



Everyone can be a coach

Coaching has become a popular term. Everyone is in favour of it. But what is the 'it' that everyone is in favour of? In order to try to elucidate its real role and value we have proposed various fallacies that we see in the use of the concept. These fallacies are not often stated quite as baldly as we have done. But our view is that they provide a good starting point in trying to clear up some confusion.

Our simple definition of coaching is:-

'helping others to learn useful abilities'.

Hence we have a rather broad view of the process, which we will elaborate via addressing various fallacies about coaching.

Some Fallacies

- Coaching is carried out by special people called coaches.

This may be so in some organizations. But we would want to convince people that anyone could be a coach. Indeed outside work people may happily engage in coaching but might not transfer the notion to their work life. For instance parents coach their children in all sorts of things - and not just sport. The fact that they may vary as to how well they do coach does not undermine the basic argument - it may, on the contrary, suggest that everyone needs to learn to be a good coach.

Increasingly in organizations managers are expected to be coaches, but in many cases they feel nervous about doing it. They don't see themselves as teachers, which may be their only model of how to help someone to learn. The fact that this is a problem for some managers indicates the need to address the issue, not avoid it.

- Coaching only applies in one-to-one work.

Our experience is that coaching is as much needed by teams as by individuals. Indeed you often only create a team through effective coaching. Too often leaders assume that they can just put a group together, call them a self-managing team - and they will magically gel as an effective team. Removing old-style authoritarian bosses, and replacing them with nothing, more often leads to disillusioned chaos. Effective team coaches are able to assist teams really to become teams which are productive and supportive.

- Coaching is all one thing.

The kind of coaching that is needed in organisations is a long way away from the old authoritarian coaching beloved of football or baseball fans. Modern sports coaches in tennis, golf and skiing have been influenced by the Inner Game approach of Tim Gallwey. They focus more on meeting the needs of individuals, on elegant questioning and on real performance improvement.

- Coaching is about adding new knowledge and skills to someone.

Additive learning may be part of what is needed - but only part. Let's take the example of time management. This is a common problem that managers bring to us in our coaching role. These managers have often been on two or three time management courses, they may have invested heavily in palm-top technology or fancy paper-based systems. And they find that nothing works. All these attempts at adding new knowledge and skills may have failed. What is usually needed in such cases is to explore the habits the person has which undermine their attempts to change. They may, for instance, have a deep-seated pattern of procrastination. Getting to the root of this habit and helping them to ingrain a new habit may be the key to change.

- If the coach strays outside simple instruction in knowledge and skills they are in danger of getting into psychotherapy.

We are not suggesting that a coach should become a psychotherapist - or that they should have training in this area. In a way all we are suggesting is that coaches can do what a good parent does. Listen to the other person, try to understand what is really concerning them, offer support and encouragement and so on.

In research we conducted on how people actually learn at work we found that many people were heavily influenced by their managers in ways which went outside skill and knowledge acquisition. Time and again people spoke of how a manager had given them the courage to branch out and go for a bigger job or encouraged them to work with more senior people.

We also had cases where the manager was a tyrannical autocrat, who got people to learn through fear. The person then learned the relevant skills but also learned to be fearful of people in authority. This latter learning could be the more powerful - and could undermine future learning. In one case it was only through a sensitive coach that the person learned that it was OK to ask for advice from more senior people. In this latter situation the coach was of most use in helping the person to learn how to learn in appropriate ways. It did not take a psychotherapist to do this: just someone who had the awareness and capability to help the person to address their problem.

- Coaches need to be expert in something in order to coach.

We hope that the case we made above would convince people that coaching may not be about imparting expertise. We have coached managers in areas such as finance or IT where we would not claim particular expertise, but where we could ask pertinent questions, help the person to set sensible learning goals and assist them in finding resources to meet them.

- Excellent coaches are born not made.

Not true. Coaching is learnable - but for the autocrat it may be tough learning. We have been involved in developing materials and workshops which can help people to learn to be effective. But we have to practice what we preach. It's no use offering a standardised training course in 'coaching skills'. Coaching is often about the person developing a new mind-set. (They may have many of the skills already, but they may use them inappropriately.) Any development programme for coaches needs to be carried out in a coaching style, for example through responding to individuals as individuals and by allowing participants to drive the process.

- Coaching is vertical.

By vertical we mean that it is based on a more senior person coaching a more junior individual. This is the commonest mode but with delayed and downsized organizations the senior people are often over-loaded and cannot coach on everything. In any case the emphasis on vertical-only modes undermines real empowerment. Managers often find that their secretaries (if they still have them) feel more empowered if they can coach their bosses on keyboard skills, IT software, etc.

Another factor here is the use of horizontal coaching. Learning groups can be established with one of their objectives is to coach each other in relevant skills.

- Coaching has to be face-to-face.

The face-to-face mode is the obvious way to coach. However we have used the phone and email as modes when it is not possible to be with the person all the time. Increasingly many teams are virtual teams relying heavily on electronic communication. If people assume that emails are just for information sharing, they can miss opportunities for coaching.

- Coaching is about fixing immediate performance problems.

This is an unfortunate assumption. In organizations it gives the sense that coaching is only for those who are failing. It becomes associated with a remedial approach. Our notion of coaching is closer to the best sports models. Modern tennis players or golfers of exceptional ability still use their coach. And the coach is best employed helping the person take a strategic approach to their learning. Some of the best golfers have decided at a certain stage in their career to change fundamentally some aspect of their game such that, in the short term, they have played worse. But they have gone for the long term benefit - and been rewarded for it.

Conclusion

We have made the case for a broad view of coaching. We believe that fashionable ideas such as the learning organization will have little value unless organizations focus on developing coaching capability widely across the spectrum of people who work there. Coaching is too important a process to be left to appointed coaches.

By Ian Cunningham and Linda Honold