both professional and coaching experience is to fail to meet the real need of the coachee and to undermine the coaching engagement. (By doing so, it also damages the reputation of coaching as an intervention in the organisation's eyes, as little improvement is likely to result.)

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There is a second and equally important point here. The role of the coaching provider is not to soothe and sympathise: an executive coach that provides only an ear and a metaphorical soft shoulder will, in the long run, prove to have a woefully inadequate repertoire at their disposal. The effective executive coach – in other words, the one who helps to bring about improved performance for both the coachee and their organisation – needs to

be able to challenge as well as listen. While the listening will take place within the context of a supportive and professional coaching relationship (supported in turn by an initial coach-coachee matching process), coaching is also a dialogue. The actual need will be dependant on the individual and their particular circumstance (and the ability of the suitably experienced coach to be able to accurately identify it), but there must also be a willingness to move beyond a non-directive approach where this has a positive effect. As Victoria Wood once pointed out, "Just tell him, someone: it's quicker". Just remember that, with Victoria Wood, the impact is comedy: ignoring or being unable to fill a coachee's need could be anything but.

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