

Could do better: must do better

When we were at school, perhaps the least useful criticism a teacher could offer was to write 'could do better' at the end of our work.

It was hardly a helpful remark because, unadorned, it said nothing other than that the teacher didn't like your work very much and wasn't even sufficiently inspired to offer suggestions for how you *could* actually do better.

As adults, we feel entitled to receive constructive comments about our work, or our overall performance. Yet no matter how constructive these comments might be, the truth of the matter is that today, in the real world of business, all of us, without exception, could indeed do better.

Or at least we could, if only we knew how. Coaching is a means. It empowers employees to do better by showing them how.

Learning how to do better is not an easy task. As children we are more open to having our personalities guided and our performances prodded and improved than we are as adults. By the time we reach adulthood, our experiences of life, combined with our genetic heritage, leave most of us feeling that our personalities are fully formed and that we're not really open to making changes in our attitude or behaviour.

You hear the consequences of this all the time. 'I am what I am', people say. 'Take me or leave me', they proclaim. 'It's too late for me to change', is another comment beloved of those who do indeed feel that it is too late for them to change.

The trouble is, though, that people who make these kind of proclamations very rarely perform to the top of their potential. They might do well, perhaps even very well, but even if this is so, you can be sure that, yes, they could do better.

But if they are going to do better, two basic factors need to feature within their attitude towards their performance.

The first factor is a willingness to change, the second is a willingness to find out they need to do in order to change for the better.

Could do better: must do better is the fundamental credo of people in business who want to perform to the very limits of their potential, says Dr Charles Woodruffe (below), author of *Winning the Talent War*.

Fortunately, the first is a diminishing obstacle in today's business world. Coaching is maturing as a concept and people are getting accustomed to the idea that coaching is not just a remedial intervention for people who aren't doing well, but a means of helping people who are already doing well to do even better.

Add the first and second factors together and you have an irresistible formula for being more successful in the future. For the truth is that whatever level of performance we reach, there is always going to be an 'increment of improvement' available to us.

Just as professional sportsmen and women take for granted the need to probe every aspect of their performance to make it even better, anybody in business – no matter how much he or she has achieved to date – should surely do the same. In short, all will benefit from accepting the role that coaching can play in maximising their own performance and helping them strive for a stratospheric level of achievement.

In broad terms, business coaching should be directed at:

- ◆ amplifying individuals' knowledge and thought processes;
- ◆ improving their self awareness and facilitating the winning of detailed insight into how they may be perceived by others; and
- ◆ creating a supportive, helpful yet demanding environment in which each individual's crucial thinking skills, ideas and behaviours, are challenged and developed.

That's the broad picture. What about the specifics of coaching?

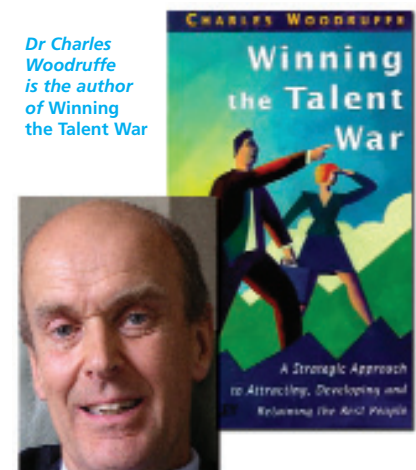
Business coaching today covers a wide range of areas of human expertise. Some coaching is directed at improving important niche skills such as writing a marketing plan or even a press release. On the other hand,

coaching can also involve psychological interventions that address very fundamental personal issues, preconceptions and attitudes the individual brings to the workplace.

Not every kind of psychological intervention is coaching, however. For example, psychotherapy and counselling, powerful as they can be as tools, are directed more at helping individuals understand themselves better in a personal context and cope with and enjoy life more.

Business coaching is focused on business, and in particular on how individuals can be helped to perform better at the organisations that employ them. In practice, some of the issues addressed by business coaching, psychotherapy and counselling may be quite similar, but there is a significant difference in that business coaching is ultimately about helping the individual to perform at a maximum level within a particular organisation.

Another significant difference between business coaching and psychotherapy and counselling is that business coaching tends to be focused around a very specific problem or challenge identified by the individual being coached or by the organisation that employs



him or her. This means that business coaching is usually limited in duration, and will always focus on the problem in hand. Psychotherapy or counselling, on the other hand, involves going into aspects of the 'private self' and can last for a long time, even many years.

Business psychologists need to be good at spotting the positive aspects of an individual's psychological make-up that are responsible for successful performance. But in many ways, the most important contribution business psychologists can make to the coaching process is to be able to identify problems that are inhibiting the individual's performance or preventing the individual from really fulfilling their potential.

As human beings we are, at one level, simply highly sophisticated types of biochemical machines. And, like any other machine, it is all too easy for our capabilities to be massively undermined by a spanner in the works. The spanner might be something easily identifiable through just one or two coaching sessions, or it might be something buried deep down in the individual's make-up: something that needs unearthing by a business coach carrying out a fairly detailed and in-depth investigation into their psychological background.

A high performer, for example, who refuses to delegate authority even to highly able and dedicated colleagues, may have a simple but not immediately obvious personal reason for being like this. These personal reasons often turn out to originate in the individual's childhood. It's not necessarily the case that the individual doesn't perform well, but rather that the individual will never be all he or she can be until the problem is identified and recognised. This may be solved in just one session, or it may take many months. But when a cause of negative behaviour is identified and its potency diminished, the sky can be the limit as far as individual – and corporate performance is concerned.

Because coaching is essentially a psychological intervention, it's easy to assume that the benefits it yields will themselves be psychological and relatively intangible. But

this is not the case at all. There is abundant evidence that coaching can be a highly effective process at a commercial level.

Benefits to organisations providing coaching can include:

- ◆ improvement in company revenues and profits;
- ◆ enhancement in operational efficiency;
- ◆ development in employee morale and motivation;
- ◆ increased employee productivity particularly through developing soft skills;
- ◆ provision of clear thinking space to gain clarity and fresh perspectives;
- ◆ leveraging of organisational culture change;
- ◆ better career progression and succession planning; and
- ◆ creation of cultures and environments which promote loyalty and reduce staff turnover.

There's no doubt that coaching is already recognised as a major resource for businesses in the UK. According to recent research

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undertaken by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, around 87 per cent of UK companies make use of some form of coaching to develop their staff.

Business coaching can take place on an individual or team basis. The crucial point is that either individual executives or the team of executives be given access to one or more professional specialist coaches who are solely motivated by the desire to help the coached person succeed. The coach will be – or should be – immune from company dynamics and politics, while also being aware of them. The coach will take time to monitor, assist and guide the coached person without having any

other personal or political agenda than the success of the individual.

Today, there is a boom in business coaching. The reason is not hard to find: it can help an individual being coached make great strides in his or her personal performance, and the quality of this personal performance can also bring huge benefits to the organisation employing the individual. There is a particular boom in one-to-one coaching, because this form of coaching is especially effective. Indeed, business executives are so aware of this that increasingly the provision of a coach on an ongoing or periodic basis will be enshrined in employment contracts, especially for senior people.

Confidentiality is always a sensitive matter in business coaching because one purpose of coaching is to unearth and identify issues that may be inhibiting an individual from performing to his or her fullest capability. To what extent should the organisation who employed the coach (and most coaches are employed by the organisation rather than the individual) be made aware of these issues?

The simple answer is that it is unethical for a coach to break confidence about sensitive matters. Coaches will therefore regard the coaching sessions with individuals as sacrosanct and private. However, they will certainly urge individuals to bring particularly difficult problems to the attention of the organisation and may in certain circumstances ask the individual's permission to do this themselves. Furthermore, any really serious problem identified does need to be brought to the attention of the organisation, but again, this must be done with the full consent of the person being coached. Unless confidentiality is in place, there is little chance of the individual approaching the coaching procedure with the level of frankness necessary for the process to be effective.

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