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Life Coaching is getting a mixed press lately, yet it is used a lot in top companies and organisations. It has had a longer recognition in the USA than in the rest of the world where a level of scepticism is still to be found. It has relevance to companies of any size, throughout the performance textile chain. Dr Des Rice, PhD, OBE, believes it is worth delving a little deeper.

Creating a coaching culture in businesses

Successful organisations now regard Coaching as essential. Many of the world's most effective businesses and their top executives now accept that coaching makes an important contribution towards the success of their businesses, their teams and their individuals. They no longer regard coaching as something 'soft', which may give some welfare benefit but no economic return. Coaching in the workplace has quickly entered the mainstream.

That said, there are many executives who have not heard of coaching, are confused about it and are not reacting. They run a strong risk of being left behind! They may lose, or not attract, high quality staff. Successful businesses know that their most important asset is their people and that talented staff will not stay in unduly authoritarian businesses. They are more assertive, assume more rights and are less willing to 'toe the line'. For that reason they will be attracted to organisations which have replaced authoritarianism with an inclusive, dynamic, creative way of achieving success through having a coaching culture.

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Benefits of creating a coaching culture

- Workplace communication improves as friendlier, trusting relationships are created.
- Conflict is reduced, resulting in a happier, healthier work environment.
- Individuals become more self-directed, less dependent and more accountable.
- Self-awareness is increased and interpersonal skills valued and developed.
- New behaviours emerge, resulting in improved leadership and teamwork.
- New skills and competencies are learned and practised.
- Commitment to ongoing learning, training and development is increased.
- Training is part of the job rather than off-site, random and of little practical benefit.
- Improved customer relationships result from improved motivation and enthusiasm.
- Increased sales due to improved listening skills, rapport building and enthusiasm.
- Executives and other staff bring their 'whole self' to work and to home, resulting in improved work/home/life balance.
- Staff retention is greatly improved for all of the above reasons.

Overall the outcome should be an effective, productive workforce that is responsible, healthier and happier.

Coaching as a methodology for coping with change

One of the most common reasons that businesses use coaching is so that they can manage change better. Today, all public, private and representative bodies are subjected to unprecedented change. In the past they were quite stable and needed only limited ability to either create or manage change. Today, change has become the norm, for various reasons, including global competition, demographic changes, demands for novel products and services, consumers with access to products and services on the Internet, and staff who refuse to be subjected to patriarchal, top-down management.

Coaching helps businesses cope with such change because it assists executives and staff to communicate and relate in a completely different way. This results in commitment, responsibility and accountability which engender a belief system that "together we can do this". This is preferable to the more usual behaviours associated with persistent change, which include fear, blame, uncertainty and chaos. Margaret Wheatley in her much-acclaimed (1999) book "Leadership and the New Science, Discovering order in a chaotic world", invited us to consider humans (workers) as "bundles of potentiality that are fully adaptable to change". She postulated that the key to successfully managing change



Dr. Des Rice warms to the subject of coaching.

Transform your world

and its associated chaos is to focus on building relationships between these bundles of potentiality. Many others have further developed this subject of building 'relatedness' between individuals, teams and the organisation. Their studies strongly suggest that the introduction of a coaching culture can create this type of working environment which encourages participation, cooperation and shared responsibility. This allows change to be seen and dealt with as a normal ongoing creative process, not as a time-limited complication and certainly not as a potential catastrophe.

How do you create a coaching culture?

There are four components to creating a coaching culture in an organisation:

1. Getting commitment from the board/ leaders (not just permission).
2. Beginning an Executive Coaching programme.
3. Initiating on-the–job training in Team Coaching.
4. Teaching coaching skills to all leaders and managers.

It is unusual for all four to be implemented simultaneously. Normally, several leaders are Executive Coached. As they reap the benefits, they introduce the other components.

Executive coaching – how it works

As an Executive Coach I become a partner in the executive's business life. I assist them in clarifying their vision for the future of their organisation or for their part of it. I help them to identity their personal values and check how

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these are aligned with those of the organisation. Where necessary (or possible), we make amendments.

We work on live issues, setting goals and measuring successes and failures. From these we identify the behaviours and 'belief systems' that are beneficial to the executive and those that are self-limiting or destructive.

The process does not involve me fixing or trying to change the executive. It involves self-learning, based on observation and discussion of ongoing successes and failures. Thus, clients identify their strengths and also the 'blockages' that inhibit their progress to even more success. There are several components of success. These include substantial increases in individual and organisational performance that, previously, would have seemed impossible. There is the satisfaction of achieving both improved performance, with less effort and, simultaneously, a more functional home/work life balance. There is the creation of a happy working environment that encourages all staff to 'bring their whole selves to work'.

Executive coaching is not consulting, counselling, teaching, changing or fixing. It is not remedial, it is transformational. Transformational means that when the executive sees personal self-limiting behaviours and beliefs, then replaces these with others which are more appropriate, the dramatic improvements in performance become permanent and not just short-term fixes. The duration of the coaching cycle will depend on the terms of reference. For assistance with a specific short-term project it will last for a minimum of six weekly, probably 45-60 minute sessions. More usually it will last for six to 24 months as the executives transform both themselves and their businesses.

Team coaching

This is similar to individual coaching but with the added benefit of the shared experience of learning how to deal with each other whilst working on difficult real-life issues. The key principles of working in teams are learned. These include: really listening to each other; speaking clearly (not aggressively nor being pseudo-nice); supporting (not blaming) each other; holding each other accountable for our commitments and, last, acknowledging/appreciating each others' achievements.

When teams learn to perform in this way, all of the difficult issues get discussed, team members feel valued and secure, there is a sense of common purpose and the working environment becomes joyous, honest and healthy. This is much more desirable than pseudo-niceness, pretend-agreement, bar-room complaints and, worse, project sabotage.

"The time has come when Executive Coaching for Board Members is A MUST."

Institute of Directors (IoD). UK, 2006

Coaching skills training

The skills include: listening, questioning, creating a conversation, managing oneself, building rapport, eliciting and influencing beliefs, eliciting values, building self esteem, using coaching models (such as TGROW) and putting all of the above into an organisational context. Many businesses assert that they do not need training in these coaching skills because they already have and use them effectively. In some cases this is at least partially true. In most, it is not. By way of example: many executives are shocked when they start to practise their listening stills. What they discover is that frequently they are not really listening in order to fully understand the speaker's point of view, their situation and view of the world. Often they are instead waiting to talk, thinking of an answer, thinking of a clever/smart comment, daydreaming, assuming, presuming, etc. With training, they become aware that their colleagues/employees actually know that their opinion is not being truly heard. This causes immense problems in any organisation. When we think that we are not being listened to we either stop communicating or start to be aggressive and frequently personal. Neither benefits the organisation. So, executives find it really useful to begin to practise listening skills with others, in a 'Coaching gym/practice field' situation.

Similarly, all of the above skills can be examined and practised, away from the job in a coaching gym. In this way, leaders learn how to coach as part of their daily remit. As a result, internal organisational communication really improves, with all of the associated benefits mentioned above.

Conclusion

I hope that teaching of coaching skills in schools, colleges and universities will eventually be the norm. When this happens I expect that we will have not only a more efficient, effective and pleasant business environment, but a much more civil society. We have not yet reached that point; however, leading organisations are already working with specialist coaches to create these new ways of working and living together. Make sure your organisation doesn't get left behind.

"Coaching is based on inspiring individuals to realise a brilliant future, which (from their current perspective) would seem to be impossible."

Robert Hargrove, in 'Masterful Coaching'