Reflections from the Field

Introducing a Coaching Culture within an Academic Faculty

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Abstract

This paper describes a change project which seeks to introduce a coaching culture within an academic faculty. It discusses the changing academic labour market and the pressures this puts on academics, the potential for coaching to contribute to staff development and reflections on the practicalities of introducing coaching to academic managers and leaders.

Keywords

coaching culture, coaching academics, academic professional development

Introduction

This paper describes the efforts made by an academic faculty in a large distance learning university in the UK to introduce a coaching culture into elements of its academic leadership and management. The paper is reflective in nature, with the aim of raising awareness amongst academic leaders and coaching professionals of the benefits a coaching approach offers to academic workplaces.

Although the scope of the project is modest, with a focus on academics who manage tutors on fractional contracts, it uncovers interesting opportunities. Perhaps the most important is the space created when academic managers begin to move from advice mode to, as Stanier (2016, 2020) puts it, staying curious longer in conversations with colleagues.

The paper begins with a discussion of the context of UK Higher Education, including a description of how the sector has grown and changed. It then provides a brief description of the coaching approach and discusses its use within academic communities. The following section tells the "story" of introducing a coaching culture within a large faculty in the distance learning University, including overcoming obstacles, initial planning, identifying champions, winning resources for external training, gathering feedback, explaining how initial resistance turned to enthusiasm and continuing efforts to embed coaching within the working culture. The final section explores lessons learned and offers some thoughts on useful areas for future research.

Context of UK Higher Education

The UK's 165 Universities together form a critical part of the economy and society. There are around 2.4 million students working at various levels of intensity and, while the majority are full time undergraduates from the UK, there are substantial numbers of postgraduates, part time learners and students from overseas. This educational activity generates around £40 billion per annum for the UK economy (Universities UK, 2021).

In terms of academic staff, Figure 1 illustrates in bar chart form the split between part time and full time staff working at UK Universities. There has been a gradual increase in staffing numbers, from 198,335 in 2014/15 to 217,065 in 2018/19. Part time staff represent around one third of these numbers (HESA, 2020).

Figure 1: UK Academic Labour Market 1
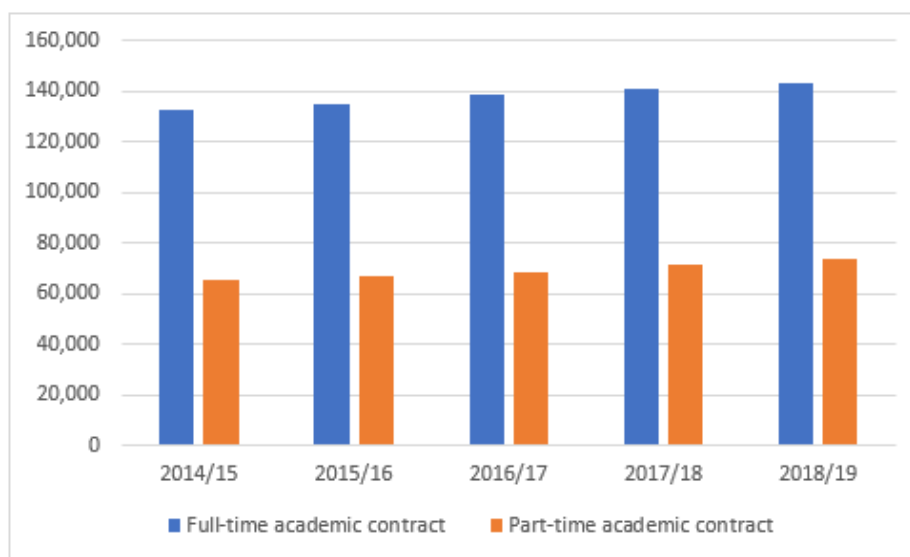
The UK Higher Education sector is a large and growing industry. It is also the case that the 200,000 plus academics are working within an increasingly competitive environment (Baxter, Callaghan and McAvoy, 2018). Universities compete for students, university employers compete for staff and individual academics compete for grants and publications in top ranked journals. This creates a highly judgemental working environment, with tables for research ranking, student feedback, grant success and other metrics.

In many ways universities now display elements of corporate strategic thinking and financial planning. As Beynon from Cardiff University has commented in an article on the rise of corporate universities:

These changes are part of a powerful neoliberal strategy that has transformed Britain's public sector; the changes taking place in higher education parallel those that have reshaped the country's health service, tax collection, policing, and education more generally. Universities, competing for students – now their main source of income – and competing for position in various league tables, have increasingly behaved more like profit-seeking corporates than charitable organizations (Beynon, 2016, para. 11).

Important change has also been associated with technological innovation. This has led to developments in digital learning which challenge prevailing pedagogical approaches to university teaching (Baxter, Callaghan & McAvoy, 2018). The speed with which such technological

developments are impacting on university teaching have been enhanced and compounded by the 2020/21 coronavirus pandemic.

Taken together, these imply that the nature, type, organisation, and monitoring of academic work is undergoing significant change. Collini has written of this with respect to researchers:
The devoted university teachers of a generation or more ago who were widely read and kept up with recent scholarship, but who were not themselves prolific publishers, have in many cases been hounded into early retirement, to be replaced (if replaced at all) by younger colleagues who see research publications as the route to promotion and esteem, and who try to limit their commitment to undergraduate teaching as far as they can (Collini, 2010, para. 4).

The result is a more intensive labour process with academics pressurised to teach well, publish research articles, put in grant applications, engage with developments in digital teaching and learning and participate in knowledge exchange.

Resulting Challenges

Increasing intensification of academic labour and a more competitive marketplace present clear challenges to academics and their managers. One of these is the apparent dis-connect between the day to day working reality and the expectation of academic autonomy. Indeed, while the working environment of each academic will be unique to their department, faculty and institution, most aspire to a high degree of autonomy (Rem & Li, 2013). When academics who have experience (or expectations of) autonomy begin to inhabit a targets-based environment, with its concurrent tendency towards hierarchy, tensions are likely to arise.

Coaching and mentoring, with their focus on individual goal setting, active listening, accountability, and an overall client-led focus offer, if not a resolution to such tensions, at the very least the space for honest conversations around common challenges. This approach also opens space for the creation of constructive solutions. With the emphasis on listening, staying curious and empowering individuals to take responsibility for choices, coaching and mentoring go with the grain of academic autonomy.

Tensions will undoubtedly still exist, but a coaching and mentoring approach allows for reflection, improved mutual understanding and individual empowerment. As Guccione and Hutchinson write in their book on academic development, "coaching and mentoring can help any individual within the organisation, at any level, to ratify the challenges they face, how their goals may be attained and how they may effectively use the myriad other tools and resources that are available to them" (2021, p.21). While this publication indicates that the practice of coaching is gaining some traction in the education sector, there is still tremendous potential for coaching within the academic workplace.

Examples from the literature into using coaching within an academic setting include Thomson's (2018) case study work at the University of Warwick where he reports on their coaching and mentoring scheme. This staff development intervention covers academic leaders and University professional services staff. He writes that although academic staff operate outside a traditional hierarchical structure, there are other workplaces where employees have significant autonomy, for example law firms and hospitals. He suggests that higher education professionals are dealing with common challenges: "concerns about how they manage themselves and their time, how they relate to colleagues, how they manage staff and their performance, how they influence upwards and where they are going in their career" (Thomson, 2018, p. 214).

This finding is shared in McDowell, Bedford and DiTommaso's (2014) study within Walden University in the United States, where coaching was used as a professional development tool.

They argue that "coaching, like any other professional development activity, should be considered a positive, proactive activity for faculty members to enhance current skills and develop new approaches" (2014, p.5).

In addition, there has been some interesting work done in the potential for peer coaching as part of developing academics including Huston and Weaver's (2008) work in the United States and Cox's (2012) intensive case study of a small number of UK academics. Also, with a focus more on mentoring than coaching, Carmel and Paul (2015) use a case study from two academics based at a Jamaican University to conclude mentoring has many potential benefits for academic staff.

The 200,000 plus strong UK academic labour market has a workplace culture that while rooted in autonomy is currently challenged by competition, targets, and intensification. A leadership approach which draws on a coaching mindset has much to offer those attempting to resolve the resulting tensions and create positive outcomes.

Coaching and mentoring

In terms of definitions of what constitutes coaching and mentoring, one way to conceptualise this is along a spectrum, with mentoring at the more directive end of and coaching at the other, more person or client centred end (Downey, 2014). Downey introduces a push/pull model with directive activities such as instructing and giving advice at one end and non-directive activities such as listening and reflecting at the other. Within this framework mentoring pushes the coachee to a solution. Suggestions are offered, feedback given, and advice (possibly even instructions) provided to the coachee. At the other end of the spectrum the coach might stay curious, summarise, encourage insight, facilitate reflection, and employ active listening and powerful questions. Here the coaching conversation creates space to identify the most important challenge facing the coachee and draws on coaching skills to empower the coachee to take initiate change and act.

While the mentoring end of the spectrum has the potential to have some positive impact, coaching - with its focus on the individual taking responsibility for their own growth and development - offers the opportunity for insight and transformation. As Starr (2016) suggests, it is often "more effective to help someone gain their own insights into a situation than it is to tell them what they should think or do" (2016, p.13). Starr highlights the following aspects of coaching which assist development:

- Advanced listening skills
- Powerful questions
- Reflective practice

Coaching conversations which draw on these competencies offer individual, holistic personal development which – because it is internally driven – might well last over time. Such self-motivation, important in any workplace, may be particularly well suited to academics who value autonomy and agency.

As coaching has grown as a profession so has the number of coaching models. For example, Passmore's (2016) industry guide to coaching lists GROW (Goals Reality Options Wrap-up), solutions focused, cognitive behavioural, NLP, transpersonal, appreciative, and integrative coaching. While each of these (and others) are likely to have benefits, what is of most use within an academic setting is a mental shift away from solving other people's problems. As Stanier (2016) observes, "when you build a coaching habit, you can more easily break out of three vicious circles that plague our workplaces: creating overdependence, getting overwhelmed and becoming disconnected (2016, p.136).

Of course, university leaders and managers are not unique in suffering from overwhelm and tending to give advice and offer solutions. Nevertheless, a coaching approach offers these

academics another choice in how they lead.

Case Study Faculty

The faculty has around 400 salaried academic staff and a substantial number of part time tutors. These staff are split into three schools and together with other university colleagues support around 50,000 students.

These academic staff are responsible for producing distance learning material, developing teaching strategies and delivering (mainly online) tuition. They are also engaged in research, scholarship into teaching and learning and day-to-day managerial and administrative duties. This produces a complex series of demands which individual academics must negotiate and manage together with their Head of Unit.

Within the context of these competing demands, it was identified that there is a real opportunity to develop a coaching culture. Such an approach, with its focus on person centred growth and the lack of emphasis on hierarchical power structures, is ideally suited to an academic environment where autonomy is expected and valued. As Kimsey-House et al (2018) write:

We [the coaches] assume strength and capability, not weakness, helplessness, or dependence. We assume a deep desire to give the best and achieve potential. A co-active conversation has certain beliefs built into it: that every situation has possibilities and people really do have the power of choice (2018, p. xvii).

Such an approach has attractions for many organisations, but perhaps might be particularly suited to academic environments with a world view which emphasises agency and autonomy.

Coaching culture strategy

Figure 2 describes a potential model which can be used when introducing a coaching approach to academic leadership within a faculty. It must be acknowledged that while this figure makes introducing such a strategic change look clear and easy – just a gently push and the cycle of coaching will begin! – in reality it is likely to be slow and difficult. The reasons for this include organisational change being mediated through existing customs and practice, contingencies around power hierarchies and a reluctance to take on new activities.

Figure 2: Coach Culture Cycle
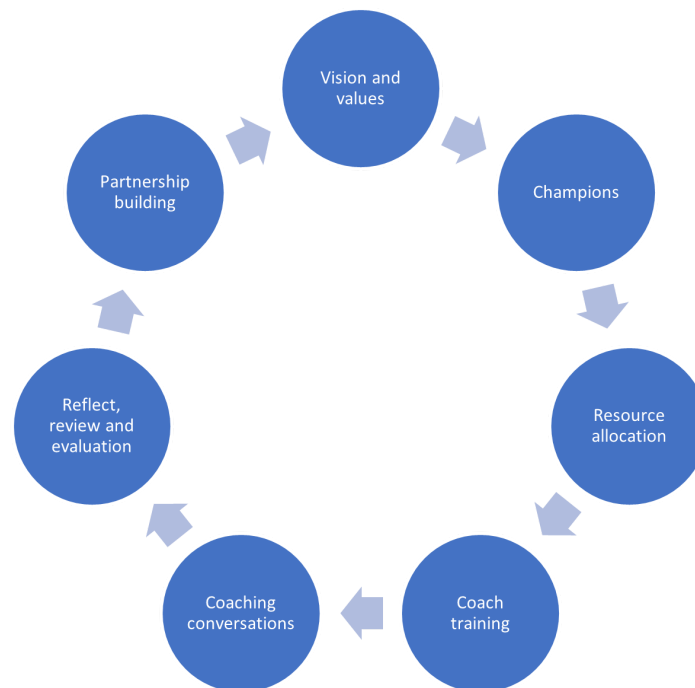
The sections below discuss each of these steps, offering commentary on how they were applied in the case study faculty.

a) Vision and values: The organisation (here a faculty) needs to have a desired goal related to introducing a coaching approach amongst academic leaders and managers. Ideally different categories of stakeholders are involved in the creation of this vision, and it is embedded in organisational values. This relates both to the values articulated within an organisation's mission statement and (more importantly) how those values are modelled by leaders and practiced by staff. As Kimsey-House et al (2018) comment:

What is important for leaders and managers to know is that values show up in choices and those choices are visible in behaviour. Having a list of corporate values posted in a prominent place is a fine idea. How you act and react will be more powerful in reinforcing behaviour than that list. Actions truly do speak louder than words (2018, p.142).

Within the case study faculty, the provision of coach training was nested within existing strategy documents which highlighted investing in staff. As the project grew suggested amendments were made these documents. At the time of writing this is still a work in progress.

b) Champions: Such individuals have an important role in encouraging staff to recognise and value a coaching approach to conversations. Champions, including senior leaders, who participate in coaching themselves and who discuss the benefits as widely as possible through presentations, newsletters and so on will enhance the status of coaching as a desirable and useful practice.

Within the case study faculty there were several champions. Senior leaders shared their positive experience of coaching via the regular Faculty newsletter and the project instigator (this paper's author) spoke with other senior leaders to raise the projects profile and encourage participation.

c) Resources: For any coaching initiative to succeed an organisation will need to invest resources. This will include finance for external coaches and/or training for internal coaches and time allocation in staff workload plans for coaching conversations to take place.

The approach used in the case study faculty was to win budget funding for what was initially seen as a pilot project and 10 academics with management responsibilities were put through training provided by an external company. Following the success of this pilot funding was won for a second and third cohort.

d) Coach Training: There are numerous organisations that offer relevant training. Variables to consider include cost, quality, accrediting body, and method of delivery. In the longer term, as the coaching culture becomes more embedded, thought must also be given to sourcing some form of coach supervision.

Within the case study faculty a training provider ran a 6-week on-line module which included two coach mentoring sessions. The resulting qualification took participants to Foundation level with the European Mentoring and Coaching Council. This training was supplemented with bi-weekly coach coffee mornings where participants came together on-line to discuss their experiences.

e) Coaching Conversations: These include formal coaching sessions as part of the training and self-reflection on how coaching is built into management type conversations. This is perhaps the most important element – building a coaching habit in professional conversations.

f) Reflect, Review and Evaluation: This is a strategy which encourages reflective workshops, reviews progress, and gathers feedback on the effectiveness of coaching on individuals and the organisation should be built into the process from the beginning.

Within the case study faculty this has taken place at two levels. On the one hand there is the individual reflection done by coach trainees. There is also the strategic reflection and planning done by the co-ordinator in partnership with the training provider.

g) Partnership Building: Once the coaching culture is developed and the (hopefully) positive impact is beginning to be felt, then the success and lessons learned can be shared internally and externally.

For the case study faculty this has included reaching out to other faculties, running workshops, and writing up papers. In terms of making connections with other Faculties and units within a large institution, the coaching culture for academic's initiative takes time. Coach champions need to be identified, relationships of trust built and then partnership working can start.

The time element of a new initiative gaining traction should also be considered. For example, it took 18 months for the coaching project to build momentum. Getting the first cohort of trainees signed up involved several emails and phone calls over a month to reassure colleagues the time would be well spent. Filling the second training cohort took a little less time while the third cohort "sold out" within 36 hours. While the reasons for this will be fully explored in later research, initial thoughts are that the idea of coach training was no longer new and thus less of a threat. Also, the word spread that coaching made professional life easier, with participants reporting less pressure in feeling they always must provide the answer to colleagues' challenges. Participants also reported a marked improvement in the quality of their listening. An interesting aside is that some participants noted how coaching skills were having a positive impact on their conversations outside of work with family and friends.

Stakeholders

For those considering making a case to bring coaching into their own academic workplace, Passmore's model on stakeholders might provide a useful conceptual tool. In Excellent Coaching, he argues that one of the necessary conditions for coaching within organisations is to have

alignment between the needs of key stakeholders. Figure 3, drawing on Passmore's model (2016, p.43), describes these stakeholders.

Figure 3: University Coaching Stakeholders

Applying this model to a university setting, business needs are likely to include improved levels of staff satisfaction, in particular working through the tensions between an autonomous professional role and an increasingly competitive higher education market. The individual/ team's needs are linked to this, as coaching can help lecturers shape goals, take ownership of their choices and work through challenges. The coach/provider needs would be influenced by whether the coaching is internal or external. For the latter the coach would need to contract with both the paying client and the coaching client/colleague in terms of outcomes. Internal coaches will be looking to listen carefully to client/colleague challenges and help shape solutions. Given the level of institutional knowledge held by internal coaches there is also the possibility for mentoring interventions.

Embedding coaching culture

In the longer-term consideration needs to be given to further training, ethical issues, supervision - and some form of evaluation. In terms of training, colleagues who experienced entry level coach training could be invited to consider more advanced learning. Again, this will require securing a new stream of funding, identifying a relevant training provider, and ensuring participants keep on track with the training.

As coaching becomes more established, it is likely ethical issues will need to be taken into consideration. This is perhaps especially the case with internal coaching conversations. As Morgan (2019, p.59) writes in The Coaches Survival Guide, "You may find yourself coaching someone you have known for a long time, such as a business contact, a colleague, or even a friend… If you are working as an internal coach in an organisation, it is likely you will continue to interact regularly with your coaching clients….". This point is also made by Cox (2012), who argues that internal coaches, whether peer to peer or from a line management perspective, need be aware of the importance of trust, contracting and confidentiality.

For these reasons internal coaches need to be aware of – and follow – ethical guidelines such as those which have been developed by coaching bodies. For example, the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (2019), sets the following ethical standards around working with clients, professional conduct, and excellent practice.

Supervision has a role to play not only in ensuring ethical issues can be discussed with a knowledgeable peer, but it also because it offers the opportunity for the growth and development of a coach's professional practice. As the Bath Consultancy Group's Professor Peter Hawkins, who developed the seven modes of supervision model, reports "It is important that supervision is not seen as an activity carried out by a supervisor with supposedly super vision! Rather it should be seen as a joint activity between coach and supervisor that the quality of practice constantly develops the capacity and capability of the coach" (2010, p. 23).

There is also a need to build in some form of evaluation. While the core of coaching centres around the coach-client relationship, organisational stakeholders, who are paying for coaching and investing staff time, will want to evaluate the impact of coaching. This is likely to mean data collection and evaluation.

While there might be a case for arguing that it is problematic to apply a numerical measure to a personal process, for example Sofianos comments "Coaching … works on the sense-making processes that drive the real and lasting transformations within organisations and these effects are not always immediately visible to the onlooker" (Sofianos, 2015, p.56). Professional bodies, such as the Institute of Leadership and Management, also argue for evaluation in any coaching programme (ILM, 2017).

Within the case study faculty, a mix of feedback is used, including internal questionnaires and anonymised feedback gathered by the training provider. As is noted in the following section, the faculty intend to gather more detailed feedback as part of a future research project.

Conclusion

This paper provides early reflections on the introduction of a coaching culture into an academic faculty. It places these reflections within the context of UK Higher Education and argues that coaching has the potential to lessen the pressure on academic managers to constantly give advice and solve other people's problems. It also encourages active listening, goal setting, self-reflection and accountability. The internal motivation and empowerment, combined with deep listening, might well transform the relationship between academic managers and lecturers. This in turn creates space to recognise and overcome barriers and, just perhaps, co-create a future which delivers for the individual and the organisation.

While this paper represents a modest addition to the existing work in this area, it is intended as a first step into future research. This will include in the first instance a project which gathers quantitative and qualitative data from those who have undergone coach training and are holding coaching type conversations with colleagues. This is likely to take the form of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. We are also reaching out both internally and externally to offer papers and workshops to academic leaders to help others understand the potential benefits of creating a coaching culture. Over time there is great potential for developing intra-institutional comparisons and moving beyond the UK to consider the potential for coaching in Higher Education Institutions from an international perspective.

Coaching and mentoring have so much to add to the quality of working life. I extend an invitation to those interested to get in touch so we can begin conversations, build relationships, and work together to deepen and broaden coaching for academics.

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