

So far and yet so near

Glynis Rankin explores the potential of remote international coaching for increasing the application of learning from leadership development and executive education programmes

Using coaching to deepen the impact of training and development programmes makes sense. All too often, delegates leave a training event fired up to apply all that they have learned. Put them back in their working environment, however, and within a week they are as busy as ever – with the impact of the learning programme slowly fading as the pressures of working life take hold.

This article explores the case for coaching to improve levels of workplace implementation, looks at the methods that are now being used to deliver remote coaching and shares Creative Metier's learning about how to make it work.

The provision of a coaching programme to support a training intervention can more than double the cost. In addition, there are practical issues – if the delegates are geographically dispersed, on a national basis let alone an international one, face-to-face coaching is out

of the question, so remote coaching is a real possibility in making this work.

Implementation of learning

Research published last year by the International Institute for Management Development¹ details the results of an online survey about coaching effectiveness for managers who had recently participated in executive education programmes at a leading European business school. All the programmes surveyed included 360° feedback, which was debriefed by a coach during the programme. Analysis of the 232 responses demonstrated some interesting findings.

Ninety seven per cent of respondents in the study said they left the programme with between one and three issues to work on. Eighty one per cent said their commitment to work on these issues was “high” or “somewhat high”. When it came to working on these commitments back at the workplace, 39 per cent reported working on the issues “somewhat” and 57 per cent “very much”. Only 4 per cent completely implemented the changes to which they had committed.

Previous research suggests that the lack of a supportive working environment is the greatest barrier to implementation. However, in this study, only 3 per cent of respondents cited this as a problem.

The first and most important barrier that the respondents talked about was themselves (27 per cent). Respondents named “attitude”, “personality”, “staying committed”, “habits” and “reverting to old behaviour” as just some of the challenges they faced. Twenty one per cent reported lack of time and 16 per cent reported the daily routine as barriers.

To quote the study: “Managers going back to work after an executive education programme face obstacles other than just time – sometimes

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having an action or development plan is not enough, even if managers fully intend to work on it. To implement their action/development plans or to improve their behaviour, coachees must also overcome their own attitudes, personalities, habits and the risk of falling back into their daily routine.”

The potential for coaching to improve implementation

Coaching has considerable potential in helping delegates achieve the commitments that they make on development programmes, providing a structure of support and challenge, accountability and encouragement.

Remote or virtual coaching has particular value in this context:

- it is cost effective
- it can be used globally, from any location to any location
- there are no travel or associated costs, other than communication costs
- meetings can be diarised to suit the schedules of participants
- if a meeting is deferred, there are no complicated arrangements to unravel.

What do we mean by remote coaching?

Remote coaching draws on a wide range of communication channels. It includes telephone coaching, or coaching utilising an Internet

medium such as Skype with the option of using a video camera so that the coach and coachee can see each other.

The term ‘remote international coaching delivery’ refers to coaching delivered from anywhere in the world, to anywhere in the world, using some or all of the channels listed above. It can work just as usefully for companies working across two sites in the same city as from one side of the world to the other.

Many coaches have been using telephone coaching for years and know that it produces results. Improving technology increases the range of possibilities all the time. For coaches who have not been trained in remote coaching, the whole concept can appear to be counter-intuitive. In talking with coaches about the way they work, we have found that they cite the physical presence of another person, their ability to read body language and to interpret the subtle shifts in gesture or expression as key aspects of their coaching skill.

For the client too, the idea of remote coaching can seem strange. This is particularly the case if they are unfamiliar with coaching. In a recent study carried out by Creative Metier², interviewing CEOs of microfinance banks globally, those who had not experienced coaching before immediately equated it with sports coaching – improvement of skills or behaviour by observation and feedback in real life situations.

The need to ensure a shared understanding of



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what coaching is and how it works is just as relevant in remote coaching as it is in working face-to-face.

It may seem surprising, then, that the coach, sitting somewhere else in the world, perhaps unable to see the person (and perhaps not even having met them) can make a contribution. There is considerable evidence that people are often more open in sharing information online and at a distance than they are face-to-face. There is something about the lack of a need to perform, that frees the coachee to explore issues from a wider perspective, and to really benefit from the experience.

There is a need for research into the way in which remote coaching works, but practical experience does suggest real potential.

Setting up a programme

The techniques that the coach uses, and the considerations for programme design, need to build on common best practice in face-to-face coaching programmes and to develop additional skills if the approach is to be used successfully.

A robust structure for coaching delivery, with expectations articulated from the outset, is even more important with remote coaching than it is when working face-to-face. The successful design of remote coaching programmes should include:

- clarity about the outcomes expected from the programme
- relevance – the content of the programme will be most successful when it addresses issues that are of immediate relevance to the coachee
- setting up clear expectations about the number of sessions and when they will occur, with a reminder sent before the meeting
- a programme to which the coachee is committed (the research cited above demonstrated that coachees were committed to achieving the results but needed help to do this)
- an appropriate approach to the coaching (the IIMD research also breaks new ground in its

identification of what respondents actually wanted from their coaches: “Compared to coaching in longer term relationships, coaching in executive education programmes requires more active participation of the coach. Rather than guiding coachees to reach their own conclusion, the participants in this study wanted their coaches to interpret the results (of the 360° feedback) and to make recommendations.” Professionalism, interpreting results and inspiring action together accounted for more than 85 per cent of responses. While this may not always be the case, the need to understand the coachee’s expectations at the start of the programme is critical)

- agreement that the coaching meeting should still take place whether the person has work to be done in between or not
- room to flex the time budget. A programme of one or two hours a month over a number of months may be insufficient if a major problem arises – a ‘budget’ of time that can be drawn down during the coaching period is more useful and puts control into the hands of the coachee
- practical aspects – will the coaching be delivered by phone or Skype? Is there an online or other resource to be used between meetings? If there is, it will need to be carefully introduced and supported
- location of the meeting – encouraging coachees to choose a quiet space where they will not be interrupted and where they can talk freely.

Coaching skills

In remote coaching, careful listening is critical. With practise, the sense of hearing develops so that intonation and energy in a voice can provide useful data with which the coach can work. There is still a need to check out the understanding by asking such questions as ‘it sounds as though you are...’

Working remotely with a video link such as Skype can provide visual contact, however this does need to be practised. Looking directly at the camera, even though you cannot see the other person, gives them a real sense of presence and engagement. Looking round the room or doing something else does not. It is worth practising this with a colleague before launching for real.

These skills need to be learned and practised. While they draw on general coaching best practice, they also require specific additional skills and considerations. Once these have been learned, coaching remotely can be just as effective as working face-to-face.

In Creative Metier’s approach, coachees also use online resources designed to support and develop

their thinking between meetings. The coachee can then provide 'read only' access to his coach and they can both look at the same screens during the coaching meeting. This gives a completely different dynamic to the meeting – the coachee is leading the coach through his thinking processes, asking about specific issues and is guiding the help that he needs. This significantly reduces the amount of time required for coaching – the coachee has already done 70 per cent of the work that he would have previously done during the coaching session prior to arriving, so each

session is more focused, and the overall coaching time (and the cost) has significantly reduced.

Working across cultures

Working across cultures adds another dimension to remote coaching. It presents opportunities for providing support across international organisations. It can also present additional challenges. Our recent study for the Women's World Banking Center for Microfinance Leadership explored some of these issues.

In response to questions about what the CEOs were looking for in a coach, some said that they were looking for expertise – for clear advice and guidance. Others talked about the need for an indirect approach in a culture in which their staff did not give each other feedback or clear instruction and found it difficult to give negative feedback to colleagues. However a similar range of preferences or needs might be expressed in different



References

- 1 Hooijberg R, Lane N "Using Multisource Feedback Coaching Effectively in Executive Education" *Academy of Management Learning and Education* Vol 8 No 4 (2009)
- 2 Rankin G, Lynch E *Succession, leadership development and the use of coaching in the microfinance industry – interviews with CEOs* Women's World Banking (June 2010)

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organisations in any culture. Establishing the coachee's expectations, and clarifying the coach's approach, is part of any good contracting conversation. Questions such as 'what do you expect/need from me as your coach?' or 'think about one of the best leaders/managers you have worked for. How did he help you learn and develop?' enable the coachee to express his preferences and an honest dialogue to follow.

Encouraging feedback on the coaching process will also assist this dialogue.

The practical matters discussed above come into even sharper focus when working internationally. As with all coaching, it is important that the first meeting builds rapport and commitment.

If you are working across time zones, the coach and coachee need to have a sufficient band of hours within which they can be mutually available. If the coachee has to work outside his normal hours or has only a very small window in which he can hold the coaching meetings, there is far less likelihood of the relationship working. Equally, from the coach's perspective, it is important to decide the extent to which evening or early morning calls are acceptable.

In addition, having a back-up channel of communication is also essential so that the meeting can continue with as little interruption as possible.

Summing up

In remote coaching, developing a clear plan for the first contracting meeting is critical. In addition, framing the relationship with some sort of event that marks the end of the coaching programme can also help support completion. This might be a review date against the commitments the coachee made at the beginning, a joint call with a stakeholder to work towards or time-bound deliverables that will encourage ongoing participation by the coachee.

Taken overall, remote coaching, drawing on the wide range of communication options available, can offer valuable support in deepening the impact of executive and leadership development programmes. Coaching has the potential to provide support, challenge and a structure for accountability to maintain commitment and application and to deepen learning on return to the workplace.

Remote coaching provides a workable and cost effective solution that adds value long beyond the end of a development programme. **TJ**

