

Does a “blended” programme of development and coaching, produce sustainable change?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine whether a blended leadership programme, which combined coaching and development sessions, would lead to lasting change. The research was undertaken with a group of senior leaders at a wholesale bank in the United Kingdom. Using a case study approach, the research gathered data from a number of sources, and at a variety of depths, to track any changes both during and post the intervention. The results provided a number of interesting findings including that changes did occur, the ROI exceeded 300% and learning and impacts of the programme lasted six months beyond the end of the programme.

Keywords: Blended programme, ROI, Kirkpatrick’s levels, exploratory coaching, leadership development, sustainable change.

Introduction

The aims of this study were three-fold: to explore whether a leadership development programme that includes coaching can generate performance changes; to examine whether there is a robust methodology for being able to effectively evaluate such change, if it does occur and to assess whether any change can last over an extended period.

The study was undertaken in a UK-based financial institution, listed in the top Fortune 100 companies. The area of the bank in which this study was conducted, is the wholesale bank, which focuses most of its business towards large corporations and other financial institutes and governments.

Throughout this study, I refer to those managers of the bank who were selected to attend the development programme entitled Maximising Team Performance (MTP), as “delegates” in order to avoid having to switch back and forth between such terms as “members of staff”, “coachee” etc. This programme was designed to last for nine months and included eight themed workshop modules, of two and a half hours each. These were interspersed with the six coaching sessions, of ninety minutes. It is this combination that produces the “blended programme” referred to as MTP.

Methodology

Establishing if change occurred as part of the MTP programme, required a data capture approach conducted at various points, both during and after the programme. Using a single case study approach and a recognised data “capture” methodology, it was possible to triangulate the

data and thus achieve one of the major challenges that faces case study research: the problem of validity. This has been defined by Mays and Pope (1995, p.110), as “referring to an approach to data collection in which evidence is deliberately sourced from a wide range of different, independent sources, and often by different means.”

The “sources” and “means” used in this research were based on the ubiquitous evaluation model of Kirkpatrick (1959). The model suggests four levels of evaluation:

1. Reaction (how learners feel about instruction)
2. Learning (learner performance e.g. on in-class tests)
3. Behaviour (the extent to which learners implement or transfer what they learn in class)
4. Results (organizational benefits, stated in terms of organisational performance or ROI)

When to Measure?

Establishing an appropriate timescale for data collection can be a real challenge when measuring change of this nature. Liedtka, et al. (1999) showed that research into the sustained effects of an executive education programme, showed a high level of retention, even when measured up to *forty months* post the programme’s completion. However, Lee rightly indicates (1995, p.40), line managers and others may need/want relatively immediate feedback on the development programme. Some changes and developments may take several months, or even years to become apparent, this is in part due to the fact that such changes are rarely predictable and seldom linear in nature (Laske, 2004, p.43).

Limitations of the Methodology:

The methodology allows for a multiple source of data to be collected, which makes internal validation possible but does not allow for a wider generalisation of these results. Whilst this data is “thick” in nature and provides an opportunity for a deep understanding of this case, it may have been beneficial to have made two particular additions, namely:

- a) Adding structured or semi-structured interviews with a sample of candidates, which would have allowed for even deeper analysis of changes that may have occurred.
- b) Real-time/live observation of candidates in role. This would have provided primary evidence to add to the secondary evidence gained as a result of the methodology applied here.

Findings

Section 1: Immediate Outcomes

Collecting data at this point was achieved using a multi-pronged approach, consisting of: delegate survey; attendance records; identified learning from the workshops and the changes that had resulted from these.

The survey of delegates sought to explore their experience, in relation to the workshop element of the MTP Programme. The main areas under investigation were: Administration of

MTP; Structure of the workshops; Workshop Content and Delivery; Support from Line Managers and lastly perceived Value. There was also space for free-form comments.

The results shown in Table 1 suggest that the satisfaction and experience of the delegates was largely a positive one:

Area	Focus	Result (Range 1-4)	Standard Deviation (+/-)
1	Administration	3.1	+/- 0.53
2	Structure	3.1	+/- 0.4
3	Content & Delivery	3.1	+/- 0.2
4	Line Manager Support	2.1	+/- 0.57
5	Value	3.4	+/- 0.45

Table 1: Results of five main areas of MTP Survey with Standard Deviation.

The highest scoring section came in the area of value. When asked: “was this programme worth ‘leaving your seat’ for?” (Q.18) 42% of the respondents Strongly Agreed and the remainder Agreed. The language of the question was designed to be colloquial in nature, as it was felt high performers in this organisation would use this type of mental scale, as a litmus test to judge the whole programme.

Finally the area that may have a significant bearing on learning and the sustainability of change resulting from this programme, would be the support of Line Managers. The average response to this area (2.1=Disagree) suggested that respondents were experiencing less support than they wanted, needed or had expected. This is an area in the design of the programme that had failed fully to be addressed at the start. As a design fault it can be identified as a major flaw, although thanks in large part to the intrinsic motivation of the delegates, was not as negatively impactful as might have been expected (CIPD, 2008).

Each of the coaching sessions, from Session ii onward, recorded the actions that delegates created and committed to taking. On average, delegates created two commitments per coaching session. This “homework” is similar to the idea of tasks agreed within REBT therapy and one of its founders Ellis (1955) believed clients who undertook and completed such tasks generally had a positive therapeutic outcome, whilst those “who steadfastly refuse towards helping themselves outside therapy, generally do less well” (Dryden, 2006, p.366). Whilst I am not suggesting that coaching clients are undergoing therapy, the point is still a valid one i.e. those delegates who created their own commitments to action and followed through on them were likely to gain the most from the exercise.

These findings were presented both to HR and the business in December 2007.

Section 2: Intermediate Outcomes

This section will look at the following: commitments from coaching sessions; the ROI produced from the programme and the end of programme review. The aim will be to draw on data from each of these sources whilst accepting that they are interrelated in relation to change.

Engagement in the programme was high and this is evidenced by the fact that 92% of all coaching “commitments” that were made during coaching sessions were acted upon. Currently there seems to be a dearth in the literature generally and in coaching more specifically, around completion rates of homework; suffice it to say that 92% appears high, although it may not be when compared with other similar results. It may also be that any feelings of disquiet about this figure could either be confirmed or eased by looking at potential rival explanations. These might include:

- * delegates saying that tasks were completed when in fact they were unfinished
- * delegates saying that tasks were completed when in fact they were never started
- * setting goals from coaching discussions that were already in train or almost complete
- * setting goals from coaching discussions that were very straightforward (simple) to complete

The design of this research failed to guard against the first three of these possibilities. Taking a position of “unconditional positive regard” (Rogers, 1961) as we did, can lead one to be misled if the delegate was so inclined. The fourth possible rival explanation was dismissed to some extent by reviewing the data in the form of the commitments that were made by delegates.

When analysing the impact the coaching had on delegates, it is worth exploring the end of MTP reviews. Rather than distribute a second survey, the decision was made in the design phase to gather evidence through free form summaries and testimonials. A request for these was sent to all delegates on the course and received from almost 60% of the final delegate population. A sample of these can be seen below.

“By far the best part was the 1:1 coaching sessions ... the impact on our team and our business has been hugely positive and by extension, profitable to the business”
MD

“1:1 coaching sessions were always welcome additions to my diary. They provided plenty of food for thought and self-analysis” GB

“Your attention to detail brought out some long standing issues I had previously considered trivial; I now feel more structured and focused in my work” MP

“I have found the coaching very useful indeed and think it has helped considerably in managing my team through what has been a difficult period” AT

Finally, a last area that it is important to review is the effects of the programme on ROI. Delegates with attendance of over 75% were invited to take part in this exercise and the final numbers who were included was six, although 16 were invited.

In line with recommendations only the return calculated from this group was included in the final ROI figure with no extrapolation to the broader population. “No data, no improvement” says Phillips and Phillips (2007, p.10) and thus, the remaining delegates, for the purposes of this study, effectively made no contribution to the ROI result, although all associated fully-loaded costs for them were included. This is a conservative way of calculating the final ROI.

Below are the final return figures, following all returns by the group of six delegates being off-set against the fully-loaded costs of all the delegates:

Benefit:Cost Ratio = 4.17

The ROI figure for this programme is = 317%.

This result is very positive, and sits within the range achieved by other coaching programme research e.g. 200%-600% achieved in a study of managers at a public body in the United Kingdom (Ascentia, 2005).

Section 3: Lasting Change.

Six months after the official end of the programme delegates who attended over 75% of the available sessions were sent an email-survey to complete. This sought feedback on the sustained nature of changes that had been made as a result of the programme.

The survey asked for qualitative and quantitative feedback on four different areas: management skills; wider stakeholder management; personal development and team performance.

Area 1: Management Skills

When asked if/to what extent MTP had impacted on their ability to lead and manage their teams, 100% of delegates responded that the programme had made a “Very Positive” impact in this area. Comments to substantiate such judgements included:

“I recognise the importance of individual coaching (of my staff) and the influence my behaviour and attitude have on the team morale and performance.”
Senior Project Manager

“Makes you consider your affect on the surroundings more (particularly people)”
Senior Manager: Front Office

Responses linked to management skills included a range of responses from those that were quite specific such as: “listening to staff and taking action” to the more general, “team management”. Delegates reported that they accessed these changes “regularly”. Other changes such as: “providing more feedback and coaching” where provided, were rated as used “when prompted or reminded”.

Area 2: Wider Stakeholder Management

The majority of responses reported that the programme produced a “Positive” effect on this area (75% with 25% “Very Positive”). Many of the coaching conversations undertaken by both coaches, included discussion around considering the impacts of, or on, wider stakeholders in the business or beyond. It appears that managers, even at this relatively senior level, found themselves too often inward looking and unable, unwilling or unaware of raising their sights and using that critical skill, required when moving up the corporate ladder i.e. the skill of “seeing the bigger picture” (Goleman, 1999. p 187).

I feel that this was one of the key advantages two external coaches brought into the organisation under study. We were able to provide that external perspective that it is often quite difficult to achieve as a manager, when your role can require you to focus on pressing issues.

Area 3: Personal Development

Delegates responded that MTP as having had a “Very Positive” impact on their personal development in 100% of the returns. In a reference that summarises several similar comments:

“The one to one session turned out to be a hugely beneficial and unique experience. I found that I was able to become comfortable with the observations on my strengths and weaknesses and do something about them” AH

Coupled with a phrase that was witnessed on several occasions, “additional self-confidence” the data begins to form a picture of delegates making lasting change at quite a fundamental level. In part the reason for such high levels of positive response may be due to the coaching style of the two coaches involved in the programme. Both coaches describe their style as transformational and seek to explore beliefs and “self” related areas where appropriate, rather than keep coaching conversations at a surface level.

Area 4: Team Performance

75% of respondents rated the coaching in the MTP programme as having had a “Very Positive” effect on the performance of their team.. Bowles *et al* (2007, p.403) in research on the impact of coaching on middle and executive managers, found that their “results support the positive influence of coaching on development of leader competencies that are likely to influence the performance of individuals under the direction of those who are coached”. MTP can reinforce this finding.

Conclusion

As discussed, this case study was conducted in a specific context and the results from it are not more widely “generalisable”. However there is some merit in briefly reviewing the possible implications for interested parties.

Banking: This programme spanned the early and middle phases of the credit crisis of 2007-08. The effects on the banking world are well known although it is probably fair to say, poorly

understood, by all but those more directly involved in the sector. The benefits to the bank, through the impacts of this programme and the commitment of the delegates, have been many and various, from the intangible benefits such as increased confidence in many of this management population, through positive feelings of being invested in, to a harder, bottom-line impact of an ROI of over 300%. A blended programme, such as MTP, that includes coaching, will have a myriad of positive impacts for management development.

Human Resources/Learning and Development: There are three main conclusions for the HR/L&D population to consider from this research: i) coaching was the most popular part of the programme and was, arguably, the most significant contributor to the lasting change that was generated ii) a blended programme such as this appeared to produce sustainable change iii) getting line manager buy-in is valued but not essential to the success of such a programme.

Researchers: Whilst this research has focused on the question of sustainable change I hope that it has also provided some guidance for others when pursuing their own work. I do not feel that this work will have added greatly to the discipline of research per se but that it may have added to two elements of interest from a research perspective about evaluation, specifically the evaluation of a development programme involving coaching.

What this study has done I believe, is add a contextually unique set of data i.e. blended development in a UK-based investment bank, gathered in a rigorous way that suggest the Five Levels model works effectively as a model for evaluating the effectiveness and contribution of coaching to sustainable change.

Secondly, a genuine challenge that did arise during the study could act as a warning to others embarking on the journey of coaching research. The obstacle occurs when the coach is also the researcher. One of the very cornerstones of effective coaching, namely the rapport that exists, especially when established over an extended period such as was the case in MTP, actually has an adverse effect on reliability of the data. It is my contention that the closeness of the relationships will have impacted on the reliability of the data

Coaching: There are some interesting implications for coaching that one can draw from this research, beyond the fact that it seems when blended with workshops, this type of development approach in this setting, produced sustainable change. Whilst not wanting in any way to undermine the significance of that finding, I will explore some of the slightly less obvious conclusions here.

Relative to other similar professions, coaching is still in its infancy and part of the rationale for this study was to add some evidence to the growing body of research that investigates the effects of coaching. The resulting conclusion from this broad body of evidence produced here, it seems safe to suggest, is that the coaching undertaken in MTP produced change in the short and medium term. Through follow-up, there is also evidence to suggest that it developed delegates in a way that other interventions (other than clinical) do not and that this development in turn, leads to sustained change.

Finally, I would like to discuss briefly a significant area that I learned during this research and the implications it has for coach skills and approaches. When coaching is provided by large organisations, as in this case, and when the brief for the intervention is broad (e.g.

improve management skills), the timing of the coaching is often not under the control of the delegate, the result was that we experienced numerous openings to coaching sessions where the delegate had brought nothing to the meeting in terms of an area to discuss, let alone a clear goal. There was no hint that this could be put down to resistance on the part of the delegates. In order for us to generate such positive reviews of the effectiveness of coaching we developed a style that sought deliberately to explore all potential areas for further discussion before the delegate decided on the area they felt would be most beneficial to focus on. It was not, in reality as formulaic as described here but it was very well received by delegates, who referred to it variously as: “a great sounding board”, “chance to verbalise it all”, “opportunity to see the woods for the trees” and “like therapy”.

We termed this approach “exploratory coaching”, which, has on reflection, many similarities to the meta-state model as described by Linder-Pelz and Hall (2008):

“This involves two loops, the feedback loop and the feed forward loop. The feedback loop constructs information as it maps out an understanding of the world; the feed forward loop converts the information into energy. The first is information encoding of triggers and stimuli; the second is the energy response to those triggers.” (2008, p.47)

Our delegates were given plenty of opportunities to self-reflect on their current situations and from that, through the coaching process gain the energy from the action planning phase.

Reflecting on what this might mean for coaches who find themselves in similar assignments, there is a greater emphasis on listening for cues beyond the obvious and the ability to summarise and playback effectively. Although perhaps the ability that we found we developed the most as a result of this experience, was improved patience. We had to allow delegates time to establish where they were on their various fronts before they decided where to focus and before we could employ more standard coaching skills to help delegates move forward.

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