

Going the distance

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Introducing coaching is one battle. Making it work is another. Four organisations share their experiences with *Kirstie Redford*

With coaching increasingly being used by UK organisations, we ask four diverse organisations about their commitment to coaching and what they get out of it.

VSO

For the international development charity VSO, coaching was introduced to help communications between managers and employees, and specifically to improve the way managers listen, says organisational and staff development manager, Michelle Hammond,

"Making coaching a key management style has enabled us to better empower people, listen to employee concerns and improve their performances," she says.

With a tight budget, the charity does not have a separate function to implement coaching. Its training department sits within HR, and the programme is co-facilitated with two internal staff from the HR team and an external provider.

"Coaching helps employees explore the issues they are up against to encourage them to think more thoroughly and take ownership of their problems," says Hammond. However, she admits that VSO is still on a steep learning curve with the introduction of its coaching scheme, and the initial model for the programme required some modification.

"We've changed the programme all the way through, so it has been important to remain flexible," says Hammond.

Being an international organisation, VSO has also come up against some culture clashes. "We're finding that coaching works in some countries and not in others," says Hammond.

"Some are more hierarchical and so coaching is not the first method they choose to use. After taking initial soundings, they can see the value in it. We just need to educate them on the benefits it can bring."

She also discovered that coaching works much better face-to-face than trying to communicate across distances.

"We're trying to enable all the coaching to be done face-to-face now," she says.

Measuring the success of coaching is notoriously difficult. Having rolled out its scheme in October 2004, VSO is still trying to gauge how well it is working.

"We're trying to evaluate the impact it is having on the ground," says Hammond. "However, we're already seeing a greater awareness of skills."

She adds that, overall, the programme has had very good feedback and VSO aims to get further insight from a planned staff survey, which will contain specific questions about the coaching.

BEA Systems

Global software company BEA Systems sees coaching as the most effective way to develop staff within its fast-paced culture.

"Our culture places high demands on our employees," says Zoe Spicer, HR director for Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA) at the company.

"Coaching provides cost effective and on-the-spot development today, tomorrow and whenever it is required."

BEA provides three levels of coaching.

First, it has executive coaching, which targets prospective senior executives.

Second, it provides coaching workshops for all employees defined as 'top talent'.

"This helps staff foster everyday coaching relationships and encourages coaching as part of our culture," explains Spicer.

Third, it offers training to line managers to help them directly coach their staff in their areas.

"We've also had requests from employees who would like to start peer-to-peer coaching," Spicer adds.

BEA's global management and development team-based in the US in San Jose, California, is responsible for the coaching programmes and sources external partners in the regions. The EMEA HR team also has the power to tailor coaching to meet its workforce's specific needs.

"Coachees are encouraged to select their preferred coach to ensure best fit wherever possible," says Spicer. "We encourage all employees to spot coaching opportunities and make the time to assist others in finding their own solutions."

BEA uses 360-degree assessment reviews of coachees before and after coaching to evaluate its effectiveness.

"This has produced interesting qualitative feedback," says Spicer. "But ultimately, when an employee comes to HR and asks for a coach on hearsay, that's a success."

West Bromwich Building Society

West Bromwich Building Society has used coaching to change the company's culture. With flatter structures and shrinking cost bases, Paul Turner, general manager (people) at the society, believes a new type of manager is required to help motivate and coach staff.

"The biggest driver of culture change is management behaviour," he says. "You need leadership. We require managers to become 'player coaches' - working with the team as well as leading them."

The building society uses external coaches to help with initial training, although Turner admits that it is mainly regarded as an internal initiative. "We did use external coaches to upskill our own trainer coaches. You have to get this expertise from somewhere," he says.

However, it is the HR team that has driven the process. "It has put in some specific definitions around what coaching means to West Bromwich, giving a hard-edged approach," says Turner.

The building society is in a unique position as Turner is one of just a handful of people in the UK doing a research degree in coaching. With no blanket national accreditation scheme, he believes defining what coaching is within an organisation is half the challenge. "Many people say they are coaches," he says. "But my research suggests they adopt a style that's not necessarily coaching," he says.

West Bromwich Building Society rolled out its coaching programme in 2002 after a pilot scheme in 2001. It now uses an accreditation system for its internal coaches. "It's critical to have some sort of benchmark system," says Turner. "To gain accreditation, coaches need to prove they understand the theory, and back this up with testimonials from coachees."

Eighty managers have become accredited coaches and in 2004, 90% of managers and 87% of staff said they believed coaching had improved their performance.

As for return on investment, Turner says it is using internal measures such as motivation. "We really are finding that in each area coaching touches, benefits appear," he says. "External benchmarks can be seen in the fact that we've received record profits over the past couple of years.

But the problem is these links aren't proven - coaching is just part of this success."

Deloitte

To business consultancy Deloitte, coaching is all about talent management, says Jane Lucien-Scholle, a partner at the firm.

"Management of top talent is top of our agenda, as the cost of recruitment and attrition is so high," she says. "We see coaching and mentoring in areas such as leadership as an important area to invest in."

Deloitte's coaching programme was introduced 18 months ago and specifically targets female employees preparing for promotion to senior positions.

"The reason we want to bring more women in is not really down to fairness - it's the business case for it. There will not be enough senior talent in the market unless more women come on board. As women start to have families and maybe work part-time, they often don't receive the same ad-hoc informal coaching that men do. People think part-time motherhood is not compatible with a senior career, but we think it is," says Lucien-Scholle.

Deloitte's executive coaching is targeted at director and partner-level employees.

"This is a one-year process, where they meet people from other parts of the business and receive coaching on management styles," says Lucien-Scholle. "We take a peer group of people up for promotion and try to give them the skills and knowledge they need to get that promotion."

Deloitte has talent managers who sit on its executive board. "They don't have an HR background, but they do focus on how to coach and mentor," says Lucien-Scholle. "We have an internal department for executive coaching and also use external coaches. In one way, it's easier to use a central facility, but sometimes you also want the external anonymity."

Selling coaching into the organisation can be tough, especially for the managers who are expected to train as coaches.

"It's human nature to be sceptical, so you need to overcome this," she says. "People who you want to train as coaches may think it takes too much time and worry they won't be measured on it or get any credit. The staff being coached are usually delighted - it's the management you have to sell the idea to. So reassure them of the benefits. Getting your chief executive behind [the idea] will also help."

Deloitte has some robust figures to back up its success. According to its annual people survey, 73% of women who took maternity leave in 2004 have returned to work and there has been double the number of promotions among women.

"Coaching really has started to pay dividends and we are confident we will see even more," says Lucien-Scholle.

HR learning points

- Face-to-face coaching works best
- Be flexible - you may have to modify your programme after it is launched
- Think carefully about the content of a programme and the tools and models you want to use before starting. Do you want one model, or is your team capable of working with several?
- Reassure staff about the benefits of getting involved in the programme and that it doesn't just mean extra work
- Have a game plan - there are no quick wins. You have to view coaching as a behavioural change process
- Identify benefits and key measures before you begin
- Get buy-in from chief executives at the start. They may want to see the hard benefits of coaching, which can be difficult to prove