2 What is a coaching culture? The key ingredients

Introduction

For executive coaching to progress successfully to the next stage of its development, it needs to move beyond the confidential one-to-one personal development process to be a key ingredient in, and contributor to, the organization’s development and the creation of higher organizational performance and stakeholder benefit. One senior executive I spoke to said: ‘It is time for coaching to come out of the closet and be part of the bigger change journey.’

In this chapter, I present an overarching framework for how coaching can approach this transformational threshold in its own development, and how coaching and organizational benefit can be linked much more strongly. This will then provide the scaffolding for the different elements that will be explored throughout this book. I end by providing a map for how each part of this coaching architecture is picked up in the different chapters of the book.

What is a coaching culture?

In my interviews I asked a number of people what they were trying to achieve in creating a coaching culture and their vision of what success would look like. I also have looked at the literature on coaching cultures, including Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005), Hardingham et al. (2004), Caplan (2003), and many others. From all these elements I have arrived at a new aspirational definition of a coaching culture:

A coaching culture exists in an organization when a coaching approach is a key aspect of how the leaders, managers, and staff engage and develop all their people and engage their stakeholders, in ways that create increased individual, team, and organizational performance and shared value for all stakeholders.
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To give more colour to this definition, I then reflected on my research with different companies to draw out what the different levels of an organizational coaching culture could be, using the five levels of culture, outlined in Chapter 3.

*Artefacts:* The organization espouses the importance of coaching in its key strategy and mission statements and coaching appears as a key competency and capability for all leaders and managers.

*Behaviours:* A coaching style of engaging is used in one-to-one as well as team meetings, as a way of encouraging both problem solving and continuous team and personal development. There is a focus on the collective endeavour of the team and the organization and its stakeholders.

*Mindsets:* There is a prevalent belief that you get the most out of people, not through telling them what to do, or through advocacy and explanation, but through engaging them with the issues and challenges and helping them think through the choices and options. There is a belief that nobody has all the answers, but through inquiring together we can arrive at better responses to new challenges than by thinking alone.

*Emotional ground:* The mood of the organization is one of energy, with high levels of personal engagement and responsibility, where every challenge is an opportunity for new learning, and problems are addressed through engaged relationships. There is high challenge and high support for all employees with a real focus on helping individuals and teams to realize their individual and collective potential.

*Motivational roots:* At the well-spring of such a culture are people who are both committed to their own lifelong learning and development, and who believe in other people and their potential to learn continuously. There is also a belief that collective performance can improve through learning and development. These motivational roots are also fuelled by a belief in the power of dialogue and collective exploration. There is a belief that together we can create ways forward better than any of us can do by ourselves.

This book will explore the steps necessary to move towards this being a reality in many different types of organization.

**Developmental stages in creating a coaching culture**

Surveys indicate that relatively few organizations believe they are deriving the full benefits of executive coaching (Jarvis et al., 2006; McDermott et al.,
2007; BlessingWhite, 2008; Peterson, 2010b). The reasons that are given include:

- lack of clarity of the purpose of coaching in the organization;
- lack of focus on where and when coaching would be most beneficial;
- inconsistent quality of coaches;
- absence of good contracting between coach, coachee, and line manager; and
- lack of good evaluation of outcomes.

Writing primarily from an American perspective, Peterson (2010b) suggests that organizations typically go through four stages in their use of external coaches:

1. *ad hoc* coaching – driven by individuals;
2. managed coaching driven by a champion or sponsor;
3. proactive coaching driven by business need;
4. strategic coaching driven by organizational talent strategy.

The first stage is often driven by the enthusiasm of a few senior executives who have found coaching personally beneficial and recommend it to others, and who locate coaches by personal recommendation or through people they know. Suddenly, the organization can discover that they are spending a large amount of money on coaching, which is being paid for from local budgets, with no financial or quality monitoring. When Maxine Dolan was put in charge of coaching at Tesco, she was shocked to discover that the organization was spending over £1 million a year on coaching with no way of monitoring the appropriateness or the effectiveness of this spend.

In the second stage, organizations often appoint a key individual, either a senior executive or a senior member of the HR or learning and development department, to lead the production of a more central plan for coaching and expenditure in this area. This usually moves on to a recommendation for coaching to be better linked to the business agenda and more proactive in who should have coaching and when (stage 3 of the model above). In time, organizations may then target their coaching spend even more by linking their coaching to (a) the leadership, leadership development, and talent strategies, and (b) the organization’s culture change and other current change processes. This takes the organization into Peterson’s stage 4, where there is a strategic coaching approach.

Knights and Poppleton, in their research for CIPD (CIPD, 2008), argue that these stages need not be sequential, and that later stages are not necessarily better, as it depends on the type of organization and its developmental
needs. They observed three ways of structuring coaching services, which they termed:

- *centralized and structured*: providing a structured, standard, and consistent service across the organization;
- *organic and emergent*: where the aim is to be responsive to specific needs and preferences in the organization as they arise;
- *tailored middle ground*: where the organization chooses a mix of the above two approaches, so as to have some consistency in service, while responding to specific organizational contexts and needs.

The authors concluded their research by stating:

> One size clearly does not fit all in relation to organizing coaching services. What’s important is having a clear understanding of the organizational context for coaching, then establishing the enabling processes that are congruent with that understanding and intent.  
> (Knights and Poppleton, 2008: 10)

I agree with Knights and Poppleton that ‘one size does not fit all’, and their argument for the approach to organizing coaching being tailored to the needs and style of the particular organization. However, I think they are in danger of creating fixed polarities between the centralized and organic and also between the structured and emergent. I would contend that sooner or later, it is necessary for every organization that invests in coaching to transcend both of these ‘either-ors’. This does not mean creating a ‘tailored middle ground’, but an approach that transcends the false dichotomy by creating three foundational pillars, which:

- provide a clear unifying coaching strategy, linked to the mission and current business strategy, while encouraging flexibility of coaching provision in different parts of the business and a constantly evolving, developing, and learning coaching approach;
- link coaching to the wider organizational culture change, while realizing that developing an organizational culture is never a linear journey from A to B. Rather, it is a journey that, at its best, discovers more about the culture and what needs changing as it attempts to bring about that change;
- have an integrating infrastructure that while giving clear direction and decisions on resources from the top and the centre, those at the top and centre are constantly learning and being informed by what is
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Developing the three pillars

Creating a robust and sustainable coaching strategy and culture requires it to be built on strong foundations. I would suggest that if any of these three key pillars is missing, there is a danger that coaching can become marginalized, or swept away in the next round of organizational cuts, restructuring or new initiatives.

1. Coaching strategy

The first pillar is creating a coaching strategy that is not just another policy document among hundreds of others in the organization, but one that is firmly grounded in the organizational mission, the current business strategy, the organizational development plan, and linked to all the people development policies (leadership, management, talent, etc.). This strategy needs to be developed collaboratively, constantly updated as the context and the practice change and develop, and communicated to everyone in the organization. Processes for doing this are explored in Chapter 3.

2. Aligning the coaching culture with the wider organizational culture change

The second pillar ensures that creating a coaching culture is aligned to the wider changes in the organizational culture. For any organization to thrive it
needs to be developing its strategy at the same speed or faster than the world in which it operates is changing. However, the even bigger challenge for the organization is to develop its culture at the same speed as it is developing its strategy. Organizational cultures are pervasive and inherently conservative and can be a drag on all forms of strategic change unless they are carefully developed. Creating a coaching culture is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. A coaching culture is a key part of creating a more general culture of continual learning and development that will enhance the capabilities and capacities of all staff, managers, leaders, teams, and the organization as a whole. Learning and development and increased capability and capacity are also not ends in themselves, but in service of individual, team, and organization performance. High performance, in turn, is in service of creating greater shared value for the organization and all its key stakeholders. Ways of aligning the contribution of coaching to the important task of developing the organizational culture are also explored in Chapter 3.

3. Coaching infrastructure

The third pillar that anchors all the activity of coaching at work is establishing and maintaining the necessary governance, management, and involvement of all parties that will provide a sustainable, robust, and integrated operation. There are several key aspects of such an infrastructure:

* A strong sponsorship/steering group. This group ideally needs to include: a representative of the senior leadership team; the HR director; senior executives from the different business units and functions of the organization; the coach manager; and some young potential leaders of the future who represent an important customer group of the coaching. It is important that this group has both clout and visibility in order to demonstrate that coaching is not a temporary project, or merely an HR initiative, but located at the centre of the organization and driven by senior line managers. The sponsorship/steering group needs to act as the board for all coaching activities providing the high level decisions, scrutiny and alignment to the key strategies and development of the business. Like all good boards, they should be involved in creating the coaching strategy, allocate the resources and drive quality evaluation and review processes.

* A management group. The management group need to drive, co-ordinate and integrate all the coaching processes and activities. The composition of this group will depend on the size of the organization and the stage of development in coaching. At a minimum there needs to be a full-time coach manager or part-time coaching champion. However, over-reliance on one central driving force is dangerous and full of risk. This person will soon become
over-burdened and the coaching enterprise will become too dependent on their efforts, capability and retention. If they leave, the development of a coaching culture can go backwards or flounder. A small effective group is far preferable.

A community of practice. Good governance and management are critical but not sufficient, and the third key part of this pillar is a community of practice of all those who are providing the coaching. This community, as I will show throughout this book, needs to be more than a group of trained and quality suppliers. They need to be true partners in creating a coaching culture committed to the development and success of the wider organization. They need to be motivated, engaged, integrated and aligned to the business agenda. Their commitment must not just be to the individuals they coach, and the development of their own practice, but to the development of the coaching culture and community within their organization and how it learns and develops. To create such a community requires investment of time and resources. Throughout Chapters 4–10 I will show how such a community can be established and sustained, with examples from organizations that have successfully done so.

The three pillars are rarely put in place before an organization begins to establish coaching activity. Indeed, many of the organizations studied only addressed the need for these foundations once they realized they had a lot of coaching activity, without any effective integration or evaluation.

The seven steps

In Coaching, Mentoring and Organizational Consultancy: Supervision and Development (Hawkins and Smith, 2006), we suggested seven steps that are necessary for establishing a full coaching culture, while recognizing that very few organizations, if any, had successfully put them all into place. Since writing that book, I have interviewed, studied, and engaged with a wide variety of organizations, from several different countries and in different places on the journey to creating a coaching culture. In the light of what has emerged from these encounters, I have slightly amended the naming of some of the steps, while mostly finding validation for the approach and the importance for all seven steps.

In the six years since writing Coaching, Mentoring and Organizational Consultancy, there have been many developments, particularly in team coaching and ways of harvesting the organizational learning from the many rich and varied coaching conversations. Both these activities now feature strongly in Step 4.
The seven steps do not necessarily become established in the order they appear, although my research did confirm that this was the most frequently used sequence. In Chapter 11, I will explore different routes and order in establishing these steps.

One of the big challenges in sustaining the journey to becoming a coaching culture is that it is all too easy to focus on the many inputs and forget the outputs and outcomes. Like many long-term initiatives, the costs of investing in creating a coaching culture are mainly at the early stages, whereas the benefits are accrued further down the road. Having invested large amounts in the individual coaching of senior executives or developing a quality community of internal coaches, some organizations become impatient if they do not see the business benefits. I have helped a number of senior executives develop both patience and a bigger picture by showing them the seven-step model, and how the output benefits and business outcomes only start to emerge when the coaching efforts have been supported by some of the later steps in the coaching culture journey (Figure 2.2).

The depth of the foundation

Having established the seven steps, built on and supported by the three pillars, we do not have sufficient for a full coaching culture. If the organization stops here it will have created a strong infrastructure and lots of coaching activity and approaches, but be in danger of confusing producing quantity with ensuring quality.

Once coaching is underway it is important that the skills are constantly developed, the coaching relationships deepened, with the support of on-going development opportunities, coaching supervision, and quality evaluation processes. These ways of deepening the practice of coaching and the quality of what it produces are addressed in Chapters 12 and 13. They provide the bedrock on which the pillars and the seven steps sit (Figure 2.3).

Putting the framework together

This framework provides a map for both coaching strategy in organizations and the steps to creating a coaching culture. It provides also a map through the book. Figure 2.4 shows how each part of this framework is covered by different chapters.

It is important, however, to remember the map is not the territory and the process is never simple and linear. Organizations I talked with constantly described putting a coaching culture in place as being more like spinning plates than progressing step by step. None of the elements remains still and constant.
Figure 2.2 Developing a coaching culture – outcomes.

1. Developing external coaching provision
   - Increase in individual leadership capacity

2. Developing internal coaching capacity
   - Increase in distributed leadership

3. Leaders actively supporting coaching endeavours
   - Develops an increase in the organizational learning

4. Developing team coaching and organizational learning

5. Embedded in HR and performance management processes

6. Coaching becomes the dominant style of managing
   - Higher engagement with all stakeholders

7. Coaching becomes how we do business with all our stakeholders
   - Higher creation of shared value with all stakeholders
Figure 2.3  Coaching strategy: steps to creating a coaching culture.
Figure 2.4 Coaching strategy: steps to creating a coaching culture map of the book.
as the next step is put in place, but need to be attended to and adapted in response to the fast changing world around them. However, a number of organizations reported how useful it was to have the map, as it had helped them stand back and see where they were on their journey, notice what they were not seeing, provide new avenues they had not yet explored, as well as recognize all that they had achieved. Several organizations also found the framework very helpful in educating their senior leaders, in seeing how all the different activities and initiatives fit together and how the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.