

## COACHING



Erik de Haan, an Ashridge Consulting executive coach and author of bestselling books on the subject of coaching, throws some light on the subject.

# FROM STIGMA TO STATUS: COACHING COMES OF AGE

Coaching is difficult to define because it's such a wide and varied field. It's a form of learning that facilitates development for an individual and can be used in a variety of ways, for example, getting past an impasse, removing a stumbling block or drawing out and building on strengths. It's usually about issues relating to work or leadership practice and it's almost always one to one.

Undoubtedly, coaching is becoming increasingly important and people are asking why. Why are there so many books, so many courses, even Masters programmes, on coaching? Why are so many consultants and therapists interested in becoming coaches? Why do you see professional coaching accreditation, international foundations and conferences? I think there are three main reasons for this flurry of activity and why coaching is increasingly seen to be so important.

The first is probably the most influential. Over the last ten years or so there's been a profound change in how coaching is viewed. In the past it was seen as remedial: if you heard the word coaching you'd assume there was a problem. Now coaching has progressed from having a stigma attached to it to affording status: coaching has become an indication that one's company considers one worth an investment. And I think this is because something else has

happened in many business cultures: people are more willing to admit to themselves and to others that they need the help of professionals to understand themselves and to grow and develop in their working environment. This is increasingly seen as positive, as demonstrating emotional intelligence and insight, and as something to be proud of.

Indeed, senior executives are now more willing than ever to acknowledge that at some point they have had coaching and that it has informed them as leaders and influenced their value systems, the way they deal with other people or their approach to their work. Today this is more common in management circles than it has ever been. Coaching used to happen when things were going wrong or as a last resort and then wasn't talked about, certainly not in a positive way. That's a big difference.

The second trend that in my view makes coaching more professional and more viable is that it tends now to be much more integrative. Nowadays coaches are much less interested in making dogmatic statements about one view or another. They want to use whatever works, borrowing ideas from different approaches, like sports coaching for example. They ask themselves what will work for this particular person, at this particular moment, with this particular question.

Thirdly, the coaching profession globally is becoming more professional, mature and regulated. Coaches receive proper training, adhere to transparent accreditation and codes of conduct, keep serious files and undergo regular supervision. Research is increasingly carried out. These days, I notice with some satisfaction that for the first time new clients are beginning to inquire about my background, training and supervision. Clients are also becoming more professional in what they expect from coaches.

In practice, coaching is like the experience everyone has had at some time where a good listener is there just for them, to look at what is important just to them. This enhances their own reflective resources and helps them develop their own ideas about a situation. On top of this, the coach may be able to contribute input from experience, for example, opening up other perspectives, considering issues from different points of view, or using creative ways of sorting material. Just giving a very good summary can make a big difference.

With one client I drew up a plan for meetings. After one session he was clear in his mind that he should be looking at alternatives to his present job. The coaching helped him to realise that there was a lot going on in his organisation that he didn't like

but because he worked so hard he hadn't given himself time to think about it. This single session gave him that opportunity and he later resigned from his job. I consider this a successful assignment even though it finished after only one session. On another occasion, I had a contract for five sessions with someone who had just been promoted to a leadership position over his peer group, which can be difficult. From the start he seemed to be coping very well in his new position. I thought one or two sessions would be enough but at the end of the fourth he asked for more. He just felt he wanted someone to support him for the first year in his new leadership role, and we're still having conversations.

What will happen on a coaching assignment is often very difficult to predict, although you write a contract and plan ahead as much as you can. But you never know what's going to develop. Sometimes only after a few sessions the client will trust you enough to tell you about something that is really bothering them. That can change your perspective completely. In coaching, unlike other forms of consulting, forward planning could place restrictions on the experience for the client. So you're very exposed and completely at the mercy of the conversation as it develops. That can be scary, both for the client and for the coach.

Just as a coaching relationship takes both the coach and client on an uncharted journey, coaching itself is evolving and changing in the way it is perceived and used. All the signs are that it will become an even more valued part of individual and organisational development in the future.

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