

The subtle approach

Does coaching work best when team members are not even aware it is happening? Angie Dixey investigates.

As organisations increasingly turn to coaching to help improve sales performance and develop talent, performing the role of “coach” has become a commonplace responsibility for sales managers. Yet, even as organisations continue to expect this activity from their managers, the issue of whether effective coaching happens in practice is also coming under scrutiny.

Just because responsibility for coaching falls to sales managers, this does not necessarily mean they have the requisite skills or appetite to perform the role effectively. Indeed, recent research suggests managers are not coaching nearly as often as organisations would like, while a survey undertaken by the CIPDⁱ observed nearly half of respondents reporting a decline in the perceived effectiveness of managerial coaching.

So what could be causing this discrepancy? If recent research is correct, why when requested to act as a coach, do managers apparently fall short?

Coaching is certainly not a new phenomenon in a leadership context, with the latter part of the 20th century dominated by theories promoting more democratic, coaching-based approaches designed to help increase organisational performanceⁱⁱ. The positive relationship between a coaching-based style of leadership and overall leadership effectiveness continues to be identified and supported through empirical researchⁱⁱⁱ, so this aspect of a manager’s role certainly appeals logically.

Much of the current research surrounding managerial coaching is quantitative, using metrics based on characteristics and behaviours promoted within practitioner literature – such as good communication skills, the ability to empower employees, and self-awareness levels – to determine what makes for an effective and, indeed, not-so-effective managerial coach. Notwithstanding the value these studies offer, what remains unanswered is why managerial coaching is not as prevalent as perhaps required. Furthermore, the large majority of respondents involved in these studies are either those being coached or those responsible for sponsoring and driving the adoption of managerial coaching within organisations.

What appears to be lacking within the existing research is the “voice” and experience of the managers themselves – a perspective which could perhaps help identify a potentially overlooked variable and shed light on why managers are not apparently coaching in a way that fully meets organisational expectations. It was this perspective that formed the basis of a research project I undertook as part of a Masters programme in Coaching & Mentoring with Oxford Brookes University.

Research methodology

Regardless of whether and how organisations demand their

managers to coach, it is how managers make sense of this that will inform their accounts of what their role of coach means to them and how they perform and experience it. To address this subjective element, the study adopted a phenomenological approach designed to achieve a deeper exploration of how managers personally and directly experience their role as coach; recognise that individuals interpret and create their own reality; and enable the enquiry to travel beyond quantitative measures.

Rather than trying to generalise human behaviour, the approach recognises the need to understand, in great detail, the specific accounts of how individuals experience something, whilst giving access and insight to a common perspective. Consequently, the study consisted of in-depth interviews with a purposively selected sample of six sales managers from a variety of global and UK-based IT sales organisations, followed by a robust and thorough process of thematic analysis.

Preference for conversational coaching

Results from the study identified three key themes which all offer interesting challenges when we consider how best to support managers employ coaching more frequently and effectively:

1. A preference for conversational coaching
2. The challenge when faced with unresponsive individuals
3. Developing a mindset of empowerment

The most notable finding to emerge from the study was that the participants were indeed coaching – in fact they were coaching daily – just not necessarily in a way that organisations expect or are accustomed to measuring. Given the potential impact their preference for a conversational approach has on how their coaching efforts are recognised and measured, this article focuses on this aspect of the study.

When considering their application of coaching, participants described two distinct approaches: firstly in the operational context, addressing day-to-day challenges; and, secondly, in the context of personal development and longer-term career progression. One manager explained: “There are different levels for me. I could be coaching at a fairly tactical level... helping that individual own the solution, coaching them to come to the right decision. But then, if you go to the other end of the scale, there’s the more strategic coaching... you know... ‘What are your aspirations in terms of your role?’”

This differentiation was further emphasised by the way in which the participants employed coaching. They described the majority of time being spent using a conversational style at the tactical level, with the more strategic, personal-development conversations being undertaken in a more formal setting, but on a less frequent basis.

The study suggests managers are using coaching for distinctly different outcomes and in distinctly different ways. In their paper “Developing the Leader as Coach”, Grant & Hartley identified that, in practice, managerial coaching represents a continuum of activities ranging from formal sessions (akin to those provided by external coaches) through to more daily interactions where a manager adopts a leadership approach

based on coaching principles.

Whilst findings from the study certainly support Grant & Hartley's observation, there was also a consistent preference and propensity to focus at the tactical end of the continuum and employ a more conversational stance. Formal coaching sessions were typically prescribed by the organisation, yet participants all described a high level of discomfort and reticence in using this approach, highlighting how it frequently worked against them, as the individual being coached often becomes defensive and less likely to open up.

One participant explained: "The more formal you make coaching, the more barriers there are to it succeeding. ... If you say we're going to meet for an hour's coaching, the first thing that person's going to think is 'what have I done wrong?' It becomes confrontational. ... I've got an instant barrier to get over."

Conversely, the large majority of participants expressed a preference for those times when the individual was not even aware they were being coached. They preferred instead to focus on creating a relaxed and trusting environment where being coached and challenged simply became an accepted part of daily conversations.

Implication for organisations

The study's findings certainly suggest that managers are experiencing a less-effective outcome when they adopt a structured and formalised approach; instead, they prefer to adopt a more conversational style, where their coaching efforts are not necessarily evident and simply "become part of what they do". Indeed, all the participants struggled to differentiate between when they were managing and when they were coaching. One participant encapsulated this when they explained: "You can't just separate it and say 'today I'm managing and tomorrow I'm coaching'; to me it's one and the same. ... You know, the way that you manage."

This presents an interesting proposition for organisations actively trying to encourage sales managers to incorporate coaching into their role and how they might go about recognising and rewarding this activity. Rather than introduce rigid and formalised processes that can potentially promote coaching as a discrete activity to be performed as an adjunct to the manager's primary role, organisations may wish to revisit the expectations they are placing on their managers.

By equipping them instead with the skills to have powerful, daily conversations that can help people expand their thinking, develop their skills and create their own meaningful solutions, managerial coaching can become outcome focused, rather than process driven and perhaps uncomfortable for sales managers to "live in". By providing freedom to apply these skills informally, where sales managers can experience possibly more successful outcomes, the issue of "managerial coaching" can become just a way to have effective conversations – simply part of the day job – that helps create high-performing teams.

However, the challenge here is whether a manager's actions are interpreted by the individual, or others, as coaching. If not, their endeavours are conceivably going unnoticed, distorting any efforts at measuring the frequency or effectiveness of managerial coaching.

With this in mind, organisations should consider whether their approach to managerial coaching is making it easier or harder for their sales managers to take advantage of such a beneficial approach and how they can perhaps support a more conversational style. Furthermore, we need to consider whether the measurements being used to determine the prevalence of managerial coaching is presenting an accurate picture? Identifying a more appropriate metric that captures the use of conversational coaching would perhaps contradict the reported discrepancy in the current research, revealing that managerial

coaching is actively happening, encouraging others to follow suit.

What next?

By undertaking a personal and idiographic analysis of the experiences of a small group of sales managers, my aspiration for the study was that it would reveal a potentially hidden variable. Whilst it is not my intention that the study's findings are generalised, they do offer a new and promising perspective. As organisations continue to place such importance on managerial coaching in the sales environment, further exploration would be beneficial in understanding whether the conversational approach is indeed more prevalent than perhaps current measurements are capturing and whether this approach offers more successful outcomes than more prescribed and formal activities.

Should this be the case, we can then consider how best to equip sales managers with the skills to have powerful, informal coaching conversations and define a measurement approach that could more appropriately and accurately recognise and reward such activities.

Further information regarding the study's findings is available in a full research report. If you would like to receive a copy, please contact Angie Dixey on talk@angiedixey.co.uk.



About the Author

Angie Dixey is the founding director of Angie Dixey Ltd, a consultancy established in 2012, which provides coaching and leadership development programmes to sales leaders and their teams. Having enjoyed a successful and rewarding sales career spanning 20 years – during which she held direct sales, management and leadership positions – she understands intimately the demands and complexities of a competitive sales environment. She holds a Master's degree in Coaching & Mentoring Practice, is a certified MBTI® practitioner and member of the International Federation of Coaching.

¹CIPD, Learning and Talent Development, Annual Survey Report 2013. ²Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2008; Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; McGregor, 1989; Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1973. ³Hagen & Aguilar, 2012; Hamlin, Ellinger, & Beattie, 2006; Manz & Sims, 1987.