

The dawn of a new era

Emily Cosgrove and **Sara Hope** investigate the importance of conversation in internal coaching and organisational change

Coaching and mentoring have made great strides as an industry over the past few years. Many organisations have embarked on up-skilling leaders and managers to become internal coaches and mentors, and sponsors are increasingly looking for ways of capitalising on their value.

While there is plenty of advice about how to set up an internal coaching/mentoring scheme, there is much less certainty about how to make it a sustainable part of an organisation's system, structure and practices. With a rapidly changing workforce, technological advancement that is enabling greater collaboration and innovation, and a drive for instant communication, the challenges for the future of internal coaching and mentoring are complex.

Among this turbulence,

there has never been a more interesting and critical time for all of those connected in some way to coaching and mentoring within organisations. There is growing noise around the linguistics of the term 'coaching' and 'mentoring', and how organisations can go beyond the tried and tested models of discrete one-to-one relationships for targeted populations.

There is also a shift from implementing formal coaching and mentoring programmes as standalone interventions, towards utilising them within the wider organisational setting. Examples of these range from: intentionally using mentoring as a time and place not only to support the mentee, but also to develop the coaching skills of leaders; weaving coaching and mentoring into wider talent programmes; to integrating mentoring into diversity strategies.

Connecting a formal role with wider organisational change

One important challenge specifically facing internal coaching over the next decade, will be how to connect the role of an internal coach (who may have significant training, be qualified and accredited) with a manager who is trained in coaching skills and encouraged to take a coaching approach in their conversations.

Steve Ridgley, (John Lewis Partnership) manages 90 internal coaches who deliver one-to-one coaching as part of their day job and has identified and recognised the limitations of the



traditional internal coaching model. He says: *“As long as a model for internal coaching remains as two people going into a room and having a conversation that is confidential, it is hard to create systemic change across an organisation.”*

Ridgley is taking the bold step of using their internal coaches as part of building a robust change capability from within the business. The coaching offering is deeply intertwined with the John Lewis Partnership values, specifically its first principle – “The happiness of its members through their worthwhile and satisfying employment in a successful business...” – and it is this that shapes much of what he is seeking to do:

“Organisations are complex social systems and we need a more sophisticated method of change than simply ‘moving the deckchairs around’. I am really clear that coaching offers more than just coaching. Coaching and mentoring role model a different, much more powerful, way of connecting and having honest conversations, with ourselves and with each other.

“I am setting out to connect our internal coaches and manager-as-coach through learning. I want to see a golden thread of learning from our first supervisory training all the way through to senior leadership development, so that language and approach to honest coaching conversations is consistent and systemic.”

Culture

In our experience, internal coaches and mentors have the potential to offer far more value than that which can be gained from purely focusing on the traditional, formal ‘1½ hour sit down’ coaching or mentoring session. We encourage all internal sponsors to reflect on what needs to happen to move beyond just one-to-one coaching interventions and towards the building of an organisational culture of coaching conversations.

Picking up on Ridgley’s point, building better conversations across organisations requires consistency in language and approach. Consistency that not only spans all learning and development initiatives, but is also modelled and developed by all leaders at all levels within an organisation. Culture is made up of conversations and the only way real change happens is if we change the way we approach our conversations.

Those within an organisation who hold a coaching skill set are in a unique and pivotal position to help build this change capability through better conversations. Conversations that are respectful, insightful, honest and challenging at the same time as being supportive and actively look to build human connection, i.e. they encompass the fundamental principles of coaching and mentoring.

The corporate philosopher, Professor Roger Steare often asks the questions: “Where and when does leadership happen?” “Where and when is culture created?”

As leaders progress within an organisation, more and more of their time is spent in meetings. Meetings with peers, teams, clients, stakeholders, and it is through these numerous conversations that cultures unfold and grow. Margaret Wheatley wrote that human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change. If internal coaches and mentors can become ‘nudgers’ who model, challenge and shift the way leaders hold their meetings, this is when cultures have the opportunity to shift.

Internal coaches who model this in all their work continue to ignite and kindle small fires that, over time, transform meetings and cultures. If internal coaches can continue to create a positive impact with a greater number of people, including group coaching, they can continue to foster change, on a micro and macro level, in teams, organisations and communities.

Wider reach

Organisations need to be equipping internal coaches with a deeper understanding of group and team dynamics. One of the challenges of coaching senior groups in the same organisations in which



you are employed can sometimes lead to feeling more exposed than in a one-to-one relationship.

When a coach's role is to help a group gain clearer purpose and insight, they need courage to be able to share their experiences and themselves in an honest and open way. They need courage to hold group members to account and explore the unstated issues – to dare to disagree or explicitly play devil's advocate. And they need to ask for the courage of those in the room in how they challenge them to think out loud in previously uncharted waters.

To work successfully and deliver value in groups requires:

- a good grounding in the deeper dynamics of relationships within groups
- an understanding of the complexity of politics and power
- an awareness of 'self' and of the impact you have on others
- exquisite feedback skills
- the ability to employ a range of subtle and relevant interventions.



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Some of our richest insights come from the experience of what Kolb describes as a cycle of experiential learning – doing, reflecting, learning and applying. Reflecting through the process of supervision is a distinct and critical component that will support and enable all internal coaches and mentors to work with both individuals and groups in this way, and be at their best.

This means we need to be thinking carefully about the development we are giving our future internal coaches and mentors if they are to become organisational change catalysts rather than one-to-one interventionists. To embrace this shift takes a willingness of coaches and mentors, and indeed leaders, to think out loud when they may not know the answer. It takes tenacity to speak up and challenge, or say what needs to be said but is going unspoken.

We are noticing now more so than ever before, a real positive shift in interest towards offering this kind of supervision or ongoing support for coaches and mentors. Organisations are recognising the value and wider benefits of providing the infrastructure to support, maintain and build on the quality of conversations their coaches and mentors (as well as mentees) are having. Conversations not just in a coaching or mentoring context, but with their wider teams, line reports and managers and with external stakeholders and clients.

One example of this is Swarovski, who have recognised the wider value that their internal mentors offer by providing them with ongoing, externally facilitated, action learning sets throughout their time on a formal programme. These ongoing groups provide a number of benefits:

- supervision from an external mentoring expert
- the opportunity to sharpen their mentoring skills
- peer mentoring



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- reassurance in the role
- being part of a trusted group of peers from across 'my organisation' to share networks, different perspectives and grow relationships.

The 50ft Women mentoring programme, a not-for-profit cross-industry programme for young women in the workplace within their first years of work, has just launched its third cohort of mentors and mentees. At the end of the briefing and skills workshop for mentors, one of the mentors commented on how much she had valued the session in that it had provided the opportunity to connect with cross-industry peers as well as the space to have powerful, meaningful conversations. The group decided to take up Sheryl Sandberg's idea of 'Lean in circles' and took the opportunity that being a mentor on this programme had provided, to form their own peer support (or in their words – peer mentoring) group.

Technology

Another challenge internal coaching and mentoring already face is the advancement of technology and the ever increasing impact this is having on all types of conversation. Both in and out of work, communication is unrecognisably different now to our very recent past and this difference is driven by technology.

Cultural analyst Sherry Turkle has studied the technologies of mobile communication for more than 15 years and shares many examples of these changes from stories of parents texting and emailing at breakfast while their children complain about not having their full attention, to people doing the very same thing during corporate meetings.

As coaches and mentors we learn that the time and space which formal coaching and mentoring offer is not just essential for best quality thinking,

but it is sacred and highly valued by the leaders of today. In these conversations, we learn that life is hard for all of us – we all struggle – whether returning to work after parental leave, taking on a new and challenging role, or fully engaging in a difficult performance conversation.

Turkle explains that technology is seductive in that it offers us the opportunity to clean up our messy, demanding although rich human relationships. We can edit, delete and present ourselves without the risk that real time conversation requires.

So although technology already plays a part in coaching and mentoring, just as it does in all conversations, we need to remain attentive to how we use it. Technology can maintain relationships, but it cannot build them. Once we have invested time to establish a relationship, build rapport and get to know each other, technology can then assist us and add tremendous value.

Examples of this include global mentoring relationships that are given the opportunity to blossom through initial face-to-face time which are then maintained and provide enormous value from across the globe, and online coaching communities which provide a forum for peer networking and supervision.

The future

It is clear that the wider potential and value that internal coaching and mentoring offer has already begun to be tapped and utilised but there still remains huge potential to mine. Forming a wider landscape based on more skilful and therefore more powerful conversations, drawing on the fundamental principles of coaching and mentoring is an evolving process. The role of internal coaches and mentors as change catalysts for individuals, groups and organisations remains critical to this process.

In our recent research, we have been talking with a number of different organisations across the public and private sector to explore the nature of conversations in their workplace, with particular interest in the future of internal coaching and mentoring. What has been interesting to note is that right from the start there is absolute agreement that these conversations have the potential to impact wider leadership conversations at a systemic level. The ongoing and essential task for organisations is to continue building on the foundation that great coaching and mentoring conversations have laid; to carry on enabling, encouraging and developing this quality of conversations across the wider organisation. **TJ**

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