

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

There is a multitude of coaching books on the market, but none focusing exclusively on internal executive coaching. You might think that the dearth of attention is because, to all intents and purposes, there are few differences between internal and external executive coaching but this is not so—neither from the point of view of the coaches nor of the organisations that deploy them. The fact that internal coaches coach within the organisation that employs them has a variety of consequences for the coaches, some beneficial, some less so, that need exploring. Also, from the point of view of an organisation wanting to provide coaching for its managers, the processes involved in selecting, training, and supporting a cadre of internal coaches are vastly different from those required for procuring the services of external coaches. The costs, benefits, and challenges presented by the two options for providing coaching are sufficiently different for internal coaching to deserve special attention.

What do we mean by internal coaching?

Over the past fifteen to twenty years, most managers have become aware of the terms “executive” or “business” coaching as a service

procured from an external provider, often reserved for senior managers and those recognised as having high potential. The idea of in-house or “internal” coaches is a newer concept but one that is being embraced by organisations in the UK and is currently experiencing a surge in popularity. So what has led to this development?

In the 1990s, a trend for making cuts in human resource (HR) departments and passing responsibility for a number of personnel functions, including staff development, to line managers, gathered speed. It was driven partly by cost considerations and partly by the recognition that managers were best placed to deliver those functions (staff development, in particular). In many organisations, the transition was bumpy. Managers often received little guidance in how to carry out their development role, found it uncongenial, or had little aptitude for it. However, since then the use of coaching to develop managers has risen dramatically (Feldman & Lankau, 2005) and management development programmes have gradually encouraged a switch in style from a directive management style to a more facilitating, coaching approach to developing their staff (Tamkin, Hirsh, & Tyers, 2003). Two further developments have also taken place:

- employees themselves are now generally expected to take a measure of responsibility for their own development and
- some organisations are developing a cadre of specialist “internal coaches” to enrich the development activities available to staff.

It is important to distinguish between “managers as coaches”, that is, managers using a coaching style with their staff, who are not the focus of this book, and “internal coaches”, who are. Frisch (2001) described internal executive coaching as:

a one-on-one developmental intervention supported by the organisation and provided by a colleague of those coached who is trusted to shape and deliver a programme yielding individual professional growth. (p. 242)

He stressed that internal coaches should not be in the chain of command of those they coach. This sharply differentiates internal coaches from managers as coaches. I would add that ideally internal coaches should not even work in the same part of the organisation as their clients for a number of reasons that will become clear.

Carter (2005) clarified the nature of their role when she wrote:

The internal coach is comparable in every sense to the external coach, with the exception that the internal coach is an employee of the same organisation as their coachees. (p. 7)

Hunt and Weintraub's (2006) definition adds a further dimension: the fact that the coaching is for the benefit of both the individual and their organisation, defining "developmental coaching" as:

individualised, relationship-based dialogues that promote learning from on-the-job experiences and have as their goal improving the short-term and/or long-term effectiveness of the coachee and, as such, his or her organisation. (p. 1)

So the key features of internal coaching are:

- that it is a learning and development activity delivered by one employee of an organisation to another (working in different chains of command)
- that it aims to deliver professional growth to the employee and improve their effectiveness
- that it is analogous to external coaching (with all that that implies in terms of training, ethical behaviour and professionalism) and
- that it involves two clients—the coaching client and the organisation.

Why a book on internal coaching now?

Frisch described internal coaching as having been "flying under the radar" of mainstream coaching (Frisch, 2001) but that is the case no longer. A series of reports from the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD, 2008; CIPD, 2009) and the Ridler Reports (Ridler & Co, 2008; Ridler & Co, 2013) have charted the increase in the prevalence of internal coaching, and the following is just a small selection of other references to its rise:

... the most rapid area of growth in distribution of developmental coaching services may be those provided by well-trained internal coaches. (Hunt & Weintraub, 2006, p. 1)

More organisations are developing a cadre of internally accredited coaches ... to work below top team level. (Lambert, 2008, p. 8)

Large organisations are now employing fewer external coaches as they develop their internal coaching capability. (Hawkins, 2012, p. 6)

79% of organisations expect to see a small (40%) or large (39%) increase in internal coaching over the next three years. (Ridler & Co, 2013, p. 8)

In addition, the coaching professional bodies are waking up to the fact that many of their members are now internal coaches. In 2011, the European Mentoring & Coaching Council, UK (EMCC UK) set up an internal coaching special interest group and, in February 2013, devoted a specific area of its website to internal coaching. Sessions at coaching conferences focusing on internal coaching—usually led by a lead coach practitioner—have also made an appearance. And finally, coach training providers have witnessed the trend: where ten years ago participants on coach training programmes were almost entirely independents setting up external coaching practices, now there are many more internal coaches joining open programmes, plus a rise in organisations buying in coach training for a cohort of employees who will coach internally.

It is no accident that the trend towards building an internal coaching capability coincided with a world recession. When the economic downturn bit, and economies were sought in many organisations, some finance directors were startled to discover how much was being spent on external coaches and looked to learning and development (L&D) departments for options to reduce the bill. Even before that, organisations were looking at ways to meet demand for coaching from their employees:

Where demand for coaching has exceeded supply, the favoured response has been to encourage the use of more internal coaching—nearly 50% of those whose coaching budget was under pressure have responded in this fashion. (Ridler & Co, 2008, p. 1)

However, while cost savings may often be the catalyst for the development of cadres of internal coaches, organisations are finding many other benefits too, which I shall describe.

In the UK, internal coaching is becoming particularly well established in the public sector, largely in response to deep cuts in L&D budgets and, in many cases, very close scrutiny of the use of external consultants and coaches. But as Hawkins has noted as a possible future scenario:

The public sector will continue to cut all external coaching and put further pressure on internal coaches to make their services spread further, in a shorter time, without the requisite support infrastructure. (Hawkins, 2012, p. 179)

This lack of the “requisite support infrastructure” is a theme that will be explored further. It is not only a risk in the public sector.

How does the book work?

The inspiration for this book, and the “**Facts and figures**” in each chapter, come from research I carried out (St John-Brooks, 2010) with 123 internal coaches in over thirty organisations based in the UK, supplemented by around fifty interviews with coaches, coach supervisors, coach trainers, and lead coaches. Its purpose is to provide insights into the world of internal coaching. I have included case studies and questions to help you to think about “how is this relevant to me?” It is not designed to be a textbook prescribing best practice to setting up and running an internal coaching scheme, but a way of sharing the experiences of the many organisations that have already done so. The aim is to provide readers with choices.

In Part I (Chapters Two to Four), I focus on the experience of being an internal coach. It is designed primarily for internal coaches or managers who are deciding whether to volunteer to become an internal coach. It will also be of value to those of you who are thinking of setting up a coaching cohort—providing a taste of what it is actually like.

In most ways the internal coaches in my research operated no differently from their external coach colleagues in terms of what approaches they used, or the skills and techniques they deployed. Some had post-graduate qualifications and many had years of experience. However, it was also clear that they encountered a myriad of ethical issues, most of which arose solely because they coached internally.

The idea that internal coaches are likely to have to deal with more ethical dilemmas than external coaches equates to the notion that the

role of external coach is “cleaner” than that of the internal coach: that is, the management of confidentiality, boundaries, and conflicts of interest is likely to be more challenging for internal coaches than for most external coaches. When I first published my research findings, they came as no surprise to experienced internal coaches but were an eye-opener to some coaching sponsors who had not previously appreciated the complexity of the world that internal coaches inhabit.

A key issue peculiar to internal coaching is the intricate network of relationships that the coaches have to manage and the pressures that come from being part of the same “system” as their clients. The interviews that I carried out with around fifty practitioners suggest that while this by no means hamstring internal coaches’ activities, it does mean that they need to be alive to the challenges, contract with their clients very tightly, and be more alert to the possibility of ethical dilemmas than would be the case for an external coach.

Part II (Chapters Five to Ten) is aimed principally at people, often in human resources (HR) or learning and development (L&D) functions, who already have or are seriously thinking of setting up an internal coaching cohort within their organisation—of becoming, in fact, the “lead coach” in their organisation. Part II also embraces coaching champions, coaching supervisors, and coach trainers. It draws on and shares the experiences of numerous organisations, many of whom have now employed internal coaches for a number of years, to offer ideas on the whole process, from the selection, training, and matching of coaches to clients, through the marketing of the coaches to the organisation, the support provided to the coaches, and the options for evaluating the effectiveness of the internal coaching service. I make no apology for devoting a lot of space to the ways in which organisations can support their coaches. My main concern, flowing from my research, was the sense I received that many internal coaches were operating in a vacuum. Even if money is tight, there are many options for offering them support, and I outline a number of them.

The fact that the practice of internal coaching has unique characteristics when compared with other kinds of coaching and development activities would in itself merit special attention. However, there is also a need for guidance on the process of setting up an internal coaching resource. Are you clear about the purpose for which your coaching pool is being set up? Is there buy-in from the board? Has the strategy been properly worked through? Will the coaches get the support

they need—in particular, continuous professional development and supervision? Are there fully thought through policies and guidance on such issues as how to deal with coaching relationships that are not working, how session records are kept, or what happens if a client keeps cancelling sessions? Is there a code of ethics? There is some evidence to suggest that some organisations have regarded internal coaching as a quick, cheap fix. Where this is the case, internal coaches have been left without support, isolated and at risk. This book makes the case for changing that state of affairs.

Summary

If you are an internal coach or coach lead, I hope that this book will leave you feeling fully affirmed in all that you do and inspired to do even more. I hope you will feel more able to identify ethical dilemmas and the implications for your practice and how to resolve them, and also more knowledgeable about what the options are for your further development. If you are thinking about becoming an internal coach, I hope you will have a clearer idea about what it involves, both the challenges and the huge rewards.

If you are running an internal coaching pool, I hope the book will provide you with a benchmark of how other organisations are approaching this in terms of: working to a clear coaching strategy, having robust policies, providing a good training and development programme for the coaches, and evaluating success. And if you are thinking about setting up a pool, I hope you will gain a strong sense of what your choices are.