

# Trust me – I’m a consultant

**Sara Hope** and **Emily Cosgrove** reflect on what it means to be external consultants in the field of coaching and mentoring

**H**undreds of thousands of pounds are spent by organisations every year on external consultants. They are often bought for their specific expertise and experience.

They are valued for their ability to challenge and sometimes they are bought because of the perception created by the amount of money that exchanges hands.

In this article we will explore the world of external consultancy from our own perspectives of working in this capacity over the last 20 years. We will highlight the benefits that using external consultancy in the world of coaching/mentoring and change offers organisations as well as some of the challenges of working in this way.

## Consultant as ‘expert’ – does it fit with coaching and mentoring?

Historically external consultants were brought in for their expertise as professionals in a specific field, and for their ability to create change for a specific business problem. They brought knowledge and significant experience of their

subject matter, and usually for a hefty price tag.

Very similar to a classic doctor/patient model where we consult with our doctor, tell them our ailments, listen to the prescribed solutions, take some pills, and hopefully get better; traditional consultancy has been used in much the same way. However, in today’s world people now feel able to become their own experts and have a growing hunger for instant answers. Using the same medical analogy, many doctors now describe their patients arriving, having used their smartphone to Google their symptoms, possible medications, find out about any side effects and have quickly become ‘experts’ about their illness.

We describe ourselves as ‘experts’ on internal coaching and mentoring. So why would any L&D, HR or OD director wanting to, for example, run an internal mentoring programme turn to us rather than turning to Google? For us, the experience of being a full time, internal coach in an organisation for over eight years, as well as working with numerous and wide-ranging organisations from the private, public and third sector for over 15 years is what makes the difference.

So how does this notion of ‘expertise’ play out in a world of coaching and mentoring consultancy? A world where we grow to be curious, ask questions, help our clients to think for themselves and find their own solution. Certainly not a world where we rock up and tell someone what to do. It’s something Sara describes as a never ending challenge:

*“I spent years strengthening my muscle to ask questions as a coach and to gently quieten my opinions. Since becoming an external consultant however, I have learnt that my role is a hybrid between many disciplines, and that there is value to others in me*

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*“My role is a hybrid between many disciplines, and there is value to others in me sharing my experiences and stories”*



*sharing my experiences and stories. I personally don't like the term 'expert' and yet I appreciate how my personal experiences of being an internal coach inform the conversations I have."*

Emily describes shifting from a purely coaching standpoint (through her work with individual mentees and coachees) to one of external consultant, as an ongoing dance just like learning to tango or to jive. At first the shift from one step or position to the next takes time and feels uncomfortable but as we practice and understand our mistakes and successes, we are able to transition more smoothly and with better understanding. Of course, the first time is the hardest. If you've ever stood, readying yourself to jump from a high diving board into the pool below, or from a cliff into the sea you'll know that first time can be terrifying. It takes time to grow the courage to jump, but having jumped once, our body knows what it feels like and jumping a second time is usually quicker because physically and mentally we know what to expect.

The embodiment of this experience coupled with the key skills required to be a coach or mentor, enables us to provide something that no generic article, 'how to' checklist or even, we would

argue, any book can. Through understanding the context of each individual organisation that we work with, really listening to what each client is telling us and asking for, allows us to draw on our wealth of knowledge, understanding and skill to enter into a tailor-made conversation.

Experiencing first-hand what it's like to work in a system and embed an internal coaching or mentoring culture means we know what works and what the challenges are. And deepening this understanding through research, examining the experiences of others and writing and publishing on the topic has helped widen our perspective.

*"Experience has given me the ability to straddle the space of knowing what it's like to be rather than just the intellectual knowledge of to do. Yes I can pick up a book and read about best practice of internal coaching, and I can look to professional bodies about standards. However, sharing personal stories and experiences brings a richness and stance that is different to just being a 'knowledge expert,'" says Sara.*

### **Can trust, relationship and honesty align with commercial necessity?**

Human relationship could be described as the most important ingredient to success when

### **Reference**

- 1 <http://bit.ly/1L8j2hj>





working with people, this is certainly true in the world of coaching and mentoring. Building trust is critical right from the start. For clients to gain value, we need to be able to create a space where we can be honest, reflect back what we are

noticing, and where we can effectively challenge. As any coach or mentor will understand, there is great skill in being able to do this effectively and with integrity. In just the same way, as external consultant we sometimes need to say no, to disagree with the person who is paying you to be in the room and this takes a willingness to be vulnerable and have courage. As research professor Brené Brown describes, “Vulnerability is our greatest measure of courage.”

The tension between the desire to ‘sell’ and therefore please a client or potential client, and the importance of maintaining integrity, creates a constantly swinging pendulum between the spirit of generosity and giving, and the commercial growth of any business. As coaching professionals, we bring a passion for valuing relationships and innate desire to grow relationships. *“We are evolving in this area and we have a way to go,”* says Emily. *“Right now we are going with the spirit of being generous. Our strength is not just about sharing content, it’s about finding meaning through doing so, with which to grow understanding.”*

There is integrity in being honest enough to encourage clients to take on certain aspects of what we provide, when we recognise there is enough internal strength to do so and it will provide a healthy stretch for the client. Even if this means less income for our business. What we have learnt from doing this is that a far deeper level of trust is built, relationship is strengthened and clients actively look to continue and grow the relationship.

### **In our changing organisations what builds credibility and value?**

The term now being used to describe our current moment in history ‘The Social Age’ recognises the tangible shift and change in how we go about our daily lives; from raising finances for our businesses, for example through crowdfunding, to the nature of how we work, with many of us working from home or (more and more frequently) in shared co-working space.

With the arrival in the workplace of many more Millennials who embody the social age at work as well as outside, there is a real requirement for organisations to rapidly shift from a control and command culture to one of connection, collaboration and authenticity. In order to keep building credibility and value as consultants, this shift and change needs to extend to our external consultancy and with it comes a requirement to change our perspective of position and power.

In his book *To Sell is Human* Daniel Pink shares examples which illustrate how the model of asymmetrical information – where one party is

more fully informed and the other is 'at least partly in the dark' – no longer works given our increased access to information. Now that buyers often know as much as, if not more than sellers, Pink offers an insight into what sellers need to recognise, "... sellers are no longer protectors and purveyors of information. They're the curators and clarifiers of it – helping to make sense of the blizzard of facts, data and opinions".

As external consultants working in the world of coaching, mentoring, this fits well with our offering – curation and clarification of how these powerful approaches can support organisations, along with our own personal experience of what it is like to be part of such an approach. Partnership, guidance and sharing are words we often use to describe our service as well as the attributes of transparency, honesty and learning. These fit well within the parameters of Pink's definition, they also sit well alongside what Julian Stodd has described as six tenets of social leadership<sup>1</sup>, which he believes is fit for the social age:

1. Be curious
2. Try, learn, try
3. Share
4. Be humble
5. Tell stories
6. Be fair and protect.

If we are in the business of helping organisations grow more connected, collaborative and authentic leaders then we need to be modelling these attributes ourselves as consultants as well as leaders. Giving focus to growing these in the role of external consultant grows credibility and value in a rapidly changing and ever more social world of organisations.

As coaches and mentors we are well aware of the importance of our own continued professional development and supervision, and enjoy as well as pay due attention to both. These are fundamental elements of our own professionalism and credibility, and in turn add value for our individual clients. One of the decisions we made right from the start of consulting together in the business of coaching and mentoring, was to access joint supervision in our role as external consultants and business partners. This quarterly event when we meet our very experienced supervisor, helps us focus specifically on our role as external consultants and the relationships which we build and maintain with our clients. It takes a slightly different form from a classic supervision model and is a fascinating and insightful journey. Although it doesn't directly build credibility, undoubtedly it adds value for our clients.

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#### **How can we flex our style to offer best value and build internal strength?**

'Strength from within' has been our strap-line for years and we work from the belief that by enabling people within organisations to support their own people, we offer best and highest value.

Most often we work with those people inside of organisations who are leading on HR, L&D or OD, sometimes it is with business leaders. Our work with these individuals will range from; providing time to think, to challenging assumptions, to acting as a critical friend and say the things that no one else is willing to say, to offering suggestions for a way forward. The skill of being an external consultant, particularly in the context of mentoring and coaching, is knowing when to flex from one mode to another. Practicing and honing this flex takes time and experience, just as it does for an individual coach or mentor. We have found that our joint supervision helps us to do this.

We have also found that staying in touch with, and being part of, a wider community of internal and external consultants helps us understand how we flex our style. Accessing the reflection and thinking space we need to be continuously learning, staying in touch with the bigger picture and sharing perspectives with others allows us to bounce ideas, make mistakes and ultimately enhances our offering.

Our consultancy is bespoke insofar as we flex our style and offering depending on the need of each client. We don't offer 'off the peg' solutions and have found that just like buying a bespoke suit which is made to measure and fitted to meet specific needs, it produces higher quality results more quickly and in the long run is more cost effective. Of course this presents its own challenges, but ones that we believe are worth facing! **TJ**

**Emily Cosgrove** and **Sara Hope** are co-founders of The Conversation Space – find out more at [www.theconversationspace.com](http://www.theconversationspace.com)