

Is a coaching culture an alternative tyranny?

By Sam Humphrey and Karen Dean



Winner of Best Article
of the Year Award 2016



What's this all about?

At a coaching event held a number of years ago, the term "coaching culture" was used in every conversation regarding coaching by, it seemed, everyone. If I were to ring a bell every time the term was used, it would have sounded like the Lutine Bell was rolling down the staircase of the Shard.

As eclectic coaches, we believe that there is no one right way to coach and indeed, coaching is not always the best solution for any given situation.

As Daniel Goleman's work on organisational climate shows, great leaders have a mix of leadership styles and it is this which positively impacts culture.

As experienced coaching consultants, researchers and practitioners, we hold this view firmly. So, we are curious about the utopian appeal a coaching culture seems to hold for organisations. We have noticed that this term is growing in usage, particularly in professional services firms, and we are familiar with the allure of this.

For many, the first experience of being coached is often epiphanous. It can leave you feeling slightly giddy and blinded by the "aha!" moments, it can give you crystal clear clarity on an issue and give you confidence to move forward in a meaningful way. Coaching can be addictive and most people convert to it quickly and easily.



While we are coaching converts, we also know that not every issue is best served by coaching - I don't want to be coached out of a burning building! An interesting debate could be had on the topic, 'is everyone coachable'?

We have seen many coaching initiatives being commissioned on the back of one senior leader having this epiphanous coaching experience and believing that everyone should and will experience the same.

We believe there needs to be a stronger business case to justify the coaching initiative and this need not be an arduous task. What is it that organisations believe having a coaching culture will deliver for them? What is the purpose of a coaching culture and what are the pitfalls and opportunities that need to be navigated if you want to shape your culture in this way?

For us, this article is intended to provoke, support and guide the custodians of a coaching culture to enable them to shape it with integrity.

Who are you?

In our experience, there are many custodians of a coaching culture, HR, L&D, Executive Committees, a bespoke steering group, internal coaches, a keen stakeholder or sponsor – the list goes on. The custodians in any organisation would include not only the sponsors and stakeholders but also the recipients of it, so the numbers can appear far larger than initially thought.

As you begin to think through whom these people might be, you also start to highlight the numbers, their role, impact, needs and expectations.

Mindset

In every organisation we have worked in, without doubt, the key success factor in implementing a coaching initiative has been having a dedicated person to drive it. Not a figurehead, not a



sponsor, but someone on the ground making things happen. No matter how bought-in an organisation is to the initiative, no matter how many great stories and successes there are, it needs to be driven and on a continual basis.

As the manager of the initiative, it can be helpful to appreciate your mindset in relation to this role. Could you be described as 'an evangelical coaching charity worker', fighting for the cause but on a voluntary basis with little power or real influence over the organisation? Or, as a 'baby minder', the one left holding the baby with no one else to help you?

Regardless of whether your role is a clearly defined formal one in the organisational hierarchy or an 'in addition to my day job I look after coaching' role, your mindset is vital in shaping a coaching culture.

As Henry Ford once said, "if you think you can do a thing or think you can't do a thing, you are right."

Ensuring you have a positive mindset and setting yourself up to succeed is of paramount importance. Your mindset will ultimately govern every conversation, meeting and action you take.

Capability

Capability is also a key factor for those who will be doing the coaching, are they an 'enthusiastic amateur'

or a 'master technician'? By reviewing where your coaches are on their coaching mastery journey, will influence the way you chose to approach this work. How much of it will you do yourself? How much needs to be lead and/or delivered by others? What capabilities can you leverage in yourself and in the broader organisation? Where are the gaps and do you try and bridge them or mitigate their impact? When you then look at the mindset and capability of the other formal and informal custodians of a coaching culture you can see how important it is to think carefully about your coaching culture networks - what they are, who is in them and for what purpose.

In Ibarra's book *Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader*, she describes three different types of network:

- 1 Your operation network: A good one will give you reliability in what you do
- 2 Your personal network: A good one will give you kindred spirits
- 3 Your strategic network: A good one gives you connective advantage

Reflecting on your networks and setting them up with appropriate purpose and membership will have a dramatic effect on shaping a coaching culture. In one organisation, there were a small number of leaders who were seen as the key movers and shakers in any organisational change. Everyone knew that if they adopted



the change, it was a good thing and they would be wise to follow suit. This small group of people could literally launch or sink any change in their organisation.

In this instance, thinking wisely about which network they are in and how best to engage them in any change was critical to success.

What's this for?

Establishing a coaching culture needs to have a clear purpose. Exploring the question in the box below: What is the purpose of a coaching culture? will help you/your organisation work out your purpose.

Understanding the context and its opportunities and threats facilitates the creation of a clearer vision for success. One which takes account of past history and future potential. This gives rise to the strategies for achieving specified goals. The strategies may attend to people, products, services, partners, marketing, purchasing, operations, sales, technology, finance, etc. It is important that a passion for coaching does not stay in a coaching bubble. It needs to be a catalyst for achieving outcomes for the whole firm. Coaching is an enabler and methodology for getting things done.

Strategies determine the principles which drive behaviour. Putting 'our customers at the centre of our business' is an example of a principle

which will demand dialogue with mutual respect, listening and responsiveness. This is fertile ground for deploying coaching skills.

If 'innovation' was a core proposition then 'empowering people' to share and implement their ideas, may need a coaching style. A coaching approach would build confidence, facilitate creativity and fertilise ideas.

Team coaching might ensure robust and relevant discussions and better decision-making. Implementation is then made easier and more cost-effective as a consequence.

The delivery of coaching will arise from what the people need to do their work well. Supporting Executives and Partners to influence and inspire stakeholders may best be delivered by external executive coaches. Unlocking efficiency may require the 'manager as coach' approach. Building high performing teams may be the remit of the internal coach or a specialist external provider or both working together.

What do you mean?

When engaging in any conversation on coaching culture, the first place we go is to ask, "What do you mean by coaching culture?"

Both these words can evoke very different meanings for people, so exploring the underlying meaning and intent of this phrase can often unearth

What is the purpose of a coaching culture?

- What makes having a coaching culture so important?
- What about other desirable cultures that are equally valid and potentially vying for resources and priority: the safety culture, the quality culture, the learning culture?
- The organisation exists within a context or eco-system. What is happening in our world at this time?
- Who are our customers/clients? What products or services do we want to offer? Who might supply these and what potential partners might assist us? Who is our competition? What makes us special?

great significance and direction. If we take the word coaching, there is probably a more generally agreed position about what this is and what it is not. It is fair to say that regardless of ongoing dialogue about the difference between mentoring and coaching, most people would say that coaching consists of the following:

- ◆ Facilitating a conversation
- ◆ Future focused
- ◆ Asking questions
- ◆ Listening
- ◆ Goal led
- ◆ Outcome focused
- ◆ Contracted and confidential

However, being armed with a definition of what coaching looks like, makes it easier to then think about the infrastructure you would need to deliver it.

Even though we're coaching converts, we're curious about the utopian appeal a coaching culture seems to hold for organisations - coaching isn't always the right response. However, if an organisation has built up a valid business case for the approach, there is much they can do to help make it work.

Often, the first step an organisation takes toward a coaching culture is seeking out external executive coaches. These are practitioners who have been trained, have deep experience and increasingly, are accredited by a

professional body, undergoing continuous professional development and regular supervision of their coaching practice.

These executive coaches need a high degree of capability and are able to work effectively with a high level of complexity in the client's agenda (Impact Framework: Humphrey, Stopford, Holden and Marsden, 2010). To support external coaches, the organisation must define a structured approach for:

- ◆ Establishing the purpose of coaching and its desired impact
- ◆ Identifying individuals who are potential candidates
- ◆ Selection of professional coaches
- ◆ Matching clients to coaches
- ◆ Contracting and three-way conversations for clarity and alignment
- ◆ Gathering themes for learning within ethical boundaries of confidentiality
- ◆ Evaluating the return on investment and its effectiveness

As we know, coaching is quickly moving beyond the provision of external capability. In 2009, the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) found that over 90 per cent of organisations reported using coaching and that 63 per cent delivered this internally by line managers supported by trained internal coaches.

Alison Maxwell (2011) distinguishes between four types of internal coaching:

1. **Manager as Coach** - a line manager who draws on a coaching mind-set and coaching skill-set
2. **Crisis intervention** - counselling at work
3. **Coach as change agent** - individuals working in a change capacity, perhaps on a strategic initiative lasting a number of months or years
4. **Developmental coaching** - individuals who offers developmental or remedial coaching to employees of the same organisation, as a recognised part of their job description

Where managers have been trained to coach and to offer this to other individuals in the organisation, they often find that they perform their own role more effectively. They are likely to develop a deeper understanding of the system of the organisation, its synergies and challenges. They develop a community of practice with other like-minded individuals who support their work. Indeed some organisations have further developed a dedicated team of internal coaches whose full time commitment is the service of coaching and its appropriate deployment, development and delivery.



The key success factor in implementing a coaching initiative has been having a dedicated person to drive it. Not a figurehead, not a sponsor, but someone on the ground making things happen.

In our view, maintaining a cadre of internal coaches demands investment from the organisation for continuing professional and personal development. An external provider offering supervision will be mindful of the ethics and management of coaching, the quality of the contracts, while developing and supporting the coaches as both practitioners and human beings. As Cochrane and Newton describe in Supervision for Coaches: "Supervision is not about coaching coaches, it is not about coaching the client through the coach. Supervision is about working with the coach in their space. In this way developing a more polished and professional expertise, secure in the knowledge that we are working ethically and providing security for both coach and client."

So, when we talk about coaching, we can fairly readily envisage what that activity would look and feel like. What makes this all tricky is when you add the word culture to the mix. In most definitions of culture, there is an implied or explicit view that culture is inherent. Words such as: customs, traditions, manifestation, all feature as part of culture. How then, do you make something, which by its essence is unconscious, into a conscious, measurable activity which has integrity and professionalism?

A means to an end

If we think of a coaching culture as the way we do things round here, do we want people to express this as a way of being, a way of doing or both? Is a coaching culture about having a set of tools to deploy in the appropriate situation or is it the subliminal mindset we want people to have in every situation with everyone?

We believe a coaching culture is a means to an end, not an end in itself, so we hold as a working definition: "Coaching culture embraces all members of the organisation or firm, individually and collectively. Coaching is respected as a core capability and is used in conversations and debate to unlock the potential of the whole, by engaging, growing and aligning individuals and teams to deliver the organisation's goals, aspirations and shareholder value. The stories which are told underpin the impact coaching has and its legacy for learning in the lives of all."

As many culture change initiatives show, the way in which the written rules of an organisation are changed provides the context and mood for the unwritten rules. Again, alignment here is key - telling people that there will be more coaching in the organisation flies in the face of the principles of good coaching. Permission, contracting, engagement and ex-



ploring 'What's in it for me?' etc, mean that changing a culture to be more coaching-focused will take time and resources. Forcing coaching into an organisation holds contradiction and can be seen as lacking integrity.

Being clear on the consequences of coaching (or not) is also key. If there are no consequences, either positive or negative, then very little will happen as there is no motivation to do things differently.

Consequences, positive or negative, in a coaching culture are curious. Do punitive consequences sit easily with a coaching ethos? What positive consequences can you create beyond a link to reward structures?

This is where the title for this article comes into its own. Coaching is an emergent, relational activity and one that can only happen with permission and need. To 'force' coaching as the 'way we do things around here' runs the risk of creating an alternative tyranny.

Sincerity and authenticity are fundamentals in a relationship and these must be present in any culture change activity if people are to 'buy' the change being asked of them.

Where we have seen a coaching culture live well, has been those organisations which have focused coaching

on business and individual performance. Coaching is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Equipping people to be able to use and value a coaching approach and apply it, with judgement - and therefore sincerity and authenticity - has resulted in a culture where coaching thrives with integrity.

What's in it for me?

As the coaching culture evolves, what might be the outcomes?

There will be intended - and unintended - consequences for individuals and the community it touches. Outcomes for you as a coach will be the satisfaction of delivering great coaching conversations. You will be learning and growing and developing increasing affinity with the coaching ethos. You will gain greater exposure to issues across the organisation or firm. You will also experience frustration at the pace of change and have concerns over resourcing and funding. There may be a lack of understanding of, or resistance to the initiative. At times you will feel more isolated.

Culture change is challenging. If you are managing the change you must be determined to see it through.

A coaching culture may also give rise to resistance. It may lead to the abdication of responsibility for performance conversations. Confidence may be compromised as people are expected to develop new capabilities and leave behind their former style.



Top tips

- **Purpose** - Connect to the vision and business goals
- **Appoint someone** - Who will own and drive the coaching activity?
- **Identify stakeholders** - Develop a plan of influence
- **Secure funding** - As an investment, not a cost
- **Agree how coaching impact will be measured** - Maintain the momentum
- **Identify what people need** - How can they do their work well?
- **Preserve what works** - Core plus more, integrate
- **Source appropriate external support** - Develop the optimal solution
- **Build a network alliance** - Secure the future of the coaching culture
- **Be mindful of pitfalls** - Mitigate the challenges

Coaching can also be left to the few 'experts'. If the successes of the past and the old ways of doing things are not acknowledged it will block people moving forward.

A coaching process is designed to deliver certain outcomes:

- ◆ **Clarity** - both of goals and how they will be recognised, once delivered. A drive for clarity in an organisation will enable accelerated performance, strengthened belief and commitment to making things happen. It is an antidote to procrastination and lack of alignment.
- ◆ **Defined roles and boundaries** - coaching-style conversations will help determine who does what and with what resources. These manage expectations and ways of working, leading to increased effectiveness and efficient use of time. People take ownership and step up to their responsibilities. A contract like this avoids duplication and dilution of effort.
- ◆ **Acknowledgment of what is relevant** - a process of validating what is said so that people feel heard, understood and ultimately affirmed in their experience. Once people feel valued and acknowledged, this frees them to move forward and create the future. Ignoring what feels real for individuals and insisting on the next best thing does not enable change and growth, it invites resistance or rebellion.
- ◆ **Ideas and options** - where coaching conversations are prevalent, exploration of the art of the possible and the unimaginable becomes natural and generative. When individuals are encouraged to share their experience and ideas, which then become solutions for the business challenges, human potential is realised and confidence builds. Controlling the staff and ignoring their thinking leads to loss of motivation and apathy - with a proliferation of resentment.
- ◆ **What, where and when** - a drive to action with specific expectations and deadlines means that goals are realised and make a difference. They can be monitored and aligned with HR processes and rewards. Talk without action leads to frustration and loss of time, money and energy.



A coaching culture has the potential to positively affect individuals, teams and the organisation's performance and ultimately its engagement with partners and stakeholders with any subsequent value creation.

Measuring the impact of the coaching culture will be important for the organisation and key sponsors.

Making progress toward a coaching culture could be tracked by:

- ◆ Staff satisfaction surveys
- ◆ 360-degree surveys and feedback
- ◆ Staff retention
- ◆ Exit interviews
- ◆ Staff absenteeism
- ◆ Number of complaints, grievances, disciplinaries and tribunals
- ◆ Effectiveness of delivery of individual against objectives or team goals
- ◆ The progression of the talent pool through the leadership hierarchy
- ◆ Communication style of the leaders - with feedback at key points
- ◆ Longevity and quality of partner relationships
- ◆ Customer feedback
- ◆ Even investor feedback

As many culture change initiatives show, the way in which the written rules of an organisation are changed provides the context and mood for the unwritten rules... alignment here is key.

It is with respectful yet challenging, conversations that professional relationships are established and proliferate, underpinning future performance and growth.

Are we winning ?

How do you know if you have created a coaching culture? Clearly, at the outset, you would set measures around the purpose and intent. As we said before, there are many ways you can track progress which are easy to communicate back into the business.

In addition to the business measures, we believe there should also be due consideration given to the integrity and professionalism of the coaching activity being undertaken. Not just doing the right things, but doing the right things right.

In managing coaching activity, attention should be paid to:

- ◆ The process for selecting coaches (internal and external)
- ◆ The quality and frequency of training and CPD
- ◆ The supervision standards and expectations
- ◆ The matching process
- ◆ The evaluation process

In short, how would you evidence due diligence and duty of care in the coaching activities that form part of your coaching culture?

In many organisations, this can be more easily seen in the approach, processes and structures - the 'rules' - that surround the use of external coaches. This is a good place to look since the rules here will be a reflection of how the organisation engages with coach-

ing and will also highlight the areas that have more weight or importance than others.

In one organisation, there were very clear criteria for selecting external coaches to the coaching pool, but they missed this point when they 'recruited' internal coaches. In missing this step, the organisation attracted a pool of volunteers who had very different motivations for wanting to become internal coaches and brought different skills and capabilities, too.

The longer-term effect of this is that this faculty have struggled to gain credibility as professional, competent coaches. Had this organisation mirrored the standards and process they use to select external coaches, the internal pool would have had a very different composition and could have vicariously benefitted from the external coaches' credibility.

In another organisation, the standards they set around the supervision and CPD it expected of internal coaches were far clearer and more professionally demanding than those set for external coaches. The upside of this was a highly motivated, engaged and relevant internal faculty. The downside was the external coaching pool stagnated.

The firm's engagement with its external pool of coaches became distant and instead of having a powerful internal and external pool, one benefitted at the expense of the other - a win/lose rather than a win/win.

All the supporting processes and systems need to mirror the doing/being nature of your coaching culture with levels of professionalism, integrity and boundaries. Any cracks in the integrity of what you are creating can have a disproportionate impact on the outcome. In creating a coaching culture, paying attention to alignment across all activity will have a synergistic effect on success.



Sam Humphrey

Contact:
+44 (0)7767 417 450
sam@grit.co.uk



Karen Dean

Contact:
+44 (0)7802 748 793
karen.dean@diabololimited.com

Sam Humphrey and Karen Dean are the proud authors of Coaching Stories: Flowing and Falling of Being a Coach (2019, 1st edition, Routledge).

Coaching Stories: Flowing and Falling of Being a Coach is a compassionate and pragmatic companion for coaches of all kinds, both in practice and in training. It is a valuable guide for other professionals seeking development, including internal coaches, managers in a coaching role, HR and L&D professionals and is a useful text for academics and students of coaching and coaching psychology.

www.amazon.co.uk/Coaching-Stories-Flowing-Falling-Being/dp/1138370096/



This article won the “Best article of the year award” from Coaching at Work at their 2016 Awards.

Coaching at Work is an independently owned magazine, which publishes bimonthly in a printed and digital format, in addition to monthly newsletters. It has been going since 2005. It also organizes events such as an annual conference and masterclasses. Its global LinkedIn group has nearly 43,000 members. www.coaching-at-work.com

The criteria the judging panel were looking at included how well written the article was, how it helped to foster good/best practice in coaching/mentoring, how it inspired thinking and learning and how it generated debate.

Judges comments included:

“A thought-provoking article which was both challenging and stimulating for a range of reasons. It opened up new ground introducing a series of great and well connected questions that were not easily answered but offered up real opportunities for reflection and inquiry for addressing the issues about what a coaching culture is and whether it is the best strategy or way forward for different interventions. A asserted challenges and learning opportunities for both the coach and the organisation.

“Because it speaks to coaching custodians it has made more people think about what part they play in coaching in their organisation and how they hold that responsibility. In addition to being provocative and challenging, it was written to also help, give guidance and practical things to think about and do”

"Provides solutions and practical steps: having made insightful observations, challenged some fundamental aspects of current practice and raised questions, it goes on to advise on best practice where the challenge has been met and there is a sound case for going forward".

"Good to have a thought-provoking paper as well as those that confirm the status quo of coaching".

It was not always a comfortable read and this, in my opinion, made the content stretching and refreshing on a number of levels."

"The connections between personal reflections and best practice made for powerful insights as the article developed. The potential for learning was continuous and had an impact way after I had finished reading".

"It's really important we develop a more critical stance as a coaching community. These are the kinds of questions we need to ask to mature as an industry and as a profession and they are not often enough reflected in people's thinking or writing".

"I liked the authors' take on this, their rigour and challenging approach, and their clear and structured approach on how to build a coaching culture. Quite refreshing reading, in fact!"

"Provocative, thoughtful questioning of our assumptions about coaching is essential at this stage of development of the discipline".

"Its constructive, pragmatic and highly relevant to coaching's place in organisations. Well done them for writing and you for publishing".

"Engaging and interesting writing style: demands a little focus from the reader, yet rewarding and entertaining too in places, deals with real life issues in a highly informed way, describing things that can be seen to be 'true' about our field and current practice and at the same time bringing them into question in an informed way challenges some potentially lazy habits as either those who coach and provide coaching and also those who buy in coaching".

