

Cultivating a Coaching Culture

— How to do it

“Coaching” has become a buzzword in the past few years. Consequently, an increasing number of HR professionals think about how to harness the benefits of coaching for their respective organizations.

Let’s look at what coaching actually is, what the benefits of developing a coaching culture are, and how it can be done.

Coaching

According to Merriam-Webster the word “coach” derives from the German word “Kutsche” which is “a large usually closed four-wheeled carriage having doors in the sides and generally a front and a back seat inside and an elevated seat in front for the driver.”

Now you may wonder how a four-wheeled carriage is related to the modern meaning of a coach for personal or professional development.

The carriage actually can serve as a metaphor for coaching: it helps people get from A to B faster than they would get there walking by themselves. Equally, a personal or corporate coach helps you to achieve your objectives faster than you would “walking” by yourself.

Unlike a mentor, trainer or consultant, a coach rarely provides advice or answers but instead helps the coachee discover the best possible way of achieving the given or chosen objectives. A key coaching tool therefore is questioning in a way that fosters deep thinking and that creates enhanced awareness.

The great Peter Drucker was perhaps one of the first consultants who acted as a true coach at a time when “coaching” was an unknown term in connection with corporate performance.

“It was never his style to bring CEOs clear, concise answers to their problems but rather to frame the questions that could uncover the larger issues standing in the way of performance. ‘My job,’ he once told a client, ‘is to ask questions. It’s your job

to provide answers.” So says Dan Lufkin, a co-founder of the investment banking firm Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette Inc., which often consulted with Drucker in the 1960s.

“He would never give you an answer. That was frustrating for a while. But while it required a little more brain matter, it was enormously helpful to us.” [Business Week article “The Man Who Invented Management”, November 2005]

Several studies proved the effectiveness and great benefits of coaching. The key benefits include:

- Improved performance of coachees through the support and guidance of the coach
- Higher retention of top talent through supportive and engaging environment
- Shift in engagement as coachees become increasingly empowered

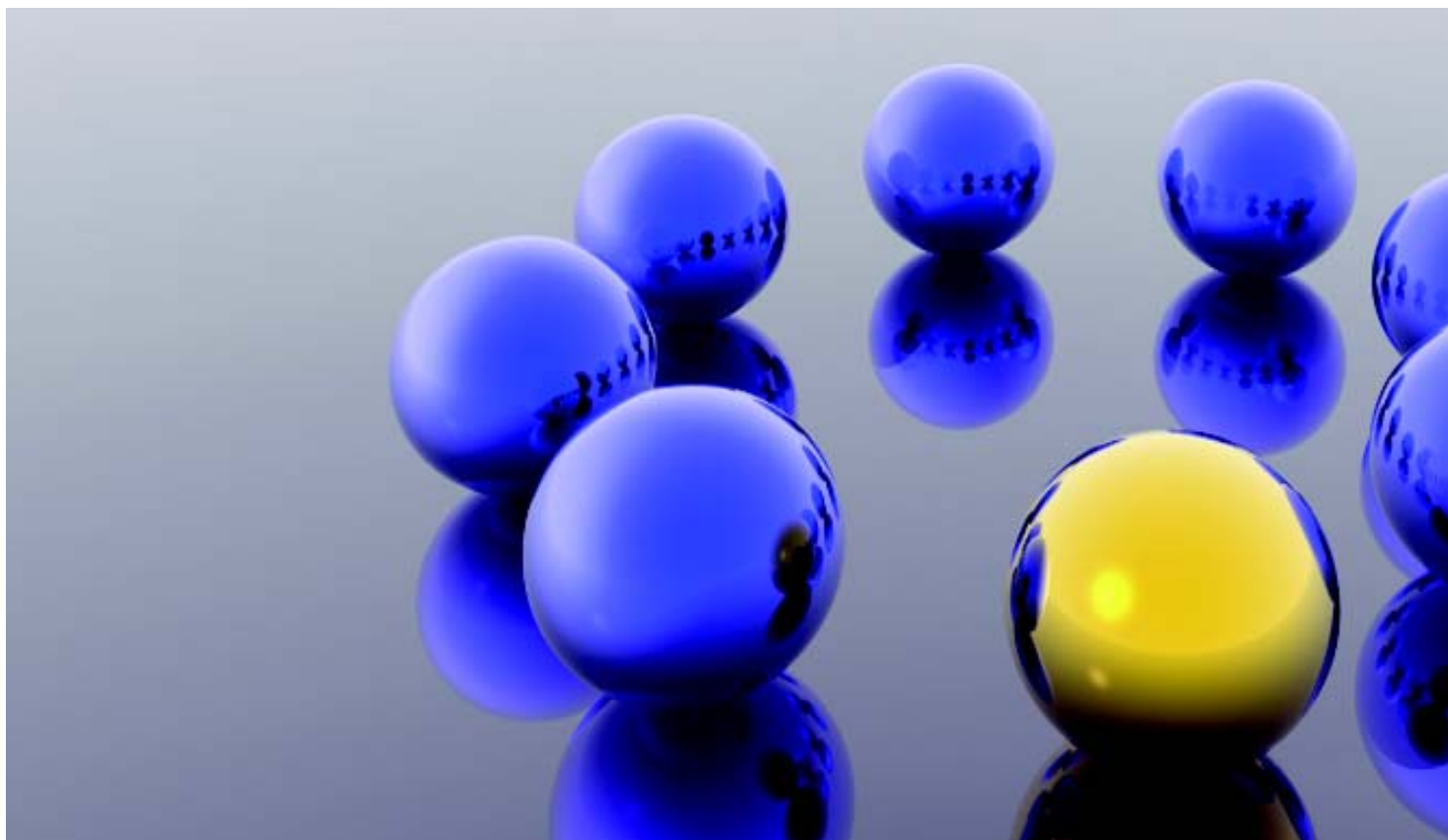
In fact, once a functioning coaching culture is established, leadership actually becomes a more simple job. However, as in any cultural change, developing a corporate coaching culture requires considerable effort, resources, dedication and commitment, particularly from top management.

Corporate culture

“A culture is made — or destroyed — by its articulate voices.” This quote by the Russian born American writer and novelist Ayn Rand gives us some hints on how culture is made. Now, let’s look at the origins of corporate culture.

Awareness of corporate culture was created in the late 1970s and early 1980s with a number of management books on the subject. Perhaps the most popular book at the time was *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life* by T.E. Deal and A.A. Kennedy, published in 1982. They defined “corporate culture” as “the way we do things around here... a system of informal rules that spells out how people are to behave most of the time.”

I particularly like this definition because of its simplicity and accuracy.



The above quotation of Ayn Rand says that culture is made or destroyed by the articulate voices of the members of a certain culture. Obviously, in a corporate setting, the most articulate voices, or let's say the most influential voices, come from top management, particularly the head of the organization. Hence, what he or she says and does have a great impact on the development of any corporate culture. Being a role model, the head of the company should perhaps be the first to get a coach.

What it takes to develop a coaching culture

Successful examples of cultural transformations to coaching cultures suggest creating three levels of coaching:

1. External executive coaching for senior management
2. Dedicated internal coaches for middle management
3. Managers as coaches for staff

For smaller organizations, level two might not be required and could be replaced with level one.

Level one

The first level is of course the most simple one as you will just need to look for qualified external coaches. I recommend having a panel of coaches for senior management rather than just one single coach for all of them. Not every coach is necessarily "good" for every executive. A panel of coaches also provides some choice for the senior managers and will make buy-in more likely.

Level two

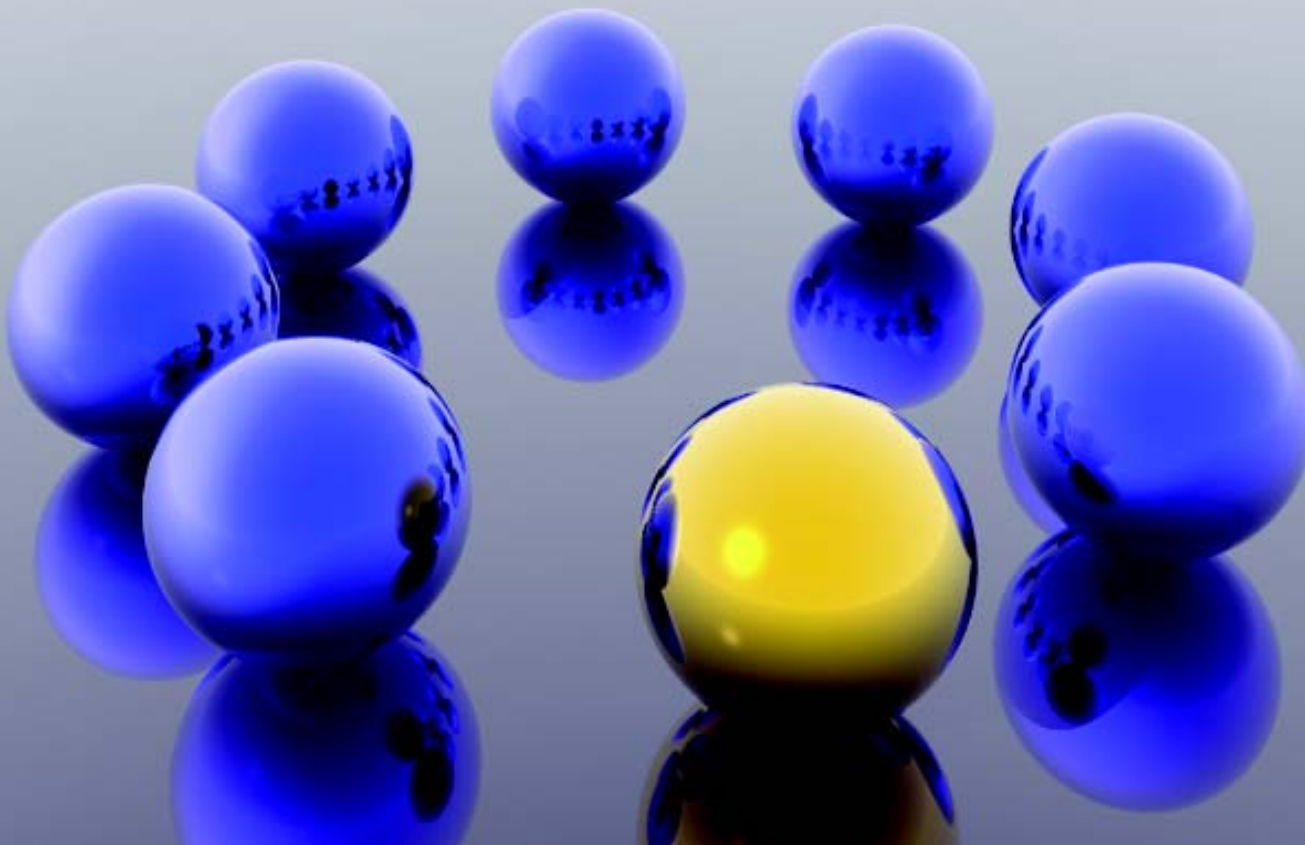
For level two, you need to have one or more people to undergo a rather extensive coach-specific training in order to become a qualified internal coach. I would consider a coach-specific training lasting 80-120 hours as appropriate for a person to become an internal coach. Also, at least in the first one to two years, the internal coach should work together with a mentor coach for support. Furthermore, the internal coach should spend at least 30 per cent of the working time with coaching. To become a masterful coach, lots of practice is necessary.

The advantage of having an internal coach is not only the direct availability; it's also that managers are supported in their efforts to coach their staff.

In most cases, the dedicated internal coaches will be members of the HR department who perform part-time or full-time coaching.

Level three

For managers to start coaching their staff, they need to undergo some coach training as well. A one-day or two-day course won't make them perfect coaches but will provide them with the basic tools to be able to start coaching their staff. Ideally, they receive some professional follow-up coaching and/or coach training during the first three to six months after



they start coaching their people. Managers are likely to face a number of difficulties, especially when they start using coaching to manage their people.

For example, the department head of a retail company recently completed a coach training program for managers and started coaching his team members. A major change for him was to give more ownership over actions to be taken to his staff. He was puzzled when some of his people said: "I prefer that you tell me what to do. After all, you are the boss and should know what I need to do."

Only when he realized the root cause for this attitude was he able to coach his staff to take more ownership. In this case, the employees were afraid that their own ideas would be considered as stupid and therefore would make them lose face with their boss. Additionally, they were afraid to take responsibility for the action to be taken.

Obviously, the manager needed to deepen the trust between him and his staff and make the latter more comfortable with the new approach. As a result, over time, his team became more engaged and self-motivated.

"When I started coaching my people, I had to spend considerably more time with them at the beginning. However, it more than paid back because I have now a much more

proactive team and my job actually became more effortless and rewarding over time."

Becoming a coach

A coach-specific assessment will help reveal the already existing strengths and areas for improvement before the start of any coach-specific training. The assessment results can then be used to create an individual development plan for the internal coach and/or the managers following the coach training program.

Conclusion

It is a proven fact that professional coaching is an effective method to improve engagement and retention, particularly of top talent. Transforming a corporate culture to a coaching culture needs first of all strong commitment from top management and then sufficient resources and efforts to drive the necessary developments on all three levels of coaching. HR is in the best position to act as a driver and supporter of this change process.

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