



Teamwork: why coaching could be better than training

Most readers will be familiar with the results of surveys by CiPD, the Hay Group, OPP and others, all highlighting the problems of our team managers. Here's a taster to illustrate the point:

- Under-performing middle-managers are costing the UK economy £220 billion a year
- Four out of 10 UK Directors believe that their middle managers are the single greatest barrier to achieving their company's objectives
- UK employees spend an average of 2 hours a week dealing with conflict and disagreement, costing the economy £24 billion
- 37% of those leaving their jobs are doing so due to poor management, stress and bad relationships at work
- 72% of managers believe that improving HR skills are the most effective method to improve retention of staff

And so it goes on....

The three biggest culprits for our current predicament are:

The poison of "Soft Skills"

Whoever invented this phrase needs to apologise, to every single manager in the UK. It has spread the perception that relationship management, communication, motivation and an understanding of diversity were somehow fluffy, optional and just for wimps. So we've created our own monster by undermining the very skills that effective team management demands.

The assumption of promotion

We're very good at promoting someone who is good at their job into a management role with no preparation, no training and no support. It's a sure-fire way to damage someone's self esteem and quickly impacts on team performance.

Terrible training

The training world has to take some of the blame, for peddling management theories with little regard for the true needs of the audience. I'm not alone in having a fat file of handouts, a certificate in a drawer somewhere and a notch on my CV. Budgetholders are happy because a box had been ticked, but what true gains have been made for the manager or their organisation?



What is coaching?

Just as effective team management is not a one-size-fits-all activity, providing a manager with the insight, skills and confidence they need to perform well are best tailored to the individual.

Coaching is not a classroom-based activity. More often than not, it's one-to-one and the coach needs to take time to understand the manager, appreciate the context they are working in, and be in a position to offer relevant, timely support.

From my point of view, it also helps to meet the team, understand the personalities and build an atmosphere of trust and respect with everyone involved. Developing a team for better performance means much more than working with the manager.

The content and focus of these discussions are led by the manager, not a trainer following a pre-determined agenda. We are therefore responding to real events and issues and finding solutions that can be immediately applied. This can take unexpected turns and reveal much more than any training course or attempts to learn from a book.

Coaching is a long-term commitment, by both parties. The intervals between meetings or phone calls can vary, but the relationship is one that evolves over time. Good coaching requires good questioning and even better listening, a far cry from some of the old lecture-style training. Once a coach has established a healthy relationship with the manager, one based on empathy, expertise and a commitment to success, they should be able to ask almost anything and expect an honest answer.

The coach becomes a "critical friend" to the manager and their team, allowing them to hear, see and say things that no other member of the team would feel able to do. In a series of customer service calls to my main clients, the one thing they all valued about my work with them was that I was impartial, independent and uninvolved in other areas of the organisation.

Being able to challenge the manager, hold them accountable for their own progress and demonstrate faith in their ability to achieve takes tact, time and a magic combination of patience and determination.

The ultimate prize for a coach is to see the manager finding their own solutions, take responsibility for their delivery and to witness the team respond to a renewed sense of purpose.

All of this wonderful stuff needs constant work, with the role of the coach waxing and waning with the needs of the team. But most managers will tell you that theirs is a



lonely world, with few opportunities to discuss ideas, let off steam or ask the obvious questions.

Who benefits from coaching?

Done well, I would suggest that all managers would have something to gain from coaching. This could range from an intensive review of their relationship management skills, team direction and purpose, and ability to get the best out of their people in changing circumstances, to simply acting as an independent, trusted sounding board.

The teams I work with in fall into three broad categories:

New Teams

Even the most experienced team managers have their work cut out in the early stages of forming and galvanising a new team. Here, the baseline is set for the culture and behaviour of a team, their relationships with one another and the level of commitment to the purpose of the team.

It's easy for the manager to get drawn in to the minutiae of the team's activities, and a trusted coach will be in a position to offer impartiality, an arm's length perspective and consistent support.

Changing Teams

For some reason, the word "change" seems to have taken on some very negative connotations in the UK, maybe because we handle it so badly. The alternative is more of the same, which for most organisations is tantamount to a death wish.

How change is presented to a team is critical to how they treat it. Whether it's a change of personnel, a change of purpose, or the way things are done (this includes everything from cigarette breaks to reporting procedures), the manager will meet resistance and inertia from some and gung-ho enthusiasm from others.

Keeping the team's productivity on an even keel, maintaining communication and an eye on the goal can be challenging. Here a coach can keep the manager focused on the outcomes, help to resolve niggles along the way and ensure that the message is consistent for the whole team.



Under-performing Teams

All teams go through a phase where performance levels dip. It is the manager's ability to identify the causes and direct the solutions that are critical to the team's recovery.

Teams fail for a multitude of reasons, and the majority never makes it to that magical state where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Many organisations and managers are prepared to put up with this sorry state of affairs, in spite of the costs in real terms of carrying the dead weight, as well as undermining the self-belief and professional development of their people. For many teams, the answers are simple, but are very unlikely to be found in training manuals, traditional courses or management books.

A coach who understands the team and who offers support rather than judgement will make real differences to performance levels and commitment.

In summary

The coaching approach to team performance is a good use of time and money. It is:

- long-term rather than the duration of a standard training course
- one-to-one discussion rather than a group session
- tailored to the needs of the manager
- led by real events and issues instead of a training agenda
- relevant and immediately applicable to the team
- built on a basis of trust and understanding

Rosie Garwood supplies support services to managers in all sectors. Take advantage of the free Top Tips at www.reflectionconsulting.co.uk to improve motivation and performance and sign up for her e-problem page.