

THE STATE OF PLAY IN THE COACHING PROFESSION

Sarah Tennant and Jon Horsley invites us to consider the road we have travelled in the last 10 years of coaching, and what the future holds for the profession.

In 2023 the OCM collaborated on a Research Paper called Coaching: Maximising Business Impact with the Corporate Research Forum (CRF).

Drawing on this research, and also on what we at the OCM are seeing in the field, the following are some of the key trends emerging.

CONTINUED AND EXPANDED USE OF COACHING

As a trend, organisations have been using coaching to an increasing extent over the past few years, and the research suggests that CRF members expect spending on coaching to continue to rise over the next two years. They also indicated that there is a growing trend to use coaching with more thought and planning, particularly in relation to advancing organisational purpose and strategy, and to complement executive development programmes – more on this below.

At the OCM, we are also noticing that organisations with internal coaching pools are now looking to enhance, and often streamline through a single provider, their external coaching provision.

INCREASED ACCESS AND THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY

Coaching has become more accessible, reaching beyond senior executives to employees at various levels within organisations. Virtual coaching is significantly more common, accelerating through the pandemic and remaining an important and highly accessible delivery mode, with recent research showing that it is just as effective as face-to-face coaching.

Technology is also transforming the way coaching is organised within many organisations. On-demand coaching is part of this, and numerous providers are making use of comprehensive online platforms to deliver, manage and evaluate their coaching provision.

The CRF report highlights the emerging potential of Coachbots – coaching applications underpinned by Artificial Intelligence, as well as immersive technologies such as the use of avatars in virtual reality environments. According to Sam Isaacson, Founder of the Coachtech Collective, these two forces are poised to transform the landscape of both coaching and of learning and development (L&D) more broadly. He sees these trends as having the potential to complement and enhance the provision of human coaching in certain situations, rather than simply as a potential threat to the profession of coach.

The need for the coaching equivalent of flatpack furniture and the bespoke cabinet-maker

At the OCM we see democratising access to coaching as a good thing, as well as believing that there is still a place for high-end coaching provision. The conversation we have had with Sam was about the need for the coaching equivalent of flatpack furniture and the bespoke cabinet-maker. We also recognise the need to be wary of hubris: Kodak was a pioneer in film photography, but it failed to recognise the digital revolution. The company clung to its traditional film business, underestimating the rapid adoption of digital cameras and smartphones. We would do well not to underestimate the impact and potential of AI, and to explore potential solutions in this field.

HUMAN-CENTRIC APPROACH

Accelerated by the pandemic, there is an increasing emphasis on reconciling personal wellbeing with organisational objectives,

acknowledging the importance of holistic development and bringing the whole person to work.

Today's challenges require leaders to be self-aware, authentic, resilient and comfortable with showing vulnerability. It also requires them to be able to engage their employees around these qualities through emotionally literate relationships. In short, today's leaders need to be mentally fit, and agile.

The distinction between coaching and therapy, not always very clear, is increasingly seen as a spectrum along which some appropriately qualified practitioners can move confidently and competently. These practitioners will use a variety of approaches, including coaching and therapeutic counselling, offering clients techniques such as mindfulness and stress management, if appropriate, and always by invitation.

The balance between coaching and more therapeutic approaches needs to be agreed during the contracting phase of the relationship, as well as being an ongoing topic for re-contracting over the course of the contract, and without blending or blurring the boundaries between the two. As ever, appropriate supervision is an essential part of the jigsaw.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT AND SYSTEMIC THINKING

Organisations are recognising the need to align coaching with broader strategic objectives, viewing coaching as a means to drive cultural change and support talent development strategies.

The OCM has found that engaging with an organisation seeking to use coaching in support of their strategic intent requires standing back and thinking systemically about designing and delivering executive and/or team coaching programmes. Through this, coaching is aligned with a wider strategy, a problem to solve, or a desired change; then, either for the whole organisation or at least for a part of it, such as the people strategy or, within that, the talent strategy.

This OD approach to designing coaching interventions starts with a conversation which explores what they are looking for in terms of the outcomes of the strategic initiative they are embarking on. What is the culture they are trying to build? What do they want their people to be doing differently as a result?

We are also seeing a growing trend in using coaching within executive development programs, to align coaching with organisational goals and foster leadership resilience in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) world.

TEAM COACHING

There is increasing recognition that focusing on 'the leader as hero' and ignoring the fundamental role that teams play in ensuring business success, is a big mistake. This has led to an increasing focus on team coaching, requiring new and more sophisticated skills for coaches in managing group process and group dynamics.

The accepted view that effective team coaching requires stability in the team and in the environment is being challenged by the realities of a VUCA world as noted above. There are teams in which endless cycles of change are in train, where our HR business partners feel it is important to wait until the changes are completed before commencing investment in the team's performance. Then, there are teams where changes in membership have just happened, and the concern is to allow them the time to focus on finding their feet in their individual roles before focusing on team performance. Even if the team is stable, when the organisation is facing into a challenging environment, the temptation for leadership is to focus on adapting to the context rather than to prioritise team health

and performance. Balancing these internally- and externally-facing perspectives is critical.

THE LINE MANAGER AS COACH

There is increasing recognition that equipping line managers with coaching skills is key to ensuring effective management relationships, increasing staff performance, retention, motivation and satisfaction.

In the work the OCM has done now with many organisations seeking to shift behaviours and culture, we have found that providing these skills leads to managers being able to:

- empower their teams and therefore free up time for line managers to move away from getting too involved in the day-to-day detail;
- take a situational approach to conversations with reports, along a spectrum of directional to non-directional approaches;
- understand how they can take a coaching approach in their day-to-day roles without adding time or complication;
- develop the core skills of listening and asking effective questions;
- build capabilities to provide constructive feedback to promote growth;
- foster a mindset shift towards enabling self-driven problem-solving.

We hope that some of these themes illustrate the evolution of coaching over the past decade and offer insights into the future trajectory of the coaching profession, with the need for practitioners to adapt, innovate, and maintain quality standards in the face of technological advancements and market changes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Originally trained by the Association for Coaching, and now working for the OCM, Sarah is a seasoned coach with 25 years of experience in global business development, independent consultancy and as a founder. Her approach creates positive, collaborative spaces where clients devise growth strategies. With a blend of commercial savvy and emotional intelligence,

she empowers individuals and teams to navigate challenges and thrive. Specialising in leadership development, Sarah fosters purposeful performance and guides clients through transitions. Described as calm and supportive, she builds trust and tailors evidence-based tools to meet unique needs, helping clients achieve pragmatic yet ambitious goals.



Jon, also with the OCM, was a leader for over 35 years in social and economic development and humanitarian response, and specialises in supporting leaders under pressure in complex contexts. As an EMCC Senior Practitioner in executive and team coaching, he helps clients live their values and lead authentically. He also supervises and trains

coaches. With experience in conflict-affected areas like Cambodia, Bosnia and Lebanon, Jon offers empathy and rigour, enabling leaders to expand their choices and personal bandwidth. Clients value his focused, supportive presence, which creates a safe space for exploring patterns of behaviour and cross-cultural communication challenges.