Coaching and Mentoring in Small to Medium Sized Enterprises in the UK – factors that affect success and a possible solution.

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Abstract

This paper, adopts a case study approach in order to examine the issues relating to the deployment of a coaching and mentoring intervention within the context of a specific UK based small and medium-sized enterprise (SME). The SME coaching and mentoring research agenda is highlighted as an area urgently needing attention given its economic impact. This paper seeks to initiate this debate. The pre-eminence of culture within an organisational context is analysed in order to establish its uniqueness and impact on coaching and mentoring deployment. A number of barriers to effective coaching and mentoring within this context are also identified as issues that need to be incorporated within an intervention if it is to be successful. A coaching and mentoring programme was developed to incorporate these findings and provide a starting point to address the SME research chasm.

Key Words: SME, coaching, mentoring, barriers, culture.

Introduction: the objectives of the research

The intention of this paper is to outline a suggested approach to developing a government funded, coaching and mentoring programme within a small to medium sized enterprise (SME) operating within the UK securities industry. The selection of this particular organisation is significant for several reasons. Firstly, the importance of SMEs to the UK economy is overwhelming, with organisations employing less than 250 people making up 99.8% of UK companies, and accounting for 52% of turnover and 55.6% employment in the private sector (DTI, 2003). Further Zimmer and Scarborough (1994) stated that this century would dawn with the greatest number of small businesses ever and over the last two decades new SMEs have been identified by most western governments as significant components of economic growth in terms of job and wealth creation according to Holmund and Kock (1998), Kuratko and Hodgetts (1995), Hodgetts and Kuratko (1995) and Birley and Westhead (1989).

Secondly, given this economic significance, there is a virtual absence of existing research into the effects of coaching and mentoring on SMEs and their employees. Leading researchers tend to focus on larger organisations and interventions, for example the work of Megginson and Clutterbuck (1995), Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002), Hay (1999) and Whitmore (2002) typify this trend. One explanation for this is that the UK generally has been slow to capitalise on the SME market unlike the USA and Japan, which stimulated and exploited independent entrepreneurs (Nancarrow *et al* 1999). Consequently, according

to Hill (2001) it is little wonder that academic researchers are slowly turning their attention towards addressing the SME research agenda.

Further it will be contended that the size of this type of organisation can provide an excellent opportunity to examine the effects of a coaching and mentoring intervention, sometimes avoiding the complexities that larger organisations innately posses. Supporting this argument Storey (1994), citing the work of Wynarczyk et al (1993), contends that too often the large firm model is taken as given and the small firm is assumed to be a "scaled-down" version of a larger organisation. Further, Hill (2001) argues that it is widely acknowledged that SMEs are not just 'little big businesses' but in fact have their own particular characteristics which affect the way they operate and which largely determine their preoccupations and concerns as evidenced in the work of Carson and Cromie (1989).

I will also postulate that organisational behaviour is a central tenet in identifying the issues within SMEs and designing a coaching and mentoring solution. If, organisational behaviour is "concerned with the behaviour of people within an organisational setting" and the factors that influence their performance, (Mullins, 1989, p.2), then my contention is that issues that emerge from a diagnosis of the organisation would serve to mirror the organisational imperatives of that business. Such factors as culture and its impact, the prevalence of owner-managers in setting behavioural standards and the company perception of external consultants are all permeated by complex organisational behaviour. Further I would suggest that any coaching or mentoring strategy that does not incorporate such factors into its inception will be fundamentally flawed and miss an opportunity to anchor the intervention in the reality of the company context.

First I outline the research methodology adopted within this paper. Then I move on to contextualise the case study organisation within its specific operating environment, because it provides an opportunity to examine the factors that influence its organisational behaviour. Then I move on to suggest that the pre-eminence of an SME's culture is a central issue that must be incorporated within any coaching or mentoring intervention if it is to be successful. Certainly the determinant and visible effects of culture on mentoring have been clearly identified in the work of Barham and Conway (1998) and justify its inclusion here. The significance of this argument revolves around the contention that all the other identified issues that need to be addressed within a coaching and mentoring strategy emanate from the prevalence of the culture of the company. I then postulate a coaching and mentoring strategy that addresses these issues by interweaving what I regard as good practice with existing coaching and mentoring theory. The interaction of theory and practice within this strategy will also serve to highlight the uniqueness of such a tailored coaching and mentoring intervention.

The research methodology

A case study methodology has been adopted as a research strategy because, as Eisenhardt (1989) and Sarantakos (1994) have postulated, it is particularly well suited to new or inadequately researched areas of study. This is certainly the case in terms of existing research that specifically addresses the issues of organisational capability for the deployment of coaching and mentoring schemes within an SME context. Yin (1984) further

contends that a case study methodology is the most appropriate approach for investigations where boundaries between what is being investigated and their context are not clearly evident. This is certainly the case concerning the organisational dimensions of SMEs and their use of coaching and mentoring since there is a lack of rigorous research in this area.

This methodology also involved an extensive literature review of research concerning various training and learning interventions within the SME context. The decision to use the above material was necessitated by the lack of existing research, which specifically examined the effects of coaching and mentoring in the SME community. The notable exception to this trend was the innovative work of Devins and Gold (2000). Unfortunately, this groundbreaking study did not provide an extensive analysis of the broad range of factors affecting the successful deployment of coaching and mentoring. Consequently, an analysis of the SME research that was available provides the basis for this paper's examination of organisational culture, existing barriers to deployment and the development of an SME specific coaching and mentoring strategy. The case study organisation itself was identified through this author's continuing coaching and mentoring work with the Welsh Development Agency, which funds a broad range of SME specific interventions.

Putting the specific working environment into context

The organisation operates as a Small to Medium Sized Enterprise (SME) in the securities industry, based in Wales but with national provision contracts. This SME sector of the security industry is very 'fragmented', to use Porter's (1980) terminology, in that no one company has a significant market share. This fragmented sector is also typically populated with a large number of privately - owned companies, and there is currently no market leader who is in a position to substantially influence industry outcomes. This is further supported by Carson et al (1995), who suggests that the small scale of SME operations means that they have little impact on their economic surroundings and lack the ability to modify environmental forces to their advantage. Consequently, this vacuum of influence was a key motivator in this organisation's drive to successfully deploy coaching and mentoring in support of a skills development programme. Their rationale was that if they could develop their human resources sufficiently, they would in turn provide a sound foundation to secure their independence and assure their continued trading in a very competitive market. Supporting this rationale is the work of Westhead and Storey (1996), Curran (1999) and Gray (1998), which highlights the uniqueness of SMEs compared to larger corporations in that their motivations tend to be more focused on survival and independence rather than organisational expansion.

Equally important in contextualising the ways SMEs operate is the work of Stanworth and Gray (1991) and Westhead and Storey (1997), because they suggest that managers of small firms are reluctant to take part in external training or support activity, which supports my 12 years of experience of delivering training within this market sector. Rather they favoured using individuals with whom they had an existing relationship as opposed to securing the services of external paid professionals (Curran and Blackburn, 1994; Gibb, 1997). There is also complimentary evidence from Curran and Blackburn (1999), to indicate that owner-managers are reluctant to accept any form of external advice, driven primarily by the characteristics that prompted them to become owner-managers in the first

place. Smith et al (2002) contend that these characteristics, namely extreme autonomy and independence, serve to delimit the perceived options open to owner-managers in even seeking out such advice. As a result of these factors, and my own experiences of working with this particular company, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that within SMEs generally there is little history of linking individual or organisational development with formal training/learning interventions. This suggestion is supported by the work of Bramley (1999), Centre for Enterprise (2001) and Robinson and Henry (2001), who all found that the norm within SMEs is for informal learning with a practical and experiential slant rather than a formal or accredited learning intervention. This is not to claim that learning and development do not happen, rather it supports the contention put forward by Ross (1993) that this activity does go on but is not labeled as such. These characteristics coalesce to produce a range of issues that must be addressed if the coaching and mentoring intervention is to be successful. It is to these issues that I now turn.

The emerging and potential issues identified – a case study

The first and perhaps singularly most impactful aspect of the range of issues identified for this particular organisation was the role their culture played in how the business operated. The seminal work of Choueke and Armstrong (2000) serves to highlight the significance that the organisational culture or 'climate' plays in the development, maintenance and success of an SME. This pre-eminence resonates from the fact that the culture 'emanated from the founders' (Choueke and Armstrong, 2000, p.233), and because of their proximity to the workers would serve to continually reinforce and mirror their values and norms of behaviour. Further support for this contention is provided by Schein (1985), who suggests that organisational culture has a number of different levels, some of which exhibit underlying beliefs. The prevalence of these underlying beliefs and values is significant because they are important factors in a SME's success and consequently this encourages owner-managers, in my experience, to develop them further. Goldsmith and Clutterbuck's (1984), research provides an underpinning rationale for this argument in that they concluded that a strong culture was a crucial element in maintaining the characteristic of a successful management style, which in turn permeates through to the success of the company.

The owner-managers ability to determine directly the acceptability and continuance of these 'standards' of behaviour and belief are a crucial element that needed to be incorporated in any coaching/mentoring intervention. Support for this argument comes from the work of Leppard and McDonald (1991) who stated that the omnipresence of the owner-manager has a significant impact on every aspect of an SME. Further supporting this premise, Thompson and McHugh (1995), argue that culture can be utilised by managers as a purposeful instrument of control and management. Therefore, it would be prudent to dovetail this instrument into the specific ways in which the intervention would support the introduction of the skills development programme. Significantly, because of its specificity to the small family business environment, Gersick et al (1997) justify the above strategy by contending that owner-managers are at the heart of the company through their role in laying the foundations of their business.

Another specific issue for this SME that needed to be incorporated into a coaching/mentoring intervention revolved around the perception of external consultants themselves. Hankinson (1994) argues that SMEs' perception of external consultants is a real barrier to the effective deployment of any type of development activity. External consultants were viewed as both expensive and disruptive, with little understanding of the company's real problems. This also manifested itself in a perception that consultants created problems and over-complicated issues that did not exist. In my experience of working with a number of SMEs this perception of external consultants is legitimised by a genuine lack of understanding of people development and general HR issues by this company's owner-manager. This however, is not an isolated case but serves to typify a general trend amongst SME owner-managers according to Smith and Whittaker (1998) Nash (1994), Down (1999) and Ram (2000), thus serving to reinforce its inclusion as an issue in this analysis.

Additionally a combination of potential issues affecting this company, relating to the deployment of coaching and mentoring, have been identified and consequently need to be included in this analysis. For a coaching and mentoring intervention to work effectively here, it not only needed to demonstrate real business benefits as outlined by Cannon (1997) and Blackburn and Kitching (1997), but also that it would not be overly procedure driven or bureaucratic (Gaunt, 1998). If these criteria could not be achieved then the company would typically reject the coaching and mentoring intervention as a viable solution. This is more significant than just rejecting this solution because it also highlights an antipathy to traditional forms of business planning. This is a well-known area of weakness within the SME arena (Martin and Staines, 1994; Joyce *et al.,* 1995; Storey and Westhead, 1996) because plans tend to be short term with little emphasis on the development of time-consuming or complex support mechanisms. Consequently, this would necessitate a significant change of perception of the need for planning by the owner-manager if a coaching and mentoring programme were to be successfully launched (Clutterbuck, 2001).

Supporting this change in perception could also help SMEs to recognise the amount of informal training and development they already provide as demonstrated by Curran et al (1997). This recognition could be used to stem their possible objections to taking on additional tasks, as they were already being undertaken. This could identify the obvious business benefits, as discussed earlier, that SMEs need to have demonstrated to them in order to get their support. Now I move on to examine how an integrated coaching and mentoring strategy can address the above issues.

The coaching and mentoring strategy

The first issue that needs to be addressed is the necessity to establish a common understanding of what coaching and mentoring means in the context of an SME. This is important because, without this understanding and common agreement, the owner-manager and the management team could easily sabotage the solution and reinforce the old command and control culture. Whitmore (2002) suggests that a coaching culture is the antithesis of command and control behaviours and thus reinforces its significance here, starting with providing an appropriate definition of coaching that establishes this commonality. This approach is based upon Merriam's (1983) suggestion that the definition

used within a scheme, describing the activity taking place will determine the extent of the mentoring and also, I would contend, the coaching found. I consequently decided to use the definition provided by Cleary (1995), because of the emphasis on an informal yet planned ongoing process for interacting with employees. The goal of coaching is to improve job performance by increasing employees' capability to managing their own performance.

Additionally Phillips' (1995) contention that such coaching would add value to the organisation by helping its employees grow and develop and thereby enhance overall production and profitability was also emphasised. This is because these are core areas of concern to an SME and if they can be woven into a deployment strategy they can only serve to ease the tensions concerning the effects on bottom line profit. In terms of mentoring, a more traditional definition in terms of hierarchy was used because it placed emphasis on trust, experience and supervision (Atkinson *et al* 1994). Further, Parsloe's (1992) distinction about the mentor being one step removed from direct skills or performance enhancement was also incorporated because it laid the foundations of the role the mentors would fulfil within this programme.

Once the definitions had been communicated to managers, small focus groups would need to be set up to identify what they wanted to achieve by using coaching and mentoring and also how they might be able to measure its success. Providing an opportunity to establish this 'buy in' was, for me, about getting the managers actively involved and opening a dialogue with them. Support for the involvement and dialogue aspects of this strategy are provided by Devins and Gold's (2000) research on coaching and mentoring in SMEs. This concluded that talking to managers at an early stage of development had the greatest impact on their commitment to supporting such a programme. The significance of achieving this 'buy in' is even more crucial in an SME where any form of government assistance is viewed as conflicting with their existing intuitive and informal approach (Curran, 1999).

The structure of the coaching and mentoring programme is based on a two-tier approach. The first tier, the mentors, would comprise the three directors of the company, who would support and supervise the second tier comprising the managers who in turn would act as performance coaches for the employees. Underpinning the selection of this cascade approach is Schein's (1996) contention that communications between different levels of an organisation are riddled with difficulties and misunderstanding. To address this concern and make the strategy more robust, the mentors would be responsible for demonstrating the 'new behaviours' and enabling the coaches to do the same. This level of communication and 'permission giving' from mentor to coach is very significant in an SME where the owner-manager visibly sets the tone of acceptable behaviour and cultural imperative. The expectation is that mentors would be manifesting these new behaviours in performing one-to-one supervision for the coaches around their coaching and business role. The integral function supervision performs within this strategy is based on the approach outlined by Mead et al (1999), in that it role models effective skills development. It also increases the involvement of the mentors while simultaneously making them accountable for maintaining this in-built credibility check on good practice. This provides

an excellent opportunity for culture, values and skills alignment from the directors right through to the employees.

At the core of this programme are the principles of modelling as outlined by Geroy et al (1998), Crouch (1997), Horsfall (1996), Alder (1992) and Zenger (1991), as a combination of 'skills based training' and a variety of other facilitative techniques including discussion, demonstration and feedback. Geroy et al (1998), further suggest that these techniques provide the opportunity to identify, and if appropriate, help individuals to change their values. This can have a greater impact on behaviour than changing skill levels alone. Supporting the centrality of modelling to this strategy is the work of Pescuric and Byham (1996), who suggest that modelling provides the most effective means of skills development and behavioural change that is currently available. Consequently, if modelling can achieve this change in behaviour and its underpinning values then it can also provide a concrete opportunity to directly effect the culture of the company, thereby addressing one of the earlier identified issues. Supporting this contention Burnes (1996) argues that company culture is not static, instead individuals and groups within the organisation, serve to reinforce and continually change the culture in an organic manner. This reinforces the choice of modelling as an approach given the level of significance the existing culture has within this company. It also provides a direct and tangible means of supporting the owner-manager in changing the culture.

I also believe that these modelling principles should run through the core of both coaching and mentoring programmes because of the familiarity of the managers with the techniques used. This would minimise the amount of additional training that would need to undertaken by the coaches and mentors. This serves to address some of the concerns about external consultants not understanding the issues of their business. The residual training, which would need to take place to support the mentors/coaches, as postulated by Megginson and Clutterbuck (1995), would provide an opportunity to demonstrate the principles of modelling to the directors and managers. Additionally, because there are only three tiers within this company, directors, managers and employees, actually demonstrating the differences in behaviour to successive levels of employee is no longer as difficult as Wilheim's (1992) critique of modelling suggests.

Further supporting this strategy would be the integrated use of the GROW technique as outlined by Whitmore (2002), because it has at its centre an emphasis on questioning in a specific sequence in order to achieve improved performance. The rationale behind this choice is based firstly, on the familiarity of the directors and managers with questioning as a technique and the concomitant saving of time in training terms. Secondly, the technique itself provides coaches with a focused and systematic road map of where they need to take their coachees in a relatively straightforward fashion. This is often an area of concern for new coaches; a solid framework like GROW provides a greater degree of safety for them and their coachees. My own experience of using, and getting others to use GROW successfully, also informed this decision. This does not support the critique levelled at it by Parsloe and Wray (2000), who based their comments on its application in organisations who tried to over-complicate and under-support the use of this technique. The structure of GROW can be made more robust and safer for coaches to use by the inclusion of a Personal Development Discussion. This would provide all the benefits of Personal

Development Plans as outlined by Tamkin (1996), relating to personal empowerment and ownership, but without the formality and bureaucracy of paperwork. Again avoiding formality and bureaucracy are key areas of concern to SMEs and consequently need to inform design decisions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis has aimed to provide a route map for the successful deployment of a coaching and mentoring programme within the specific context of an SME environment. The need to understand organisational behaviour when designing such a strategy has also been evidenced in the way this intervention aimed to incorporate and address the issues identified. This understanding also serves to highlight the areas that need diagnosis in order to inform the design. I have also provided indicative research supporting my contention that the prevalence of the culture of an SME needs to be at the core of such a specific coaching and mentoring strategy. I further sought to argue that supporting this strategy with a range of behavioural skills techniques and incorporating the needs of this specific organisation, has served to provide an integrated and robust solution.

Recommendations for further research

My hope is that this analysis will stimulate further research into the specific effects of the potential issues identified on both coaching and mentoring within the context of SMEs, thereby supporting Storey's (1994) original call for more SME specific research. Three potential areas for further research have been identified. Firstly there is a need to develop a cause and effect level of analysis to inform the selection of the most appropriate approach from a vast range of techniques. This necessitates the development of a substantial body of research-based knowledge specifically within the context of the SME operating environment. This is turn would provide the opportunity to evaluate the effects of coalescing a range of what can appear to be competing tools and techniques, seemingly without cognition of the consequences of such action. Finally, the significance that integrated professional supervision for coaches and mentors can play in maintaining the cohesive design and deployment of a coaching and mentoring strategy has yet to be effectively established within any work based environment.

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