



## Coaching Essentials

Coaching has been the buzz word in learning and development for a few years. Why is this? In this article Learning and Development Consultant with =mc, Sarah Fraser, explores the benefits of coaching, and explains why not-for-profits must invest in the coaching skills of their managers.

### Coaching: a must for not-for-profit managers

In the voluntary and public sectors, the challenges are ever present. But at the moment, more than ever, belts are being tightened. One result is that learning and development budgets often seem to be the first to be slashed. At =mc we regularly see managers struggling to continue to develop and motivate their staff. Yet the demand on people to perform, deal with constant change and deliver excellent results is increasing.

So how do you get the best from your staff during difficult times? At =mc we have seen how the adoption of coaching skills for managers can unlock staff potential and provide that much needed and valuable injection of both development and support.

This isn't just our view. A recent study conducted by CIPD showed that L&D professionals believe coaching is one of the most effective learning and development tools, second only to in-house training. However, CIPD argue, the focus for organisations – both commercial and not-for-profit – must be the *integration* of coaching as an essential management development tool at *all* levels.

Our experience suggests that for not-for-profits operating in the current environment, coaching is not simply a nice addition to management development toolkit. It can help make staff feel like they are still developing in a training-starved setting, increase engagement and tap into staff motivation. To get their team to deliver outstanding results in difficult circumstances, managers must learn to coach for performance.

### What is coaching?

Put simply, coaching is a non-directive conversation, where the coach listens and asks questions without giving answers, so acting as a guide for individual learning. At =mc we describe this as 'non-content coaching' – the coach creates a conversation framework that enables the 'coachee' to work out their own solutions to a problem. This is an empowering experience for the coachee and is sometimes described as *self-directed learning*. In this approach, the coach *doesn't* give any content – whether it's advice, feedback or suggested solutions. This avoids the trap that if you always provide the solutions as a manager, your staff will always come to you for them.

Regular one-to-one meetings with direct reports provide managers with ample opportunity to create productive and valuable coaching experiences for staff. Good listening skills, asking purposeful questions and guiding through a result-orientated conversation, can help staff start to find their own solutions and learn from their own experience. At the very least, they feel valued by the time their manager is taking to listen to them and be interested in them. At its best, coaching helps staff become expert problem solvers, empowered to face challenges and resolve issues head on.

Imagine a member of staff comes to you with a decision they need to make or a problem they need to solve. Whether or not you feel you know the 'right' answer, as the manager you may feel like it's your responsibility and duty to provide a solution. Below is an example of the coach approach:

### **John is in his monthly 1<sub>2</sub>1 with his line manager:**

**John:** *All these new documents and monthly reporting requirements are starting to get in the way of my usual day to day work. I can't seem to get everything done like I used to, and I'm starting to work late as a result. Is there any way we can review my workload over the next few weeks? I feel I'm really struggling.*

**Manager:** Let's try looking at this in a different way. Tell me, where do you need to get to?

**John:** *Well I need to be able to do everything don't I? But it just doesn't seem to be possible as I'm still getting to grips with these new reporting systems. I suppose I want to be able to get everything done without staying late every evening. That would be the ideal.*

**Manager:** OK, so how far away are you at the moment from achieving that?

**John:** *It feels like quite a long way. I've already worked late three nights this week.*

**Manager:** What's caused you to have to work late on these particular evenings?

**John:** *I think it's partly when I've had to deal with lots of unexpected interruptions, or help other people out. I'm happy to do that, but it means I don't get to my other work until later in the day. With reports needed for the end of this week, I've had to do the extra hours.*

**Manager:** Is there anything else, other than the unexpected interruptions, and report deadlines?

**John:** *Um, I don't think there is anything else. I know everyone is under pressure at the moment, but I can just sense myself getting more and more disheartened.*

**Manager:** What have you done in the past when you have found yourself in this situation?

**John:** *There was a similar period last year actually, when we restructured the fundraising team. I felt under a lot of pressure and ended up working longer hours for a few weeks. Thinking back, the pressure just seemed to ease after a while, I'm not sure how.*

**Manager:** What might have helped you feel like the pressure eased at that time?

**John:** *Actually I think one thing that helped was when Joan my manager then, asked me what was essential work and what could go to the bottom of my to-do list. I suppose it was about being really strict about what was a priority and what wasn't.*

**Manager:** In what way could that experience help you today?

**John:** *That's a good point, I've been really caught up in just trying to get work done, I haven't really taken a step back and considered what work is less of a priority at the moment.*

**Manager:** Is there anything else that would help take the pressure off and allow you to avoid working extra hours?

**John:** *Avoiding the many interruptions probably! Maybe I just need to say 'no' sometimes...*

Already, John has identified his own goal and started to establish some things he could do to achieve it. As this conversation progresses, his manager will prompt him to agree some firm actions he will take to ensure that he prioritises his work effectively and avoids interruptions.

The coaching process supports managers in developing their staff's ability to solve problems, taking them through a logical thinking process.

This can then be used by staff independently – self-coaching – making them less reliant on their manager to resolve every issue and provide all the answers. During the periods of uncertainty and change we're currently experiencing in the not-for-profit and public sectors, building this level of capacity and resilience is invaluable to managers and their team.

## When should you not use coaching?

Of course coaching isn't always going to be the right approach. It should be used in conjunction with others. Managers need to be flexible, wearing different hats in different situations. In urgent, high-risk or unfamiliar situations it is often necessary to be more directive, to tell staff what they should do. For example:

- ✘ When the development need is a skills or knowledge gap that must be filled first
- ✘ When the issue is time critical – you may not have the time to coach in this situation
- ✘ When it may not be appropriate – e.g. if you are directly accountable to others for the outcome
- ✘ When someone is new to the task – they will need a more directive approach from you

But when you have time on your side and you're in a low risk situation you don't have to give your staff all the answers or solutions. Some examples might be:

- ✓ When you know the person has enough experience and knowledge to draw on to resolve the problem or deal with the challenge
- ✓ When you can make the time to coach – time invested early will build capacity the long-term
- ✓ When a person is skilled but demotivated and they need to find their own solutions to re-engage
- ✓ With individuals who lack confidence but whom you are sure have competence

## Conclusion

Whether it is used as an approach to managing talent, developing high potentials and future leaders, or meeting future skills requirements, coaching enables managers to achieve more with their teams – especially in a less stable developmental environment. The result? Delivery of team results, motivated staff and a team less reliant on their manager's time and expertise.

Coaching, as a management approach, is a skill that needs to be developed like any other. It takes practice and time to master. But by developing the coaching skills of those in key management positions, organisations can provide one of the most valuable and effective opportunities for individual development, *for free*.

The question is then, 'Can you afford *not* to coach?'

### Further help

We have developed a new two-day practical coaching skills programme for managers. In a safe environment participants have a chance to develop their own coaching style through pair and group work, supported by proven tools and techniques introduced by the **=mc** programme leader. The programme is designed for anyone who manages staff or volunteers and wants to build confidence, increase resilience and ultimately improve performance in their team.

To find out more, visit [www.managementcentre.co.uk/cs](http://www.managementcentre.co.uk/cs) or call us on **+44 (0) 20 7978 1516**.

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