



Coaching Articles

The State of Play in Corporate Coaching - Current and Future Trends An article by Peter Bluckert

Current trends

It can't have escaped the notice of those in management and consultancy that there has been a veritable explosion in the coaching market in recent years. Some will question whether it has become yet another fad. Yet one-one consultation has been around in some shape or form for decades. Equally important, it will be practiced well into the future whether called coaching or not. Why - because corporate life will continue to be a complex, fast-paced and pressured place where executives and senior managers derive value from personalised, skilled help delivered in a structured and safe one-one situation.

The expansion of the coaching field has brought with it a new set of dynamics. Due to the unregulated nature of coaching there have been no real barriers to those wanting to call themselves a coach. As such, the number of coaches has rapidly increased. The breadth of backgrounds from which they come has also expanded enormously. Retiring executives, HR directors, academics and management trainers have been joined by engineers, senior police officers, teachers, clinical and occupational psychologists, counsellors and psychotherapists. A number of sports coaches, particularly those with a sports psychology background, have also pitched their hats into the ring.

This potentially enriches and strengthens the field. New influences are brought to bear. However, concerns also exist about the growing number of poorly trained and relatively inexperienced coaches some of whom are rolling off two to five day courses. Whilst coach training should be fit for purpose and there is an important place for introductory programmes, unrealistic expectations can be created by the notion of the one-week 'wonder course'. Most advanced level coach education is based around the university accreditation model of postgraduate certificate, diploma or full masters programme taking between one and three years to complete. Arguably, executive coaching competence takes a good deal longer still.

The supply side

What is becoming clear is that there is a danger of over-supply at the bottom end of the market. Some of these newly badged coaches may struggle to survive unless they have strong networks, find niche markets and have that vital business attribute - an entrepreneurial side to their nature. They will need a good deal of support and guidance from more experienced practitioners particularly their original trainers.

The coaching market nevertheless continues to grow and business opportunities exist for all sectors of coaching suppliers. Middle and upper market coaching consultancies who have the capacity to win larger contracts will continue to do well and highly regarded individual

practitioners will always be in demand. We can expect new niche markets to open up not just in the UK but further afield and many top coaching firms will plan with bigger international markets in mind. The very best executive coaches will be sought after because of the high added value nature of their work. Finally, the newly emerging coaching profession itself will provide business opportunities particularly for companies who specialise in quality training, supervision and continuing professional development.

The coach training market has continued to grow over recent years and there are now several consultancies, usually working in collaboration with universities, who offer a full range of courses from the introductory to advanced levels. These tend to be corporately focused and attract internal and external business coaches as well as managers who want to improve their coaching skills. Life coaching has also seen a surge of interest and their coach training 'academies' tend to draw on the wider public for their clientele.

The demand side

On the demand side, client organisations are now far more discerning about their use of coaching services. They want to know that their money is being spent wisely and are asking ever more penetrating questions of the coaching community. They want more clarity about the 'product' - how one 'offering' differs from the next. Is executive coaching the same as leadership coaching? Is life coaching a different thing altogether? What is the difference, if any, between coaching and mentoring? How can we tell if the coach/mentor is competent?

They also want to see a single professional lead body recognised by the field whom they can contact for advice, benchmarking, quality control and, in the case of problems, address their complaints. Moreover they want to see it now.

Future trends

An emerging profession

Coaching has reached a point where the drivers for professionalisation are coming from both coaches themselves and from the corporate world. This process has gathered pace recently with most leading coaches, mentors and professional associations involved in ongoing dialogue to create an overarching professional organisation representative of coaching and mentoring within Europe. Several conferences and collaboration meetings have been held in the last year alone.

Given the inevitability that a lead body will emerge, and probably within months rather than years, the main questions will be around the degree of support it receives from the wider coaching and mentoring community. What is for sure is that it will have a significant impact on levels of professional practice. Professional kite-marking is likely to lead, as it has done in psychotherapy and counselling, to higher standards of training, the need for professional supervision and accreditation processes for individual coaches and coach training providers. Codes of ethics, already in existence, will become the norm and processes will be established to investigate complaints of malpractice. The implications of greater regulation will be felt by all those in the emerging coaching profession.

Coach training

Training providers will need to review, and in some cases improve their course structures,

content and approach. At present there is no agreed core curriculum due to the historical diversity of approach and lack of commonly agreed coaching competencies and standards. This will eventually change in the light of newly emerging work on coaching proficiencies and best practice.

Training methods will also come under greater scrutiny and debates will focus around how best coaching can be learnt. Does it require intensive workshop sessions, where does distance learning fit, what is the place of e-learning. Further questions will arise around how many hours constitute a bona fide programme - should there be a minimum number of training and supervised practice hours and what should they be. Does it depend on the type of coaching or mentoring you are learning to do? Executive coaching, for instance, requires substantially more training and development than line manager coaching.

Finally, of course, there is the important question of accreditation. Those people who invest in coach training want to know what their qualification is going to be worth in the post professionalizing era. Their concern is that they may find it is not recognised by a lead body and are subsequently asked to undertake further training. Understandably, this is producing nervousness in those currently investigating the 'offerings' on the market.

Implications of regulation

On the face of it the professionalising process looks like a good thing. Yet it could have negative as well as positive consequences. Unless regulation can be achieved without excessive bureaucracy then creativity could be stifled. People may feel they have to fit a mould which isn't really them. And, of course, there will be more forms to fill in and portfolios to be maintained.

Standards nevertheless should rise and clients will benefit from higher levels of capability and service. These same clients will become ever more discerning about what they are buying. Proof of the effectiveness of coaching interventions will be sought especially from companies who are investing heavily. They will be increasingly intolerant of anecdotal evidence and want to see a stronger and more robust business case being made for coaching.

This will be the catalyst for more research studies and academia will be called upon to provide the evidence. Questions such as 'Does coaching work?'; 'How well does it work?'; 'Who does it work best with?'; 'What methods and approaches work best?' will absorb the minds of researchers and the emerging profession itself.

All these trends can be expected to put pressure on what has been an unregulated field. Historically coaches have been able to do their own thing with no-one interfering or telling them how and what to do. There has been an atmosphere of inclusivity and polite respect for fellow coaches which may now come under greater challenge as rules, regulations and best ways to practice start to appear. Sensitivities will get ruffled and the coaching community will be tested on its flexibility and support for difference. Two of coaching's latest trends, Coaching Supervision and Coaching Psychology, could provide interesting litmus tests.

Coaching supervision

Supervision means different things to different people. In the management world it can carry the connotation of control - a line management mechanism for monitoring performance and

task accomplishment. But Coaching Supervision is far more likely to derive both its meaning and its practices from the supervision concept in psychotherapy, counselling and clinical psychology. As such, it will have a two-fold purpose: firstly to provide support and ongoing learning for the coach through the ongoing examination of the coaching process and secondly, to provide a quality control mechanism for the client.

Those coaches from therapeutic or psychological backgrounds will tend to see supervision as a given - simply an aspect of good practice. Many will have been in regular supervision for years. However, those from other backgrounds may struggle to see its relevance. Furthermore, they may actively resist the imposition of supervision even if the emerging profession deems it to be essential.

Coaching psychology

Other influences from the psychology 'stable' could also produce future tensions for the fledgling profession. The new 'coaching psychology' concept has the capacity to contribute significantly to coaching theory and practice and at the same time create more waves. In recent years the common ground for most coaches and mentors has been the definition of the process as the facilitation of learning. Definitions have centred on the coaches' role in facilitating the learning required to improve performance. Academics, management consultants, executive coaches and others have found it relatively straightforward to gather around this theme.

The 'psychologising' of coaching is an altogether different matter. There is far greater contention about the need for a psychological background and skill-set to operate as a coach. Interestingly, we now see signs of anxiety and concern beginning to surface around whether 'the psychologists' may exert undue influence in the formative stages of the profession.

Even within the coaching psychology fraternity there is potential for boat-rocking. Those with a psychotherapeutic or counselling background will feel they have as much to contribute to the debate as the clinical and occupational psychologists.

Beyond that, there is ample scope for argument over which psychological frameworks have the best fit with coaching. Cognitive behavioural psychology is strongly recommended by some coaching psychologists whilst others make persuasive arguments for adopting a psychodynamic approach. Constructive-development psychology, humanistic and existential psychologies such as Gestalt and psycho-synthesis form the overarching frameworks for other practitioners. Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) is the defining influence for yet other coaches. Perhaps the more interesting question is how knowledgeable each of these is about the others and the extent to which they are prepared to learn from and about each other.

Concluding thoughts

There are a number of strong drivers and trends operating within the coaching field which bring this emerging profession to a critical stage. In the past there has been so much headroom available to coaches that tensions have been kept to a minimum. Similar professions such as psychotherapy and counselling who went through their early professionalizing steps ten years ago experienced some pain along the way. That could be the story for coaching too. However it does not need to be so. There is a huge resource available at the top end of coaching from people who have been there and done it before. Some of the

very same people who guided psychotherapy and counselling through its teething problems are now taking a leading role in the creation of the coaching profession. That leadership will be an important factor in guiding a diverse group of people through tricky territory.

Returning to the business perspective, this professionalizing process will drive significant changes in the field. For corporate clients it will produce a more coherent, understandable product range. They will know more about what they are buying and whether the people selling it know their stuff. In time they will have access to better information about the business benefits of corporate coaching. In cases of professional incompetence they will have somewhere to go to seek redress.

Many coaches and coach training providers will need to 'up their game' in response. Very likely some will drop out. Others will decide to invest further in their own training as they recognise the need to improve their knowledge bases and skill sets. Competency standards will form a clearer reference point for those designing and delivering coach training. Diversity of approach will continue but we will see greater convergence around some commonly shared aspects of good practice. The great challenges will be the sharing of what we do, how we do it and whether we are genuinely prepared to learn and be influenced by each other. Interesting times lie ahead!

Peter Bluckert Coaching (PBC) is a specialist coaching consultancy in executive coaching, team coaching and facilitation, coach training, coaching psychology and coaching supervision. Peter is also a founder member of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) and is the Chair of its Standards and Ethics Committee. He welcomes comment on this article and can be contacted on 01274 566060 or by e-mail, mail@pbcoaching.com, or visit the website www.pbcoaching.com.

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