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The use of internal resources for coaching and mentoring

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In-company coaching and mentoring have become part of the fabric of organisational development in recent years. But what are companies using them for and how effective are they? The European Foundation for Management Development and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council have co-operated in a survey to find out. Based on responses from 173 HR professionals responsible for managing coaching and mentoring, the survey data suggest that, while organisations are experiencing substantial benefits from their investments in this area, in-company coaching and mentoring is still a “work in progress”.

For the purposes of the survey, we used definitions, which were acceptable to a panel of advisers, in the specific context of internal company provision. This allowed us to avoid confusion over terms such as career coaching. Our definitions were:

- In-company coaching: a development process that focuses on the management of performance
- In-company mentoring: a one-to-one developmental process that focuses on the development of capability and effective career management

We also asked respondents for their own definitions of the differences between developmental coaching and developmental mentoring. While there was a rich wide variety of opinion, the most commonly mentioned distinctions are that there is a higher level of challenge expected in the coaching relationship, and that mentoring tends to be longer term and involve a partnership between a more junior and a more senior employee. The overall impression is nonetheless one of lack of clarity about where and how the two approaches co-exist.

Although they have much in common, coaching and mentoring seem to be managed as separate activities in most organisations. They are also at different stages in terms of the attention given to how well they are managed. Our survey suggests that coaching and mentoring are only just emerging from an ad hoc, reactive phase into more systematic approaches.



So what did we find?

Both coaching and mentoring are provided for a wide range of employees, from the shop floor to the executive suite. But the concentration of in-company coaching is heavily on middle managers and executives, followed at a much lower level by the talent pool and professional staff. However, there was a much more even perception of the effectiveness of coaching. Over 80% of respondents to this question saw it as effective or very effective for executives, middle managers, junior managers and the talent pool.

Mentoring is most commonly targeted at new recruits, followed by middle managers and professional specialists. Nearly half of respondents said their organisations directed mentoring programmes at female employees and junior managers. The talent pool, surprisingly, came sixth out of the ten options although it was seen as the most effective application, equal with new recruits.

The least targeted group for mentoring was employees from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. Given that case study evidence suggests that mentoring has its greatest impact in retaining and growing talent and in BME employees, it seems that many organisations lack awareness of the benefits coaching and mentoring can bring beyond short-term performance management and knowledge transfer.

This conclusion is supported by responses to our question about the benefits observed from coaching and mentoring, with improved performance and employee motivation being faraway the highest responses. It is probable that the low scores for impact on retention reflect inadequacies in how companies measure the impact of coaching and mentoring. A relatively low score for impact of mentoring on diversity management (only 40% of respondents recorded this) correlates with the relatively low usage of mentoring and coaching to support diversity policies. Reverse mentoring (where the mentor is more junior than the mentee) is closely associated with diversity management, so it is not surprising that very few organisations had this kind of programme.

The organisations in our survey used a variety of methods to measure the impact of coaching – from feedback from the coachee’s manager to satisfaction surveys) and none were dissatisfied with their measurement processes. (My own observation is that most current measurement processes are actually rather naïve and prone to giving false positive results.) However, very few organisations measure the impact of mentoring, and those that do use primarily informal methods. The international standards for mentoring appear to have made very little headway.



The type of coaching provided shows an unexpected emphasis on behavioural coaching (personal change beneficial both within and beyond the current job role – 83%), followed closely by performance coaching (application of skills and knowledge to achieve results in a current job role – 81%). Only 60% provide skills coaching and only 36% encourage peer coaching. Executive coaching is more frequently resourced externally than internally, but by a much smaller margin than predicted (76% versus 47%). This suggests that companies are investing in developing “home-grown” coaches to replace more expensive external providers.

This shift of emphasis towards internal resources (potentially bad news for professional executive coaches) may be assisted by a higher level of confidence in the ability of line managers to coach, than much of the coaching literature would suggest. It’s common for coaching pundits to say that line managers, because they have other jobs to do and because of the dynamics of the boss-subordinate relationship, can’t be coaches – they can simply use some coaching behaviours. The majority of our survey respondents, by contrast, believe that line managers can be effective skills coaches and performance coaches to their direct reports (62% and 60% respectively) and 10% in each case believe they can be very effective in these roles.

The majority of organisations (78%) have the aspiration to become coaching cultures, but two-thirds are still at the very early stages of doing so. Only 11% of organisations say that they have embedded coaching into their culture i.e. that coaching is integrated into their day-to-day systems and behaviours. An indication that so many are at an early stage of the journey to a coaching culture is that less than two-fifths of organisations have an individual or dedicated team responsible for coordinating coaching across the business. (The actual proportion may be much smaller – only 84 responses were recorded for this question.) Another indicator is the low use of supervision for internal coaches, at any level. However, a significant proportion of respondents said that they are looking at supervision for their internal coaches.

When asked how they approached increasing the competency of in-company coaches, only just over half respondents answered. Of these, only slightly more than half trained line managers as coaches, although nearly a third trained some coaches to be “coaches to the coaches”. Only 15% trained employees to be coached and only 26% had a process to accredit different levels of coaching competence and experience. Once again, a significant proportion of respondents said this was a project under development. Only a handful of companies had any kind of approach to preventing line managers who had been trained slipping back into their old behaviours. Those that did, relied on supervision to manage the problem.

The picture with regard to mentoring is slightly more positive, with 79% of responding organisations providing mentor training. However, less than half trained mentees as well (a basic requirement for programme and relationship quality) and only a third had trained staff managing the mentoring programme.



We also asked what problems respondents faced in making coaching and mentoring work in their organisations. For coaching, the primary issues were lack of organisational support, lack of understanding about coaching and poor coaching skills. A similar picture emerged for mentoring, but the most significant problems were: difficulty in attracting mentors, mentor and mentee skills and unrealistic expectations of mentors and/or mentees.

Implications

It is always tempting to read more into survey results than the data justify. However, we can extrapolate a number of specific recommendations for both employer and provider organisations.

For employers, there is a need to educate and train people to make more effective use of coaching and mentoring and to support them in these behaviours. That suggests a requirement for a coherent coaching and mentoring strategy – one that links the two activities both with each other and with the strategic priorities of the business. That in turn indicates a need for professional coordination of coaching and mentoring at a corporate level and for the provision of supervision for coaches and mentors.

For providers, the gradual maturing of organisations' approaches to coaching and mentoring and towards a coaching and mentoring culture provide a substantial challenge. The other side of the coin is that there are also likely to be substantial opportunities, particularly in supporting managers in becoming internal coaches and helping organisations integrate internal and external coaching provision.