Coaching: Is it just a new name for training?

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Abstract

This article looks at the growth of coaching in the corporate sector and considers the overlaps with training provision. Drawing on the experience of the authors, a conceptual analysis is constructed that culminates in our presentation of a simple learning strategies map that provides a framework for understanding the activities and strategies used when developing others, either through training or coaching.

Key words: Coaching, training, learning strategies,

Introduction

The use of coaching in the business sector has seen significant growth in recent years. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in the UK (CIPD, 2006, p.2) reports that 79% of survey respondents are using coaching within their organisation and that 77% say coaching has been increasing in recent years. Yet 81% agree that "There is a great deal of confusion around what is meant by the term 'coaching'". The survey goes on to identify how coaching is currently being used, with the top three being:

Improve individual performance 78%
Dealing with underperformance 30%
Improving productivity 28%

In the past, discussion of these areas in a performance review would have led to a recommendation for participation in training, so it appears that much of coaching could be aimed at the traditional training domain. However, it is possible that due to the confusion over definitions that much of what is being delivered is little more than training by another name. Training may have fallen victim to the tendency to re-brand, re-label and re-package. We hear of the 'receptionist' who has become the 'head of verbal communications' (Guardian 2006) and the unemployed now referred to as 'economically inactive'. Also, 'new and improved' sells better in the marketplace and 'coaching', as a comparatively new concept, seems to be a more acceptable term in modern business. In this paper, it will be argued that some organisations are using 'coaching' as a replacement term for one to one training and in some cases using coaching to replace the role of training with little change to objectives. Yet both, we would maintain, can and should co-exist even if an overlap is likely. A model is therefore, proposed to clarify the domain of each.

We have suggested above that social changes are reflected through language. The benefits of such a change can be seen in a number of ways. Name changes are often aimed at making the object more acceptable, thus a job termination can become a 'career change opportunity' or even called 'de-recruitment'! Training was frequently seen as filling a deficit, to gain missing skills. Yet coaching has more positive associations and is promoted as expanding existing skills, and is regularly aimed at the highest performers. Senior executives are very rarely seen to need training, but to have a coach is perceived as a sign of value, 'a badge of honour,' perhaps due to the often high costs involved. So, one of the benefits for organisations of renaming the training function is to upgrade the perception of the offering, and to make training more palatable.

Modern business must also be seen to move with the times and with new thinking and ideas. Waves of fashionable terms like quality, empowerment and 'management by objectives' have come and gone. Coaching is fashionable and gaining significant press coverage, organisations may feel under pressure to implement coaching especially since the philosophy is more in line with modern business structures. Training can be seen as a hierarchical delivery of information, yet coaching is more in keeping with current matrix management and flatter structures. A public commitment to coaching therefore fulfils the image of a modern forward thinking organisation.
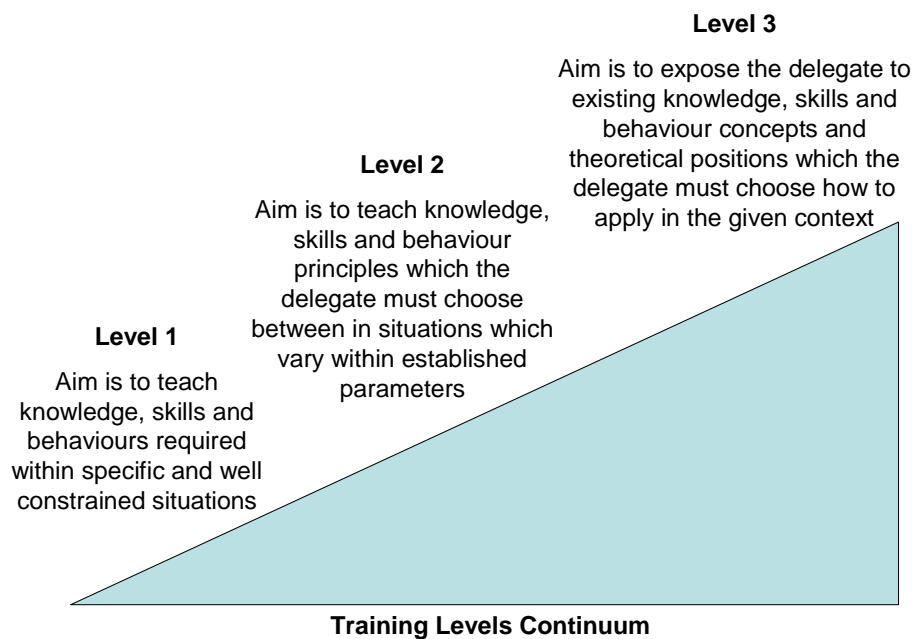
Over recent years business structures have changed dramatically and the dispersal of tasks and outsourcing have become commonplace. However, the CIPD survey (2006, p.10) reports that 47% of organisations are developing and expecting internal line managers to act as coaches. It is doubtful that if the same question had been asked about training whether the percentage would have been so high. But the coaching undertaken by line managers is not a cost which enters the balance sheet. So, while many organisations implement monitored coaching programmes with policies and standards attached, if their definition of what constitutes coaching is unclear and includes the manager as coach, then that can be seen, erroneously, as a cost effective option.

However, although we would caution organisations against using managers as a way to cut training costs, from an organisational point of view, there are significant benefits to re-branding training as coaching. We could further argue that since there is no well accepted definition then organisations can call anything coaching. Some recent coaching literature has attempted to clarify the distinction. Rogers (2004, p.24), for example, identifies three key characteristics of training. Firstly "a trainer has a set curriculum and rightly presents as an expert in his or her subject". Yet many management trainers have never managed a team or run a department. Secondly "there may be agreed standards involving accreditation or assessment which the trainee is expected to reach and on which by implication the trainer is assessed". Looking at the main uses of coaching cited above it is clear that much coaching is used to improve performance and productivity so it is not unlikely that some assessment may take place, especially in relation to competency frameworks. Lastly, on many training courses, participants have "… been enrolled against their will whereas coaching is far more likely to be voluntary" (Rogers, 2004, p 24). Yet not all coaching is totally voluntary, and pressure may be used to strongly encourage enrolment. In such an environment most employees will protect their job and reputation by agreeing to be coached.

The Rogers perspective is based on training as skills based delivery, but training, we would argue, has always been a continuum. In Figure 1 below, we suggest that training

operates at 3 levels and that the aims of training at each level are different. At Level 1 it is about the teaching of skills which are defined and assessed: a 'tell and practice' approach, for example touch typing. But in some cases training is used to develop skills at a higher level where there is processing required of the information in context, for example sales training, we shall call this Level 2. Finally, we propose, Level 3 training, for example management training where concepts and theories are presented and management must use and apply these to their situation. Any of these might be addressed in a group context, but it is also possible to train 1:1 at any of these levels enabling more customisation of the material.

Figure 1: The Aims of Training

Level 3

Aim is to expose the delegate to existing knowledge, skills and behaviour concepts and theoretical positions which the delegate must choose how to apply in the given context

Level 2

Aim is to teach knowledge, skills and behaviour principles which the delegate must choose between in situations which vary within established parameters

Level 1

Aim is to teach knowledge, skills and behaviours required within specific and well constrained situations

Training Levels Continuum

In all of these cases there is a set of information to convey. There are 'right answers' or concepts to evaluate. By this definition there is a set agenda to be addressed and this is what we term training. Trainers may use the techniques of questioning, listening and giving feedback but essentially they are using these as strategies to either persuade the trainee or gain commitment to a course of action. The process is leading the trainee to conclude the answers which are already documented somewhere. There is obviously a continuum here. Management may evaluate a number of theoretical positions and make judgements about application but there are defined concepts which form the basis of the evaluation and strategy.

By defining training in these terms we can now review coaching and look for the distinctive contribution that coaching makes. There is much literature trying to delineate the boundary with counselling (Bachkirova & Cox, 2004, Buckley, 2007) but much less attention given to the boundaries with training.

Parsloe (2000, p. 47), for example, suggests that when coaching inexperienced learners or people who are new to a situation, "the appropriate coaching style may be termed 'hands-on'

style".   Where learners are highly experienced, however, the style is more 'hands-off'. In between the two extremes, Parsloe suggests there are a variety of styles that the coach needs to be able to adopt, "depending entirely on the level of experience and performance of the learner".

It is proposed that here there is no boundary but only a continuum. For an inexperienced coachee the coach is expected to act like a trainer, delivering knowledge in an 'instructor-like' style. The choice of approach, depending on the needs of the coachee, shows strong links to the concept of situational leadership. Even with experienced learners, Parsloe refers to the use of questioning and feedback, skills which have always been used by trainers facilitating senior people. We would argue that there is little here, so far, to distinguish coaching from the higher level of training noted above.

Coaching however, should not be just another name for training; it should deliver a unique contribution and an additional output to complement training. It starts from a 'person-centred' approach (Rogers, 1986) and is differentiated by always working from the coachee's agenda to arrive at solutions and answers which are very individual and subjective. True coaching can only happen when there is not an obvious or single answer to the coachee issue. Trainers, on the other hand, generally work to established and pre-determined ideas where the routes are well defined for most situations and there is perceived to be a 'right' answer. For Level 3, training the trainer may need to help the trainee identify key parameters in order to arrive at a judgement, but it is likely the ultimate decision or course of action is defined and documented and will have some objective outcome.

The modern trainer will however use the *techniques* used in coaching and is likely to use questioning, listening and feedback throughout training. These approaches can be used to influence and persuade a delegate or to build commitment to a solution, but in each case the questioning will be directive and often leading. At a higher level when working with managers, trainers also use these skills to facilitate discussion and the evaluation of options, thus helping to clarify thinking and making the problem solving process explicit for managers to use on future occasions. Action Learning, for example, is almost entirely based on so called 'coaching techniques' and the use of questions. Revans (1978, p. 17) defines some of the key questions a non-expert facilitator can use in action learning sets as:

- What are we trying to do?
- What is stopping us from doing it?
- What can we do about it?

The task of the action learning set advisor is to foster conditions under which true learning, as opposed to the depositing of knowledge, could take place (Freire 1973). This therefore, appears to be a training technique which sits plainly on the boundary with coaching.

So far we have highlighted not only the confusion, but also the overlap between training and coaching. In view of this overlap it is not surprising that organisations are perplexed about the nature of coaching and where the boundary with training lies. However, there is a potential concern over whether that boundary is being crossed accidentally or as a conscious marketing strategy. Coaches may well stray into the realms of training during the course of a session when a coachee lacks some knowledge or information. However, it is possible that organisations are using the coaching label to make performance correction more

palatable and effectively hijacking the coaching ethos to provide a directive process not consistent with the principles of coaching. One of the authors has worked with an organisation that used the acronym GROW (a coaching model developed by Alexander (in West and Milan, 2001)) as Gap Analysis, Review Behaviours, Offer Suggestions and Work With Employee. The underpinning philosophy was certainly not person centred and yet the company could claim to be engaged in coaching. It is therefore important that we start to define a common understanding of what is expected from training and coaching to ensure that coaching continues to deliver a unique and additional contribution. The model which follows attempts to consolidate some of the issues discussed so far and map coaching and training in relation to each other.

Defining the Coaching Process

Throughout this discussion it is clear that training and coaching use some of the same techniques, but coaching should go one step further and involve a process. Much of the confusion between the two may result from the failure to distinguish the coaching process from coaching techniques.
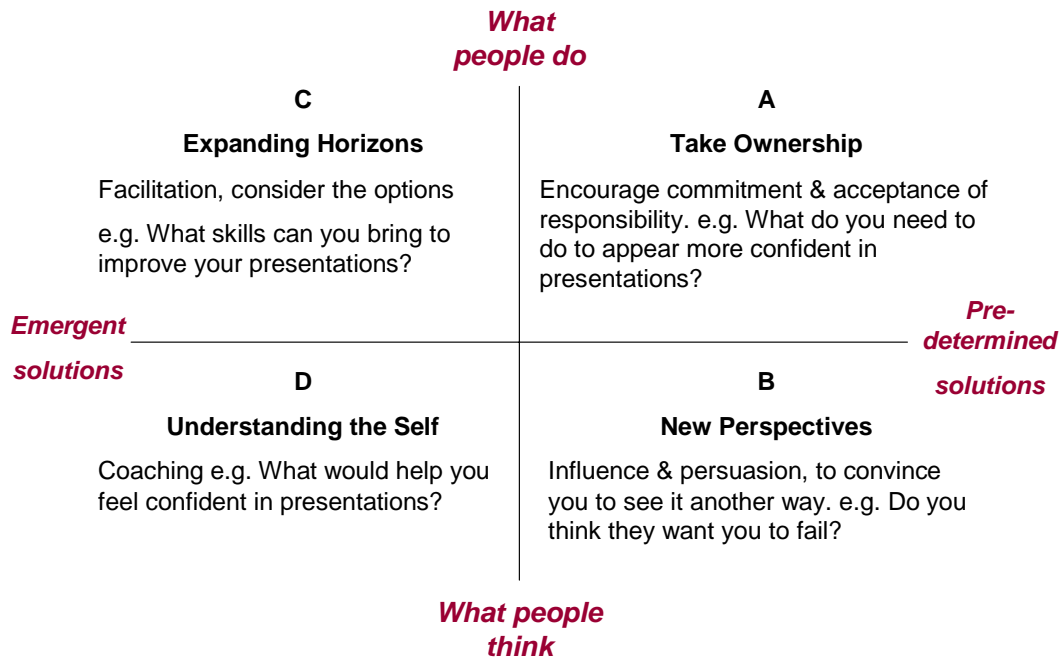
Trainers tend to use coaching techniques to facilitate thinking, to influence and persuade or to build commitment and responsibility. If training a senior executive trainers may present various approaches and then facilitate a discussion about how this applies in the current environment. Trainers do not generally engage in open areas about feelings, attitudes and beliefs. However they may use coaching techniques to make the executive see something differently, but this is persuasion. The aim is to make them see that certain ideas may be relevant in this context.

Most good coaches use these same techniques, for example to demonstrate limiting assumptions, where leading questions are used to force an answer. In this situation, the coach might ask 'If you believed this … (contrary belief), what would you do differently?' This seems similar to certain sales techniques e.g. 'if I could show you how to save £10,000 pounds, would you be interested?' It forces the client or the coachee into a 'funnel'.

However in coaching there is also the need to manage a process of development for the person. This may involve breaking new ground, looking from the inside out, or presenting theories which can be evaluated. So the coaching process becomes more holistic and necessarily subjective.

The idea proposed above is that training is characterised by having relatively ***pre-determined*** answers often with an objective frame of reference. Coaching, by contrast will create ***emergent*** solutions which will have a primarily subjective value. In Figure 2, the emergent versus the pre-determined solutions are represented on the horizontal continuum, along which the foci of training and coaching will fall. In addition, both coaching and training are strategies to develop others and may focus on actions and behaviours, the ultimate aim being to impact 'what people do'. Alternatively, both coaching and training can focus on the current frame of reference and seek to alter the mental process of 'how people think' about a situation. This cognitive - behavioural dichotomy provides the vertical axis.

Figure 2: Learning Strategies Map

What people do

C

Expanding Horizons

Facilitation, consider the options

e.g. What skills can you bring to improve your presentations?

A

Take Ownership

Encourage commitment & acceptance of responsibility. e.g. What do you need to do to appear more confident in presentations?

Emergent solutions

Pre-determined solutions

D

Understanding the Self

Coaching e.g. What would help you feel confident in presentations?

B

New Perspectives

Influence & persuasion, to convince you to see it another way. e.g. Do you think they want you to fail?

What people think

Each quadrant in Figure 2 provides a framework for understanding the activities and strategies used when developing others. We will now use the example of buying a house to illustrate the four quadrants of the model.

There are a number of dimensions to buying a house which may be addressed through training or coaching. We may, for instance, want to encourage **ownership** and accountability of the process (Quadrant A). The aim of questioning in this example would be to encourage the novice house buyer to identify what needs to be done and thus take responsibility for the actions. An example question might be: "How do you think you could find a solicitor?" There are set answers which may include a list of options relating to what they need to do. But, by generating their own answers, the novice will generally be more committed to the action.

We may also want to engender in the novice a **new perspective** (Quadrant B), in order to help them to see things differently. The first time buyer will need to be prepared to economise when taking on such a commitment. The questioner might ask: "What financial information will you need? What other costs will you need to plan for? Here questions are used to influence and persuade the home-buyer to consider the issues. Essentially the financial bills can be listed and are pre-determined but a strategy that focuses on broadening perspectives is likely to be more effective than lecturing on the benefits of financial management.

In both these cases there are a set of externally verifiable answers that can be arrived at. One set relates to what the novice must do, the other relates to how they perceive and think of the situation.

However, some of the activities required may not have such pre-determined answers. Questions such as, "How do you plan to manage your search for a suitable property?" are still about what the home-buyer must do, but they have very open answers. The answer may be affected by their available time, the methods and access to newspapers, Internet etc. Here we are trying to **expand their horizons** by facilitating a broader set of choices (Quadrant C). While there are a set of likely options, the most suitable answer cannot be determined by anyone other than the buyer. The solution will be adaptive and unique to them and will be determined by their personal circumstances and preferences. The answers will necessarily be emergent.

Finally at some point the first time buyer must make a decision about which house is best. This is a truly open decision which only the individual can make because it depends on their own personal thought processes and preferences. Here the role of any helper would be to encourage the evaluation of personal priorities to help them arrive at their decision. It may involve tools and techniques to aid clarity in the decision making (e.g. force-field analysis) but ultimately no one can predict the decision for this person at this time. This is a truly emergent choice where the person must have an **understanding of themselves** and their personal values (Quadrant D).

When encouraging ownership or new perspectives, techniques, such as questioning, commonly associated with coaching may be used, but they are used to lead and are therefore being used in the domain of training. When expanding horizons we may also have some pre-determined answers to draw on, but personal circumstances and preferences may make the selection of options more emergent. Only when we seek to create an understanding of the self in relation to the context with truly emergent answers, can we see the unique contribution of coaching.

Figure 2 suggests how the domains of training and coaching might be mapped onto the respective quadrants. Activities in quadrants A, B and C all fall within the training arena. By contrast quadrant D is the main focus for coaching. However it is also possible to see where coaching does overlap with training and that, on occasion, coaching may seek to expand horizons, create new perspectives and create ownership, but even so these are more commonly where answers are emergent rather than pre-determined. A good example is where the coachee is working on self limiting beliefs. The coach is focusing on the thought processes and emergent answers, but will frequently employ techniques to influence the adoption of new perspectives.

The model presented in Figure 2 allows trainers and coaches to adapt their approach to the individual and the specific topic under discussion. For example, in sports coaching some elements need to be trained to establish basic technique, but once the trainee surpasses technique then coaching can be adopted, working towards more emergent answers. The model also highlights that some coaching activities are perhaps inappropriately named. Sales coaching obviously has pre-determined approaches and requires judgement in application but would not normally fit our definition of coaching (as belonging to Quadrant D). In contrast to the sales example, career choice falls more clearly into this emergent realm.

Coaching and training are about changing either what people do, or how they think about a situation. Both create development and learning and both use similar techniques. Training will generally work towards pre-determined, objective areas of knowledge; whilst coaching is person-centred, helping define subjective answers to open questions where the answers could not have been predicted by the coach.

Conclusion

In this article we have explored how the growth in coaching represents a major change in the development of people. We have further argued that it is vital to understand that coaching is a process of person centred development, and not a new more fashionable and acceptable name for training. There is still a place for training, but we have suggested that the coaching process should be separated from the learning techniques that it uses. Techniques are not the pure domain of coaching and are, in fact, effective strategies in many forms of personal and group development. So called 'coaching techniques,' such as questioning, are also a vital part of the trainer's toolkit.

In the paper, we argued that as coaching evolves it is essential to provide a framework for discussion so that any coaching contract can be located in the appropriate context and we presented a model to assist with this identification. While it may be difficult or impossible to reach an agreed text book definition of coaching that everyone can commit to, it may be possible to agree the framework. The model presented enables both coaches and clients to discuss perceptions and expectations of the process and to agree a personal contract of engagement, thus maintaining clarity of purpose and protecting the coaching profession from cynicism and ridicule. It also provides a language through which to debate the scope of the process.

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