

CULTURAL BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COACHING IN ORGANISATIONS

Coaching and mentoring are essential components of an organisation's talent and leadership strategy. When used strategically, coaching has the power to transform individuals and organisations, particularly when an explicit link is made to the organisation's objectives, purpose and values.

The culture in your organisation may be one of the things you seek to transform with coaching and mentoring – but the existing culture can also create a barrier to effective use of coaching resources and styles. Here, The OCM Team share some observations of how culture creates obstacles and how you might overcome them.

OBSERVATION 1: UNCONSCIOUS FEARS

In some organisations, the operative culture (whether explicit or not) acts to create unconscious resistance to coaching and mentoring. For example, imagine working and leading in a 'perfectionist' culture where getting it 'wrong' can lead to you being punished overtly or implicitly. Why would you seek personal coaching or mentoring when it implies that you are currently less than 'perfect'? How can you stop micromanaging and start coaching your team when you can't risk them failing? For strategic HR leaders seeking to transform a culture, this can feel like catch-22 – you can't use coaching to transform the culture because the culture rejects coaching! And no amount of communication from the top team about how important it is to be agile, entrepreneurial and growth-focused will change that, whilst the behaviour of most leaders and cultural expectation remains unchanged.

If you find yourself in this situation, consider adopting a 'tipping point' approach. We know that it only takes a relatively small percentage (estimates vary, but around 25% is a good rule of thumb) of the population to adopt a new way of thinking and behaving before the whole shifts. And that is even more effective where you get key influencers involved in the change you seek. But getting that first group involved is really tricky. It can feel impossible if you are trying to change a culture across a wide organisation. So start with a small group with the highest chance of establishing your change. Build your coaching intervention there and demonstrate the benefits. Use the influencers and disciples you have created to help find the following three groups...and so on. Getting to 25% of your organisation will take less time than you imagine!

OBSERVATION 2: A HABITUAL 'TELL' CULTURE

Coaching centres on conversations with a purpose: to facilitate a person's performance and learning, help someone achieve their potential and bring about lasting change. These conversations involve open questions, active listening, challenge, support and feedback. Mentoring is similar – but there's more emphasis on knowledge transfer and development of specific skills, and it's sometimes a more directive process. But the prevailing culture in many organisations is one of 'tell' rather than 'ask' or 'listen'. We particularly see it in technical professional groups or professional services, where it's all about 'finding the solution'. This presents barriers to coaching – individual leaders can be impatient with personal coaching that doesn't 'tell' them the answers to their development challenges, and managers find it difficult to adopt a coaching style even though they have the capability. They aren't really listening; they are too busy evaluating and solution forming, and when they ask a question, it is designed to lead their coachee to the 'right' (i.e. their) answer!

If this is your world, then you need to prove to habitual tellers that coaching can make a valuable difference and that they can be valued for their capacity to develop others and to solve problems. Look for an issue to focus your coaching strategy on that can't or hasn't been solved by the current ways of working and which has real strategic import to the organisation and its leaders. In one organisation we worked with, the persistent issue was a high attrition rate at partner level – new partners were leaving after a year or so or failing in post. So, the existing partners were willing to try a coach-mentor approach to work with and develop new partners. Once trained and supported, they found that this new style solved their attrition problem and worked wonders for their client relationships too! The organisation, Grant Thornton, went on to develop coaching at the heart of its culture and capabilities.

OBSERVATION 3: LOW TRUST

Trust is the foundation of a good coaching or mentoring relationship, whether with a specialist internal or external coach-mentor or your line manager. Some personalities give trust more easily than others, with whom trust needs to be earned, and individual leaders and managers will be seen as more or less 'trustworthy' depending on their perceived credibility, reliability, intimacy and self-orientation (see the equation below)

TRUST = (CREDIBILITY + RELIABILITY + INTIMACY) / SELF-ORIENTATION

No organisation ever sets out to create low trust, but many do so accidentally through:

- inconsistent or inadequate communication from leaders about the decisions, direction and focus of the organisation,
- unclear expectations of behaviour or inconsistent responses to breaches of expectations
- subjective and inconsistent performance evaluation and reward processes
- handling organisational change in ways that are perceived as unfair, even by those that remain after a reorganisation

Like the first observation we explored, this can feel like a negative loop - building trust takes giving trust and being willing to show vulnerability, which is difficult when you have low trust. If you think you might be in this situation, then your coaching investment needs to be focussed on those things that will rebuild trust quickest, often starting with the Senior teams. Team Coaching, particularly focussed on building purposeful teams, can have a real impact both on trust within the team and the organisation.

Contact Diane Newell diane.newell@theoem.co.uk to start a conversation and find out more.