

Why coaching is the key to liberating your workforce in an uncertain business world

There is a generation growing up in our workplaces that has a very different sense of authority than for many within previous generations. This group have seen how older generations sold their minds and bodies to the corporation and were let down, badly. Many are looking for a sense of purpose and meaning from their work. And to engage in work that is ethical. They also don't quite understand why someone should tell them how to do things – they learned from the web and from their friends. This is not a generation that wears 'command and control' well.

At the same time modern business is increasingly volatile – and there are some who argue that the response from corporate leadership has been insufficient. It is no longer that change is continuous, we have gone beyond that – it's threatening. In the broadcast entertainments industry, for example, one's competitors used to be similar broadcasting organisations. Now it is Google, Amazon, Apple with different ways of thinking and different technologies. Similar changes are happening across most industry sectors.

Now add in a level of complication: Fordism. In manufacturing Henry Ford created a breakthrough with the production line. That philosophy has continued and grown to embrace Total Quality Management, Business Process Re-engineering and Six Sigma technologies. All of which have made a contribution and have a place.

But the principles, appropriate to inanimate things, have been brought to bear on human beings. Our education systems, our performance systems, our talent management systems are built on a model of prescription, measurement and compliance. Take the word 'competencies' for instance. Who would want to be merely competent when greatness or self-expression is possible? Fordism turns us into units of production and units of consumption. It potentially, robs us of our own autonomy and authority – the seat of creativity and responsibility.

To quote Sir Ken Robinson, one of the world's leading educationalists “ ***Our education system has mined our minds in the way that we have strip-mined the earth: for a particular commodity. And for the future it won't service.***”

Part of the way forward must be to enable individuals to flourish and thrive in our organisations, to enable people to give expression to their imagination, creativity, intelligence and responsibility. We have seen some organisations try to achieve this, in some cases with good results, by changing the architecture of key buildings so more people are forced to bump into each other and have more conversations than they would have had in their physical silos. Other organisations are revisiting the corporate values. If you look closely you will see that this is frequently a Fordist-type response with the leadership manipulating the circumstances to get a desired result.

Coaching therefore has to be part of the answer. However there are problems with coaching as it stands. We seem to have forgotten that, in the corporate business world, the primary purpose of coaching is performance: better results. Coaching sits with HR and L&D. Of course learning and performance are interwoven but in most large corporates, coaching is about L&D. The same is true of executive coaching - most senior executives who received coaching in the pre-2008 heyday have little or no idea of what they or the organisation for which they worked, gained from the experience, except maybe a good feeling.

There is another more worrying issue here. To many, a manager beginning to coach their team feels like a loss of control. If that manager was brought up in a command and control culture, which is likely, the thought of losing control is too great a barrier to be overcome. Training programmes with the title 'The Manager as Coach' have not helped here – it's a really bad idea. Managers – and leaders – need to lead, manage and coach. When this is understood a balance is established between enablement (a better word than empowerment) and alignment (a better word than control – alignment with corporate mission, goals values, etc.)

Coaching – or perhaps better, the principles of enablement that effective coaching embodies – has a critical role in bringing individual and team performance to the fore for the benefit of the corporation. The outcomes are in terms of greater overall performance, the release of creativity, imagination, responsibility, discretionary contribution and, not least employee engagement.

For this to happen the holders of the coaching agenda, typically HR, might think about re-inventing coaching in their organisation. As a contribution to that process they might:

- Ensure coaching is primarily about performance
- Turn relationships within the business into coaching relationships – with a business focus
- Re-contract with external coaches and ensure that they get the necessary training to bring a stronger business edge to their coaching
- Re-think how executive coaching is delivered. Who said it should be a two-hour session, once a month. What about asking the end-users what they need. I have a colleague who delivers daily 10 minute coaching sessions before 9am as an example. If you are seeking to train managers it's far better to have eight two-hour clinics on-site with e-learning support than to send people away for a two-day event.

The world is volatile. By enabling and aligning individuals and teams the energy and intelligence to survive and thrive can be found. A re-invented coaching could be part of the way forward.

Article by [Myles Downey](#) – director, Enabling Programmes Ltd and the founder of The School of Coaching. He is one of Europe's foremost business coaches and his extensive experience spans over 20 years. He coaches senior executives and leadership teams and develops coaching skills in line managers and professional coaches. His new book, Effective Modern Coaching, is available now

If you would like to enhance performance of your team through coaching and gain a stronger business edge for when the good times return, do contact me:

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