

Inside workplace coaching: A brief overview

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Abstract— Coaching in the workplace has garnered widespread popularity, leading many individuals from diverse sectors to express eagerness in coaching others. With the historical roots of workplace coaching extending into psychology, adult learning, and leadership development literature, it is unsurprising that definitions and types of coaching vary based on the context and specialisations of expert practitioners and scholars engaged in coaching as a profession or area of research. This article offers a brief overview of coaching in the organisational context, presenting a working definition and a comparison between internal and external forms of coaching. It briefly introduces workplace coaching during organisational change, inviting readers to delve into the diverse nature of workplace coaching.

Keywords—Workplace Coaching, Internal Coaching, External Coaching, Coaching Practice

INCREASING POPULARITY OF COACHING

A growing body of research sheds light on the utility of workplace coaching as an effective means to support employees in improving their skills, attitude, and resilience during periods of change within the organisational context (Bickerich et al., 2018; Grant, 2014; Grant et al., 2009; Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Meyer et al., 2023). Cannon-Bowers et al. (2023) considers workplace coaching as “one of the fastest growing performance-enhancing interventions used by modern organisations” (p.1).

As the field of workplace coaching continues to gain popularity and organisations increasingly undergo various changes and transitions, exploring the

multifaceted nature of workplace coaching and its potential benefits becomes increasingly important. The growth of coaching is promising, as evidenced by the formal recognition of the psychology subdisciplines of positive and coaching psychology in 1990 and 2002, respectively (Brock, 2008). However, the surge in coaching's popularity extends beyond these milestones. The prevalence of informal coaching in many organisations necessitates ongoing efforts to elevate the quality of coaching consultations, enhance the industry's image, and advocate for evidence-based practices. This is particularly critical amid escalating demand and initiatives focused on fortifying the evidence-based and scientific underpinnings of coaching (Corrie, 2010; Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Koopman et al., 2021; Lane & Corrie, 2006).

WORKPLACE COACHING DEFINED

Workplace coaching is variably defined by authors, often influenced by context, specialisation, and individual perspectives of scholars or practitioners in the organisational domain. The definition of coaching, whether perceived as a learning and development tool, a behaviour change intervention, a wellbeing promotion tool, or an executive development strategy, tends to vary based on the specific lens through which it is examined.

Sir John Whitmore, a pioneer in the executive coaching industry, expressed that coaching is “unlocking a person’s potential to maximise their own performance” (Whitmore, 2009, p.10). Clutterbuck (1998) defined coaching as a “pragmatic approach to helping people manage their acquisition or improvement of skills” (p.19).

Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) define coaching as “a Socratic-based dialogue between a facilitator (coach) and a participant (client), where the facilitator primarily employs open-ended questions to stimulate the self-awareness and personal responsibility of the participant” (p.74). Other researchers have more directly associated coaching with improving job performance (Jarvis, 2004), behaviour change (Cox et al., 2010) or developing individual self-control abilities (Grant & Cavanagh, 2011). While most of the aforementioned definitions underscore growth and improvement, some researchers, such as those examining coaching definitions in medical education, argue for a clearer operational definition of coaching that better aligns with coaching in the healthcare contexts (Landreville et al., 2019).

For the purpose of this paper, and in alignment with some of the existing knowledge in coaching literature, I describe workplace coaching as a developmental intervention in which an employee engages in confidential dialogues with a coaching practitioner for the purpose of exploring areas for improvement, fostering strengths, and applying solution-focused techniques to enhance both themselves and the organisation, including their performance and wellbeing.

This understanding of workplace coaching reinforces the idea that coaching, which is heavily rooted in psychological theories and principles (Whitmore, 1992) and is known as '*a positive psychology dialogue*' (Passmore & Evans-Krimme, 2021), serves as an intervention that not only assists in addressing weaknesses but also nurtures and reinforces strengths. With a holistic perspective, it has the potential to improve both personal and professional aspects of the coachee's life. This aligns with the 'third-generation' approach to workplace coaching, as proposed by Grant (2017), "an approach that explicitly focuses on enhancing both the performance and the wellbeing of individuals and organisations in ways that are sustainable and personally meaningful" (p.1).

For the interest of this paper, it is also crucial to note that there are concerns about negative consequences of change in the workplace on employee wellbeing (Guidetti et al., 2018). Whilst exploring wellbeing is not within the scope of the current article, the proposed understanding of what coaching is establishes a foundation for considering the coachee as a whole person, recognising that their growth and development in the workplace may intricately

contribute to their wellbeing.

INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL

Coaching in organisations can be delivered via two forms, or a combination of both. Firstly, there is internal coach approach (Frisch, 2001; Jones et al., 2016), and secondly, external coaches are expert independent coaching practitioners (Thompson, 2022) who often collaborate with organisations and companies on a temporary contractual basis within specified and agreed timeframe (Nicolau et al., 2023).

The benefits and effectiveness of workplace coaching, including both internal and external approaches, have been extensively explored in the literature. The results of a study conducted by Rekalde et al. (2017) revealed that using external coaches as a method for executive development was more effective than other training and development methods, particularly in facilitating sustained and lasting management behaviour changes.

However, coaching is not without criticism. For instance, as highlighted by Berglas (2002), it's plausible that an executive coach is engaged with an executive who possesses an underlying psychological disorder. This condition (underlying psychological disorder) may serve as a hindrance to the executive's ability to demonstrate certain leadership skills in the workplace. Berglas underscores the necessity for protective measures to avoid situations where coaches work with individuals whose challenges, stemming from psychological issues, cannot be addressed or improved through skill enhancement in executive coaching. Without such safeguards, both the coached executives and the organisations they are part of may encounter adverse consequences.

Nevertheless, in this paper, I propose that workplace coaching, akin to other helping professions, necessitates a more nuanced approach to substantiate its benefits and advantages. Hence, exploring what coaching is and how internal coaching differentiates from external forms becomes crucial. This, in turn, facilitates a more structured approach to explore what coaching can do for individuals and organisations. Readers can delve into the literature further to better understand what type of coaching suits their organisation and employees' needs and why. This is especially crucial when coaching is to be employed before or during periods of organisational change.

As noted above, workplace coaching can take two

forms: internal and external, with variations or combinations of both. Internal coaching is defined as a "one-to-one developmental intervention supported by the organisation and provided by a colleague who is trusted to foster individual professional growth" (Frisch, 2001, p. 241). This definition underscores the "colleague as coach" and not necessarily a line manager or 'manager as coach'.

The current paper proposes that an internal coach can indeed be a line manager or a colleague outside of line management. This aligns well with the shift from the traditional 'manager as controller' to the contemporary 'manager as coach' and the emerging 'colleague as coach' approach, all of which emphasise employee development, making a step towards collaboration and organisational support. (Carter, 2005; Tamkin et al., 2003). It is important to note that if an organisation adopts the 'manager as coach' approach, the responsibility for the role of the internal coach will be exclusively assigned to managers or those in line management.

External coaches are generally more skilled and provide higher objectivity, as they are usually unaffected by internal politics in their clients' organisations (Newton & Bristoll, 2013). On the other hand, internal coaches often possess a profound understanding of the organisation's inner workings (Tyler, 2007), are known to be more readily available (Tompkins, 2018), and may be a more cost-effective coaching solution compared to external coaches (Pandolfi, 2020), hence their growing popularity (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2019).

McCarthy and Milner (2020) delved into the benefits of coaching for both internal coaches and employees. Their findings, derived from a thematic analysis of 580 responses, revealed that employees who received coaching not only acquired new skills and knowledge that made them more innovative and adaptable to change but also that managers who provided internal coaching felt motivated and satisfied when they observed positive transformations in their employees. These findings align with a study by Abid et al. (2020), which highlighted the positive impact of internal coaching interventions on both employee motivation and overall workplace thriving, illustrating how coaching can have a mutually beneficial effect. Despite the findings reported by McCarthy and Milner (2020) and Abid et al. (2020), Schalk & Landeta (2017) suggest that organisations should evaluate which

forms of coaching, internal or external, best meet their needs and objectives.

The current paper takes the standpoint that, despite all the positive outcomes associated with coaching, it is wise to consider the specific context in which coaching takes place. Caution and sensitivity should be exercised to ensure that interpretations of findings by other researchers and practitioners are not universally applied to all contexts and clients.

IS COACHING SUITABLE FOR EVERY TYPE OF ORGANISATION?

The use of coaching as one of several tools and strategies within the workplace is not confined to a specific organisational type. Rather, organisations should clearly define their objectives for coaching programs and determine how coaching can address individual or organisational needs, objectives, or challenges. As such, coaching can be applied across all types of organisations. However, organisations must decide on the type of coaching, preferred methodology, coach selection, and the appropriate duration. They should evaluate their capacity to provide the desired coaching internally, externally, or through a combination of both approaches. Additionally, organisations need a comprehensive understanding of the potential strengths and weaknesses associated with utilising coaching for their specific objectives.

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For instance, both private and public organisations in various sectors and industries experience different scales of change, transition, and restructuring, which sometimes result in varying degrees of stress and uncertainty for employees. A response to change is a cognitive and behavioural reaction rooted in adaptation and a thorough comprehension of how to respond to the change (Khaw et al., 2023). Organisations deploy a range of interventions to combat stress effectively (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005).

Workplace coaching is viewed as one among several interventions with the potential to alleviate work-related stress (Ebrahimi, 2023).

A study conducted by Grant et al. (2009) in the Australian nursing sector within public health demonstrated that executives, following a regimen of 360-degree feedback, a half-day leadership workshop, and four individual coaching sessions over a 10-week period, experienced heightened resilience, goal attainment, and overall wellbeing. The research also proposed that short-term coaching interventions could effectively support executives in navigating organisational change. Of significance is the study's adoption of a cognitive-behavioral, solution-focused approach, integrating coaching into a broader program. Consequently, the emphasis lies on addressing the specific needs of individual clients and understanding how the holistic program positively influences the organisation, fostering positive outcomes, making the type of organisation secondary in importance.

In a parallel vein, Hakro and Mathew (2020) undertook an inquiry to assess the impact of Cognitive Coaching, implemented as a program in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Oman, on the behavior and attitudes of leaders across academic, administrative, and professional service departments. The results indicated the effectiveness of coaching for both personal and professional development. Nonetheless, the study emphasised that, particularly within the Middle Eastern organisational context, the endorsement at the board level and attentiveness to cultural nuances in coaching relationships are imperative to enhance the effectiveness of coaching initiatives.

Earlier in this paper, Schalk and Landeta (2017) proposed that organisations should assess which forms of coaching, whether internal or external, align best with their needs and objectives. In essence, irrespective of whether coaching is implemented in public or private sector organisations, and regardless of the industry or geographical location, the primary focus should be on what the organisation aims to achieve through coaching and how those objectives compare with the benefits offered by other forms of helping and developmental initiatives, such as training, mentoring, consulting, workplace counselling, and employee assistance programs. Therefore, the definition and understanding of coaching, how it is utilised and its potential benefits

within organisations are intricately connected to the context in which coaching is practiced, organisational objectives and dynamics, whether the organisation is undergoing minor or major changes, organisational culture, leadership endorsement, and the coaching approaches, methodologies and frameworks employed within that specific context.

CONCLUSION

This brief piece has highlighted the nuanced nature of workplace coaching, suggesting that it lacks a universally applied definition and is more context-dependent. Both internal and external coaching offer benefits to organisations, with the choice between them depending on the specific needs and objectives of each organisation. Workplace coaching serves as a valuable tool for assisting individuals and organisations in enhancing performance, resilience, and overall wellbeing. Notably, coaching appears to be beneficial even during periods of organisational change. The increasing popularity of workplace coaching is evident across various sectors, with diverse organisations recognising its potential.

In practice, the crux for organisations lies in articulating clear objectives for coaching and developing a comprehensive understanding of how coaching can tangibly benefit both the organisation and its employees. This entails pinpointing specific coaching types and methodologies that align with the organisation's distinctive context and overarching goals, taking into account the specific needs of its employees.

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