Is it possible for managers to coach effectively in a hostile culture?

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Abstract

This paper proposes that it is possible for a manager to effectively coach their team, regardless of the culture that they are operating within. The piece of qualitative research uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to provide insight into how a group of managers make sense of their experience of managerial coaching (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), with data gathered from six purposely selected face-to-face interviews and the results delivered through thematic analysis (Langdridge, 2007). The findings demonstrate that when managers adopt coaching in a toxic culture, they overcome the surrounding negative forces by creating a sub-culture that is supportive to their coaching. A micro-bubble that protects their team from the wider environment. An unfriendly culture can have a secondary effect and become a motivator that reinforces a manager's determination to follow a coaching approach.

Introduction

Managerial coaching is growing in popularity (Hudson and McLean, 2012), and is providing companies with increased flexibility in an increasingly competitive world (Joo, Sushko and McLean, 2012). An organisation's culture can support, be neutral to, or discourage a coaching initiative (Phillips, 2004), and it is widely agreed that a coaching culture provides the most supportive environment for managers to coach (Wileman, 2013), one which encourages trust and where staff feel comfortable to ask questions (Whitmore, 2009). Cultures that are believed to discourage coaching include those that are hierarchical (Anderson, 2013), or are based on fear (Dixey, 2014), both features which are prevalent within a traditional automotive culture, making it the antithesis of what is considered as supportive.

Despite the growing popularity of managerial coaching in the workplace, there is still only a limited amount of research into how it works, which factors influence its effectiveness (Ellinger, Beattie and Hamlin, 2014), and limited knowledge on the behaviours that are needed for a manager to coach (Anderson, 2013). The impact of a culture has had little research to date, but Hall (2009) believes an organisation's climate will influence whether manager coaching will work, and Ladyshewsky (2010) proposes organisations need to change beliefs related to coaching and that it is important to create a climate that supports learning for line-manager initiatives to be effective. It is also understood that the culture of an organisation will impact whether the manager can change to adopt coaching behaviours (Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002), but Anderson identified that further research is needed into what the real cultural impact is to a managerial coaching initiative (2013).

The automotive industry presents an attractive base for the research as there is no known academic research into coaching within its organisations, and it represents a specific culture that is the antithesis of a coaching culture; being one that is hierarchical and masculine. A masculine culture is one that exhibits game-playing within the management team, consists of departments working independently from each other, and one that doesn't encourage

change, so the 'status quo' is considered the best way forwards (Beach, 2010). The automotive industry also contains very short-term, cyclical sales-based companies which, themselves, demonstrate a certain culture which would be considered negative to coaching activity (Phillips, 2011).

Literature review

The concept of using managers to coach employees first appeared in the literature in the 1950s (Evered and Selman, 1989), and has been growing in strength over the last ten years (Hudson and McLean 2012). It has become more popular as businesses have striven to increase flexibility and enable their employees to develop (Bewany 2015) and has started to become a key factor in an organisation's competitiveness (Joo, Sushko and McLean, 2012). I agree with Kim (2014) that the information that's available is mainly from practitioner literature, with less focus having been directed at the subject from the academic community to date.

Researching the subject becomes complicated as there are different forms of terminology being used around managerial coaching (Bond and Seneque, 2013), which vary across organisations (Anderson, Rayner and Schyns, 2009) and can create confusion (Joo, Sushko and McLean, 2012). For this research 'managerial coaching' refers to line managers coaching their direct reports within the day-to-day workplace.

Given the prevalence of names given to managers coaching, it's not surprising to see that there are also a range of definitions available. There are references to whether it should be considered a form of coaching as Anderson (2013) suggests there is an overlap between managerial and mainstream coaching but isn't able to provide clarity on how large that overlap is. Ladyshewski (2010) proposes that a managerial coach isn't in fact a coach, but a manager who uses some coaching skills within their management repertoire. In contradiction, Rogers (2012) believes that managerial and executive coaching have a lot in common. I suggest managerial coaching is a specific form of coaching and contains a subset of mainstream coaching behaviours that include developing skills, improving performance, agreeing actions and providing feedback (Anderson, 2013). As such, management coaching aligns closely to traditional skills and performance coaching, allowing focus on the company's objectives as well as those of the coachee (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006), and is strongly linked to the achievement of performance standards (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). There is a need for more clarity on this within the coaching community though.

To consider the impact of culture on a managerial coaching initiative, it is important first to consider what is meant by the term culture. I support Clutterbuck, Megginson and Bajer's (2016) summary when they said:

> 'Culture is a unique set of beliefs and assumptions that were adopted by its members over time and which lead to consistent patterns of meaning and behaviour' (p.5)

They believe it is the beliefs held by the individuals within the organisation, which ultimately determine the culture. This concept is evident in many pieces of literature, Hofstede (2011) considers them to be central when he refers to the mind-set that is held by the individuals determining how the organisation behaves, and Steed (2013) discusses them as rules under which a culture operates. I consider these beliefs to be the basis of the behaviours that are exhibited, and encouraged, about coaching and take many forms including a positive focus towards people development; the launch of new initiatives (Mumford, 1997), and the behavioural patterns seen between a manager and his direct report (Hofstede, 1984).

There is consistent evidence that a coaching culture provides the best environment for managers (Wileman, 2013). Whitmore (2009) describes this as culture that listens and learns and one that encourages people to be open, Steed (2013) focuses on the use of questions and challenge. It is one that is founded on a belief of potential (Phillips, 2011); and one where a coaching style is used through all areas of the business (Anderson, Rayner and Schyns, 2009).

There is very little literature available on the subject of automotive culture but Hofstede's (2011) research into cultural dimensions provides a useful way to benchmark it, using my own personal experience of the environment. Reviewing the traditional automotive sales culture against these features shows restrained environments where the group is followed; short-term orientation with a heavy focus on the past; strong individual focus where the task is more important than the relationship; clear risk avoidance strategies; hierarchies with power imbalances, and masculine cultures where strength can be displayed through assertive behaviours. The principles of a masculine culture are supported by the findings of Beach (2010) who saw it displayed frequent game-playing; top-down interactions with infrequent open discussion; departments that compete between each other; rule-following being rewarded; frequent employee burnout and a strong belief in the status quo. I believe the continuing prevalence of men holding senior positions and very few women appearing at the board level compound the masculine influence on the culture of today's automotive businesses.

It is interesting to consider Whitmore's comparison of management style against Maslow's hierarchy of needs (2009) when considering the difference between an automotive and other cultures. In this positioning he equates a coaching culture to the top two levels of 'self-esteem' and 'self-actualisation' while in contrast an automotive one, showing power imbalance, a dictatorial management style and a focus on the past would be mapped against the bottom levels of the triangle. Demonstrating the differences between the two.

Considering the impact of culture on coaching, it can either support, be neutral or discourage a coaching initiative (Phillips, 2004), and its associated business practices will affect whether a coaching management style can be achieved (Hall, 2009). Clutterbuck, Megginson and Bajer (2016) take this a stage further and suggest the environment can have a greater impact on coaching than anything the manager brings to the table, inferring a negative effect from an unfriendly environment. Dixey's (2014) research investigated this link at length and concluded that a culture typified by my industry would render coaching impossible.

> *'when the organisational culture instils a sense of fear and coaching becomes viewed as criticism and scrutiny, individuals close down, making any effort at coaching futile' (Dixey, 2014, p.74)*

In contradiction to this, the research carried out by Phillips in 2004 demonstrate the creation of a 'room for manoeuvre' (p.65) area where the managers rely on their own pro-activity to coach but potentially risk marginalisation for breaking the wider corporate rules. Converse opinions as to whether managerial coaching would prove to be viable in a toxic cultural environment providing an ideal opening for this research.

Methodology

My personal paradigm played a big role in choosing the right methodology for this research, my constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology lead to the belief that each participant would have created their own understanding of their coaching and environment depending on their personal experiences, and it was this that I wanted to understand in order to gain a real understanding of managerial coaching. Given this objective and following

consideration of both a case study given the specific cultural context, and narrative research due to its basis on the meaning made from a situation (Shinebourne, 2011), I decided Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provided the best method of providing insight into how the managers make sense of the experience of managerial coaching (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Given that coaching is a relatively new phenomenon within the automotive industry, my first challenge was to find appropriate participants, a selection of automotive managers who are actively using coaching with their teams on a day-to-day basis. I felt it was important that the sample was sufficient to allow an evaluation of the impact of an industry culture, and the results did not just show an opinion from one organisation, so my initial intention was to interview five individuals from different companies. The recruitment process proved harder than expected and required several different approaches to identify individuals which resulted in the final homogenous sample being six individuals, all of whom had extensive automotive industry experience.

With an overall aim to understand how each person was personally affected by the coaching, I chose an open-ended question style which allowed me to have some consistency and ensure key areas were covered, but also provided flexibility to move according to the participant's dialogue (Langdridge, 2007). All the interviews were between 60 and 90 minutes in duration and were recorded using two different recording devices. Following transcription, the data was analysed using thematic analysis (Langdridge, 2007) and the three-step IPA coding method recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) which considered the data in terms of descriptions, concepts and linguistic cues. For all three types I was looking to identify the facts that were interesting within the data and used the opportunity to ask questions about what the data was saying (Bazeley, 2013) developing my reading of the meaning I felt was being applied to the experience by the participant (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Once the coding exercise was complete, I grouped all the codes together to develop emergent themes from the data. Although as a method IPA does not propose visual mapping to review the codes and identify patterns between them (Braun and Clarke, 2013), I chose to use it as it is something that I use daily and am very familiar with. With the process, I looked to determine those themes most pertinent to my research objective and which would shed the best light on the experiences of the managers (Braun and Clarke, 2013), a very active process during which I was conscious of the role I was taking in the process. As directed by IPA, each participant's interview was analysed individually before common themes were considered (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012).

To ensure the bias from my personal beliefs was minimised throughout the research process itself, I used a reflective journal to note my thoughts (Shinbourne, 2011), and implemented several initiatives to provide other opportunities for specific reflection. Given that Walliman's (2016) four factors of research critique aren't valid for IPA, I followed the lead of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) and considered the ways Yardley (2000) proposed to measure validity for IPA specifically achieving sensitivity of context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence and finally impact and importance.

To ensure my research was ethical, I considered both confidentiality and procedural ethics. Confidentiality was maintained by amending the names of all my participants from the initial recordings onwards and ensuring that none of the quotes could be tied back to the individuals, their organisations or the automotive brands they represent. I also obtained consent forms on the data collected and its usage from all the participants and completed an ethics checklist.

Findings

Three themes emerged from my study into the experiences of managers coaching in the automotive industry: coaching style; personal motivation; and external environment. Each of the three themes had several sub themes.   This paper focusses on just four of the sub-themes that emerged across the three main themes and were deemed relevant for this paper as they provide understanding on how the managers have dealt with the impact of their cultural environment.

Automotive culture

Given the assumptions I'd made regarding the culture in automotive organisations, and my focus on the impact that culture would have on a manager's coaching activity, it was important to ascertain participant interpretations of the environments they operate within. All of the participants corroborated my interpretation of the automotive industry, describing it as *'old fashioned'* and an *'old boys network'*, and confirmed a masculine environment where things continue to be done as they always have been.

Nick described the sink or swim nature of the industry where *'[the salesmen] might last a year before, three strikes […] therefore you will either succeed or you won't'.* This approach creates a culture of fear. Harry experiences mistakes being seen as a weakness rather than it being *'alright to make mistakes as long as you learn from those mistakes'* as you would expect in a coaching culture.

A blame culture leads on from that fear of mistakes, as Mike described it, one where people *'put a barrier up and say that's not my fault, that's their fault'*. Adam reinforced this environment with confirmation that he wouldn't speak to one of his previous managers about a problem but would try and resolve it himself as what he's *'going to get if I go and talk to him will be – you'd just get a right ticking off'.*

There are early signs of cultural change within the industry though. Adam identifies the *'need to move to the next level'* and confirms that in *'Another five, ten years'* time it's not going to be like it is now. It is changing at a fast rate of knots'*. He can see a new breed of managers coming into the business and a different approach to recruitment as they look for more of a coach than a traditional, dictatorial manager. He does not believe the change to be consistent though, with many locations still being dictatorial.

What is coaching?

The participants were very clear on what coaching means to them. They see it as a mechanism to empower their staff and provide them with the confidence and opportunity to find their own solutions to problems. Simon described it as *'about developing people, helping, getting them to come up with ideas, solutions and bits themselves'*, an interactive process where the coachee identifies options and fine tunes them through dialogue with their manager until they can progress independently. They are using the technique to achieve key objectives, to develop their team and to create ownership of the actions agreed.

Using coaching to draw the answer out of the staff, rather than providing a solution allows them to develop their people and enhance their skills. Harry described coaching is being about *'self-discovery'* and that *'people learn when they're going through the train of thought themselves'*. Luke also described the link between coaching and achieving potential through increasing self-awareness in terms of *'getting them to think about different aspects of themselves, their own strengths and weaknesses'*.

Adam also recognises that coaching allows him to pull the answers from his staff by asking them what they think the solution should be, asking *'OK, what about, what do you think?'* and uses tools to support the result generation, *'If you had five things you could do with a customer at that point, what would be those five things?'* Harry takes a more formal approach to his coaching and sees it as *'using things like the GROW model'* developed by Whitmore (2009).

One of the participants had a different view of coaching. Nick acknowledged coaching was not just another mechanism of telling the coachee what he wants them to do, but he brings a more instructional element into his interactions than the other participants. When he states, *'leading them in the right direction'* he is implying that he is still the one who can supply the answers, rather than the coachee.

Coaching relationships

Many of the participants purported that the relationships they build with their direct reports, and the level of trust they establish, are key to their ability to deliver effective coaching interventions; this is also reflected in the literature that show developing trust is a key part of a coaching relationship (Ellinger, Beattie and Hamlin, 2014) and that to develop trust a manager must renounce his controlling position and not dictate to their staff (Ladyshewski, 2010).

Simon reinforces this and believes that staff will be more likely to take benefit from coaching if it is *'based on the relationship and the trust element they've got with you'*. Harry believes that *'trust is huge'*.

Luke talks about trust being *'very important'* and that it's essential *'that they can talk to you'*. This links to the fact that trust is key to being able to talk openly and to do that a person must believe that someone does not want to harm you, i.e. that both parties feel comfortable to be able to say what they think without any fear of retribution. This is something the participants believe is needed for successful coaching and is shown by their descriptions of allowing mistakes to be learning opportunities.

Adam thinks that *'if you're dictatorial you don't get that whatsoever, that people are frightened of making mistakes and they will hide something'*

Cultural impact

Unexpectedly, data arose surrounding the impact of their personal experiences of interactions with key people and the cultures of the businesses they have worked for. This was shown to be a powerful motivator, either as a positive influence such as training, or as a negative one like a dictatorial boss. The respondents discussed how different environments have provided them with types of behaviour to either follow or avoid.

Adam talked about the dictatorial nature of his first dealership and how it *'was completely the opposite to how I was'*. The experience didn't persuade him it was the correct way to manage but provided *'a good learning curve'* as it enabled him to learn that it was not *'how I want to do things'*. Simon's experience shows similar cultures where *'it's very high-pressure selling. The managers were quite ruthless with sales people and customers'*.

Nick's negative experiences have also had a strong influence on the coaching he's chosen to employ with his team *'I believe that I've had enough bad experiences and enough experiences within the industry or within my working life to know to treat people how you should be treated'*.

Considering the requirement to have a trust-based relationship, Adam's experience has shown that *'If the attitude is wrong from a management team level you're not going to get that confidence and trust from the people below'.*

Some of the participants have also experienced more supportive organisations which have provided them as individuals with coaching and leadership development support. Simon comments about the provision of the training isn't enough and that with one company he worked for *'it was something I think that they had to put their managers through just so that they had their programs running'.* This was seen to demonstrate lip service rather than a genuine attempt to support development.

Discussion

The participants confirmed my perceptions that the automotive industry has historically demonstrated a masculine, short-term and frequently fear-based culture. Luke referred to it as *'old fashioned'*, Harry as an *'old boys network'*. This type of culture can affect a manager's beliefs in their responsibility for learning and development (Campbell and Evans, 2015) and as Nick outlined, demonstrates an industry that can follow of a 'sink or swim' approach (Hunt and Weintraub, 2016). What is interesting is their confidence in how much the industry is changing, and the desire that is emerging to move from this traditional model to one that is more coaching friendly.

All but one of the participants share a clear common understanding of coaching to be improving an employee's performance by empowering them to find their own solutions and become more self-sufficient (Connor and Pakora, 2012). Their definition also fits closely with Hunt and Weintraub (2016) who observed managerial coaching to be a learning dialogue intended to improve both current and future performance and using a discussion that focuses not only on what's been achieved but also the process the staff member intends to follow to achieve the results. This provided confidence that the respondents were managerial coaches and therefore it is valid to consider how the cultures they have experienced have impacted their ability to develop the initiative.

Considering the impact of culture, and their definition of the environments they are operating in, the managers appear to be coaching despite the prevalence of fear, blame and short-term masculinity. Although a supportive culture is ideal (Wileman, 2013; Ferrar, 2006), the participants have found it is possible to coach without one if they have a coaching mindset and can establish trust with their team. They have achieved this through the creation of sub-cultures which are based on their personal behaviours and relationships with their staff, these have had more impact on their ability to coach than the larger organisational environment (Evered and Selman, 1989; Dalton, 2005). This mirrors a solution Rogers (2012) encourages for managers in hostile environments.

The sub-cultures these participants developed are environments that are free from fear and blame. When there is a coaching-supportive culture, mistakes are learning opportunities (Hunt and Weintraub, 2016), while in a typical automotive culture, they become something to fear. Where there is fear, as Mike demonstrated, a blame culture can occur, which can lead the leadership to create a point of blame for a mistake or problem to show that it has been addressed, rather than determine the root cause of the error (Dalton, 2005). This culture will lead people to put themselves first and avoid attention (Rogers, 2012), and it is not one where a manager can coach as the staff will not be open with their questions and feel they will be punished if they make a mistake (Hunt and Weintraub, 2002). All the managers confirmed that trust was an essential component to a coaching relationship (Campbell and Evans, 2015), reinforcing their objective to create a safe environment (Whitmore, 2009). The trust that is needed is not simply from the employee perspective, though; as Harry

highlighted, the manager should also trust that the member of staff has the capability to deliver on the task being agreed (Flaherty, 2010; Hunt and Weintraub, 2016).

Most of the literature only considers culture in terms of whether it is supportive or not towards a coaching initiative. These participants have shown that it can also have a second effect and become a motivator for managers to want to adopt the style, and on occasion give them the strength to fight for what they believe in. Ellinger and Bostrom (2002) considered the effect of experience on a person's mindset towards coaching when they saw a significant impact from a superior manager's behaviour. Further examples have been documented to support this by Campbell and Evans (2015), with a manager referring to the positive influence his learning opportunities had had in motivating him to provide the same openings for his team, and by Hunt and Weintraub (2016), with an individual for whom their motivation was driven by a negative experience.

'I don't ever want to do what she [the former manager] did to me' (p.49)

The impact of experience appears to be an emerging area of interest, with most of the research discussion having occurred within the last couple of years. Combining my findings with those studies, it creates an area that would benefit from further understanding.

Conclusion

This research has provided a better understanding of what it is like for managers to coach in unsupportive environments, by focusing on the automotive industry, and through that, offers some interesting insight into the impact of a hostile environment on managerial coaching.

Given the context of this study and my experience of the industry, it could have delivered participants whose coaching attempts were being thwarted by the environment (Dixey, 2015), or were not actually coaching at all, despite their beliefs (Rogers, 2012). Instead, with one exception, the interviewees consisted of a group of managers who are dedicated to their coaching, are exhibiting the skills that correlate with other findings on managerial coaching. The commonality of their overall definitions on managerial coaching, provided confidence that the study was considering true managerial coaching. Their objectives include developing employees (Whitmore, 2009); empowering the staff to learn for themselves (Connor and Pakora, 2012) and the skills covered asking the managers what they think rather than telling them what to do (Bewany, 2015) and creating self-realisation.

The participants' perceptions of the wider automotive industry mirrored my assumptions, of it being a masculine culture where mistakes are not tolerated, and blame is apparent. But instead of that having the expected negative effect, where the culture proved stronger than the manager's beliefs, they have won the battle and found a way to create coaching friendly environments. This contradicts Dixey's (2013) findings that managerial coaching will be ineffective in a hostile external environment. The participants agreed it is essential for a manager to be able to develop a trusting relationship to coach their staff (Fillery-Travis and Lane, 2006), and a culture where mistakes are reprimanded will undermine that trust. What these managers substantiate though, is that an unsupportive culture does not create a barrier to the coaching occurring. They have shown how with drive and determination, a manager will simply create a sub-culture within his immediate environment that is supportive and trusting (Rogers, 2012; Dalton, 2005), and as Simon described, use himself as a barrier against the more hostile wider environment (Hunt and Weintraub, 2016), so enabling the relationships that are required.

The strong desire seen in these participants to follow this approach has also been influenced by that hostile culture. In the same way that a positive experience can assist a manager in

their coaching journey, the negative behaviours they have been subjected to have reinforced their determination to take a different approach with their teams (Campbell and Evans, 2015). This is a secondary impact of culture that hasn't previously been actively considered.

In summary, this study reinforces the view that a coaching culture is ideal but demonstrates that it is not essential. These learnings might prove useful to organisations who have hostile cultures but would like to change by showing it would be possible for managers to start developing coaching in pockets, even in these environments, if they were to provide them with the flexibility and autonomy they need to develop their own sub-cultures (Evered and Selman, 1989).

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