One-to-one performance coaching is all the rage in the private sector, but as Annette Fillery-Travis explains, the technique could be a boost for teachers' professional development too

This time it's personal

Coaching is here to stay. A recent survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development has shown that 92 per cent of organisations believe that coaching can have a positive impact on their 'bottom line', and that 88 per cent now expect their managers to use coaching. A growing body of research clearly shows that coaching affects individual performance, behaviour change, culture, confidence, motivation and leadership. Organisations see a clear return on their investment, with most looking to increase that investment in the future.

People also love being coached. Every research study undertaken has found that people really value the one-to-one development and believe it has helped them to become more effective. No wonder coaching has become the must-have item of professional development.

Although education has not been in the forefront of the

use of coaching, it has not been standing idly by in the face of the technique's growing popularity. The National College of School Leadership (NCSL) has championed the role of coaching in schools, commissioning a number of publications on coaching and its potential in education. Its leadership programmes explicitly use coaching skills in roles such as the leadership coach in Leading From The Middle or the in-school coach in Leadership Pathways. Teachers are now aware of coaching, then, and are being offered it from various sources. But although much has been written concerning potential best practice in this area, there is little evidence for practice in education, and a real dearth of exploration into the ways teachers and schools are using coaching.

This is a cause for concern, as one size does not fit all. Coaching can be used to address a wide range of issues ranging from skills development through to deeper enquires around the personal quest for meaning and purpose. But the skill base of the coach addressing these issues would also need to vary. Education is perhaps unusual, as there is so far no clear definition of, or delineation between, coaching modes. This presents head teachers and senior leaders with a significant problem if they are seeking to introduce and develop coaching effectively. Who should coach whom, what support do they need, what benefits should be expected and in what timescale? These questions all need careful consideration when planning such a school-wide change.

One way of addressing this lack of information is to investigate the experience of the private sector and see if it can inform the way we should use coaching in education. There are obviously significant differences between what is possible in school and the average for-profit company: not least the inflexibility of teachers' time and the vocational aspect of the job. However, if industries and sectors not noted for altruism are investing significantly in such personalised development, it has to be worth a look.

Exactly when the practice of executive coaching first began is fairly hard to establish, but there is general agreement that the concept came into common use in the early 1980s, and had become widespread by around 1990. Originally there was a tendency for coaching to be used as a remedial activity. A company would bring in a coach as part of a 'rescue fantasy' – the last chance for an underperforming executive or professional. Increasingly, though, companies now offer external coaches to the most highly valued staff, as a way to maximise their contribution. This has led to some unforeseen consequences such as the rise of 'coaching envy' – showing that the perception of coaching has changed from stigma to status symbol.

Before we look into coaching in other sectors it is worth noting an area of divergence between them and education. This concerns the relative status of mentoring and coaching. In other sectors mentoring (support of a junior or inexperienced colleague by a more senior manager) is seen as a specific subset of coaching, whereas in education the roles are more blurred. This should be borne in mind when delving through any of the hundreds of books that cover business coaching and mentoring.

Growing demand

Originally coaches were 'brought in' in much the same way as consultants. The global demand for this kind of intervention – often called 'external' or 'executive' coaching – is estimated to be doubling every year. In the USA it is a $500m industry, while the Financial Times estimates that 4,000 professional coaches were operating in the UK in 2004, and this figure is rising.

These highly experienced professionals – often trained in psychology and organisational development – work one-to-one with executives and leaders to improve performance and delivery. Usually the coaching 'agenda' is set by the executive or leader and will range freely in both depth and breadth. For leaders in a fast-moving environment, the opportunity to pause and reflect with a skilled professional can help to improve both performance and well-being. But however attractive this sounds, the cost of such a bespoke service means it is rarely offered to everyone in an organisation.

The response by business has been an explosive growth in organisations developing their own coaching capabilities by training their own staff to coach. This is not a new concept, as the retail and sales sectors have a tradition of coaching by managers that goes back to the 1930s. Salesmen needed a high level of 'soft skills' to develop trust and rapport with customers. Now it is a common requirement of business, with 84 per cent of organisations identifying coaching by manager-coaches as either effective or highly effective.

Out of this growth in coaching within organisations, the concept of internal coach or coaching manager has developed. Although less highly skilled than professional coaches, internal coaches usually have more training than manager coaches: they oversee the coaching within their organisation and will often be responsible for 'embedding' the practice or creating a 'coaching culture'.

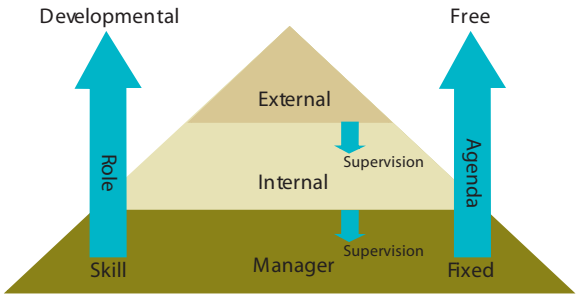

Figure 1: A taxonomy of coaching

This idea of culture is central to the use of coaching across a whole organisation. As Argyris (1994) argues, the rules, rituals and assumptions that exist in an organisation define its culture and dictate how its employees behave and learn. A culture of learning recognises and promotes the values of learning, and this translates into positive attitudes and support for activities such as coaching. Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005) have proposed that "a coaching culture

is one where coaching is the predominant style of managing and working together and where a commitment to grow the organisation is embedded in a parallel commitment to grow the people in the organisation".

At first sight the three-tiered approach shown in figure 1 may seem disconnected from school life, but a growing number of teachers are developing coaching skills and seeking to use them in school, thereby mimicking the manager/coach role. Often a more senior member of staff is overseeing or leading the coaching and can be identified with the 'internal coach' of other sectors. The use of professional external coaches has yet to be identified but anecdotal evidence identifies that some LEAs are using external coaches to support head teachers undertaking new or challenging roles under the Every Child Matters agenda.

Training

Can anyone be trained as a coach? The answer from the literature seems to suggest that the only requirement is the would-be coach's willingness to do it. The length of training is a moot point, however, as it depends upon the school's idea of what is necessary and sufficient. Current best practice for manager coaching entails two to five days of intensive training, spread out over a number of months to allow practice and application of the skills in the workplace. Other features of such programmes include assessment exercises and ongoing support. A teacher graduating from such a programme should have sufficient skills to work with their staff or their peers to address performance and low-level development issues. Although leadership programme coaches are sometimes 'external' to the school, they would expect to be operating at this level of skill and expertise.

Internal coaches should expect to have further development and to progress in their knowledge and expertise to the point where they are able to offer support to their fellow teacher coaches and help them in their practice. The appropriate depth of training here is considered to be postgraduate level, and the teacher/internal coach would see supervision of manager/coaches as an integral part of their leadership role. Several professional bodies are willing to accredit courses, and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council has kitemarked a number of these postgraduate programmes at 'practitioner' level, giving the wary buyer some reassurance as to the level and standard of the training.

Once people have experienced the benefits of coaching both to them as leaders and to the staff they lead, many will naturally seek to introduce it throughout their school. Research suggests the effectiveness of this embedding is influenced by a number of factors:

- 'buy-in' and support from senior leaders
- ongoing training and support
- effective support mechanisms
- initiatives introduced for specific learning and teaching reasons
- a commitment to measuring results
- coaching being used to address specific issues.

Other issues are also emerging. One is a preference for the use of a single simple model of coaching which everyone understands, so there is a common language for all. Similarly, the coaching needs a clear ethical structure, as people may need confidentiality to discuss certain issues and the boundaries of this need to be clear if trust is to develop in the process.

The importance of each of these factors will vary with each organisation and it is becoming the norm for organisations to consult with external coaches to develop their embedding strategy. Coaching training organisations are also well placed to advise on such processes, which can enhance their success significantly.

How long does it take to see the benefits? In my experience, teachers have responded to coaching with great enthusiasm – coupled with a deep concern about the lack of time they have to do it justice. When I researched organisations at varying stages of introducing a coaching culture, one point became very clear: in an environment where change is a constant, there is an overriding need for a flexible, confident and well-developed workforce able to proactively manage their shifting agenda. As the head of HR for a company producing diesel engines put it: "The rate of change in the industry means that employees can't be continually retrained, so they are coached to understand the elements of change and move with them." The lesson was simple: invest now and reap the benefits in the future. But how far into the future?

One theme was common in all my case studies: coaching will not produce results overnight. It is about enabling behaviour change – and we all know that takes some time to happen. This can lead to impatience in both leaders and employees, but everyone involved reported a change in culture in months and a change to the 'bottom line' within a year. Obviously this can be shortened if sufficient energy and resources are committed, but there is an argument that a slower and more inclusive pace will deepen the embedding and 'make it stick'.

In summary, coaching has the potential to offer personalised and accessible development for teachers, equipping them to meet the challenges of their changing agenda – but only if it is managed and supported effectively. Other sectors have realised significant gains from their investment in coaching, and there is now a real opportunity for education professionals to benefit from their experience.

Annette Fillery-Travis is programme director with the Professional Development Foundation.

References

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