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Leadership Coaching across Cultures

ABSTRACT

Objective: The discussion presented in this paper focuses on the practical coaching techniques premised on lasting principles of human learning; principles that are crucial to coaching relationships of all kinds. The principles involved tap into years of psychological research and practice (Kanfer & Goldstein, 1991; Mahoney, 1991) that focuses on issues that prompt changes in people, the important factors that fosters relationships and the ways of getting people to give up their regular actions for a new set.

Methodology: The article's research is based on extensive literature analysis.

Findings: The research was not able to identify the specifics of what people value in different cultures; however, it captures the major active ingredients in learning endeavor, without taking culture into consideration.

Value Added: The article discusses 3 main types of challenges that leadership coaches find across the globe and offers guidelines to handle them

Recommendations: Future papers on that topic research should include both qualitative and quantitative research findings.

Key words: coaching, leadership, leadership coaching

JEL codes: M1, M14

Introduction

The ability to straddle cultures and willingness to adapt to several norms and expectations that may even be conflicting are the qualities that must be imbibed by leaders who wish to gain any competitive edge in business. The dynamism and ever-changing demands only increase complexity; competition is getting more intense, the workforce more diverse and the technological revolution constantly out-pacing even the most progressive manufacturers. Taking these into consideration, success and steady growth are reserved for leaders who can foster versatility and resilience in their workforce.

In order to meet the demands of getting the best out of workers, leaders look for ways of boosting their coaching skills. Executive coaches offer personalized learning experience from the objective perspective of an outsider and on the other hand, Leader coaches are chosen from within the company (Peterson, Uranowitz, & Hicks, 1996). Leaders in top organizations like HP, Intel, PepsiCo and General Electric decisively foster the development of their team members and some go ahead to deploy people-development as an important technique in the quest to attain their set business objective (Tichy & Cohen, 1997). Discussion in this paper is primarily focused on the coaching techniques used worldwide by leadership coaches. Due to the fact that this research offers results based on people's ability to change under certain conditions, coaches have found it extremely useful in dealing

with their daily dealings with people. The research was not able to identify the specifics of what people value in different cultures; however, it captures the major active ingredients in learning endeavor, without taking culture into consideration. Different coaches have applied them in different fields, and it has been effective for them. This shows how robust the technique really is. Discussions like this may be used to talk about the vast differences that are pertinent in working across peculiar cultures and rather than focusing on offering culture specific advice, we have focused on the more common coaching issues that span across many cultures. The offered framework is designed to assist coaches in dealing with people in a personalized manner and based on the learning methods, communication styles, relationship norms an assumption about leadership, this framework can be adjusted.

Methods

The literature review provides the reader with a comprehensive look at a discussion focused on the practical coaching techniques premised on lasting principles of human learning; principles that are crucial to coaching relationships of all kinds. The principles involved tapping into years of psychological research and practice (Kanfer & Goldstein, 1991; Mahoney, 1991) that focuses on issues that prompt changes in people, the important factors that fosters relationships and the ways of getting people to give up their regular actions for a new set.

Discussion

In most cases, coaching is defined and taught as a collection of activities that may include the writing of development plans, delivering feedback, teaching a skill, offering advice (Peterson, Uranowitz, & Hicks, 1996; Flaherty, 2006; Hargrove, 2008). This definition often prompts coaches to focus on the wrong questions, like “How do I give feedback in this culture?”, whereas



coaching should be the process of assisting people, imparting knowledge and helping them with the right tools to make them more effective in their self-development (Peterson, Uranowitz, & Hicks, 1996). Coaching ought to prepare a person to face challenges, make progress and meaningfully contribute to solutions in the wake of new challenges. Broader questions arise from the definition that bring more attention to the outcomes rather than the coach's activity; questions such as "How can I help this person increase his or her insight?" The best approach in accomplishing the task may not be the one suggested by the coach simply because it is more of a process and should not be limited to a particular event. It ought to be infused into the daily activities of the person being coached. This way, the learner commits to certain guides and actions that help them take responsibility for acquiring and applying new techniques or learnings. Any coaching definition that focuses on one learner and probably puts him over another sub-optimizes the entire learning process. An effective coaching process goes beyond a leader impacting a learner. It is a process that both parties should benefit from. Also, the concept of placing the burden of growth and continuous employability on the shoulders of the employees puts less importance on leaders and organizations to proffer developmental directions. This process demands that those involved have a keen sense of interpersonal perceptiveness, sensitivity and timing. These requirements can place major demands on the shoulders of the coach within a single culture. Hurdles in this scenario can be as obvious as a language barrier or as complicated as the different interpretations or values placed on similar behaviors. Coaches ought to prepare for certain types of challenges and these 3 general guidelines can be very helpful:

- 1. Search for hidden layers.** People see things differently based on their culture, perception and assumptions and the difference in perspective could range from unbelievably dramatic to understated. Because of this, coaches should leave room for cultural differences, including the one they know and the ones they are completely oblivious of. As a coach, it is your responsibility to seek out these hidden layers and bring them to the surface; for the benefit

of the learners as well as you the coach. Cultures can sometimes be polarizing and the ability of a coach to accommodate different cultures, helps him/her create hypotheses about the person they are coaching. Would the person being coached be better spurred by a personal goal or a collective goal? Would this person want the coach to take the free-flowing approach that offers flexibility and freedom or will the person rather a more authoritative expertise and clear instruction from the coach? Would it be better for the coach to get to know the person first or just proceed immediately to the task at hand? Will this person be comfortable with the coach's preference for quick linear decisions? Taking time to test-relevant hypotheses can help the coach avoid unnecessary hurdles in the future. A leader can generate the hypothesis and test it out on persons from different culture so as to be better informed.

Cultural heroes can be identified and reasons why they are honored learnt. Learn who their leaders are and how they lead. Learn what important lessons they imbibe and what their educational system entails. It is also advised that coaches review resources that highlight broad dimensions of cultural differences and the distinct social and professional discourse in different cultures (e.g., Cushner & Brislin, 1996; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey & Nishida, 1996; Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede, 2009; Lewis, 1996). Studying the traditions of other culture is important, but not adequate because of their cultural blinders, it becomes impossible for coaches to formulate relevant hypotheses about others. The cultural influence of the coach cannot be completely separated from how they interpret the information they gather about the culture of others. Based on their own culture, coaches have a presumed expectation of what learners will want from the learning process as well as how people respond to feedback or new information. How people relate with one another is another factor that cannot be sidelined as such. When faced with a task that transcends different cultures, people have to dig deep, probe further in order to understand themselves and others. As expected, they will then adjust their approach and techniques based on the findings made. A study of the cultural differences and the planning for



unexpected interactions could have smoothed the way for a French leader who embarked on a 3-year-long engineering project in the UK. He was made understand that a couple of adjustments would have to be made by him when he started the project. After all, his team had something in common – same profession – although the language was different. However, immediately when the project started, his team leaders started clashing and he, being the head, was surprised with the difference in understanding of status and roles of engineers as well as the approach used by teams to resolve issues. He later stated that if he had known that this was what he would face, there would have been fewer mistakes. Expecting it tough would have made him prepare better and as such, it would have become easier. If he had made room for unknown cultural differences, he would not have had that much difficulty on the job. There was a case of an American manager’s coaching with a new worker from Singapore as a result of their varying understanding of the boss-subordinate relationship. The boss asked the employee to highlight the areas he would need to be coached on and together, they were to identify development priorities. In some cultures, this joint participation would have been ideal as it would make the subordinate feel valued. However, this was not the case in this instance. The employee saw this as an attempt at abdicating responsibilities and legitimating authority by the employer. This undermined the manager’s credibility and the manager had to adjust appropriately when he observed the interpretation given to his actions. He started giving specific instructions on how to approach tasks as opposed to his former actions where he gave room for open-ended questions. The culture appropriate role of the manager was then restored with this new method.

2. Personalize the approach. The perspective a person might take cannot be predicted from what might be unique about their culture, even though culture can help the coach prepare hypotheses in anticipation of cultural differences. The fact is that the differences in people’s character and perspective cannot be solely pinned on their culture. Each person is a product of his/her personal experiences, genetics, and sub-cultural forces beyond

culture. A person's perspective of the world is influenced by these factors as much as culture and it is now known that with the current global interactions and communication, the massive differences in people's cultures are becoming less reliable. Traditional cultural distinctions are gradually being eroded by the ever-growing interconnectedness of people, which results in different cultures accepting each other (Hermans & Kempen, 1998). Cultural norms to a reasonable extent define a group of people and while coaches can get a glimpse of the factors that significantly influence a person, coaches cannot assume that it is the only factor that forms the personality of a person (Chmielecki, 2009). Anyone from China, Brazil, Germany, United States etc. may be timid, bold, chronically late, impulsive, punctual or methodical. It is easier to understand people from these different countries if one has prior knowledge of their cultural differences with respect to time or leadership, however, there will still be individual behavioral differences amongst people.

In the quest to understand a person, factors such as profession, age, social status, gender, education, personal life experience etc. are factors that must be taken into consideration and in most cases these are the factors that will help you understand a person beyond culture. A coach who focuses on the cultural differences and ignore all other factors would most likely miss out what makes each individual unique. This is why a French engineering executive was surprised to discover that his values, style and preferences were similar to that of the non-engineering British executives and strangely not like those of younger French engineers. He also observed that his age, status, life experience and education were more aligned to his collegial similarity even more than his nationality. Any coach who approaches him with the "French man" stereotype will most likely be wrong, that is if nothing is perceived as offensive in the process. Understanding a person as an individual first is the surest way for a coach to avoid stereotypes that do not apply. Studies from the US and Europe have supported the need to coach at a personal level and research has also shown that the number one cause for people's dissatisfaction with coaching received is



the impersonal coaching method which was used (Hicks & Peterson, 1996; Peterson, Uranowitz, & Hicks, 1999).

Cultural variables that are supposed to be considered by coaches are also being used as a cloak of avoidance. As a coach, you may sometimes hear sentences like “you don’t understand me, and you never will” or “that is not how we do things in my country”. There is a possibility that such a person is resisting change under that disguise or may have ulterior motives which the person conceals with statements like that.

An Italian manager vehemently claimed that the communication technique suggested by his American coach would never work in the Italian culture when he was having issues gaining full cooperation from his team. Rather than continue in the process that he felt would never work, he decided to probe into the manager’s objections and accepted that such techniques may not be so successful in Italy. With a few other techniques readily available, the coach suggested that the manager try out a new skill as an experiment to see how it would work.

Based on this, the Italian was surprised to see how well they worked. As shown in this example, coaches can be sensitive to cultural differences without allowing their work to be affected by these differences.

3. Orchestrate change. Coaches do not have to do everything themselves to be effective. They can enable learning by organizing the resources and setting up conditions favorable for development. In some cases, the coach may not be the expert on what the learner needs, but an environment of with the right resources and people can help the learner get the information, support and opportunities needed. In this case, the coach does not have to bear the burden of having to meet the expectations, feedback, instructions and advice instead the well-set up community and the person being coached as well have the responsibility of ensuring the training continues in the right direction. The fact that the leader is afforded better flexibility is a major advantage of orchestrating the cross-cultural coaching. If a person is not convinced by the techniques used by the coach an he/she needs a better

understanding of changing performance expectations, other sources of information could be considered, including colleagues, official organizational communications, and other leaders.

Other well-respected and credible people can step in whenever the coach or leader is not available to offer information. A person who needs information or guidance but is not in the same geographic location as the coach can be helped by people from a similar cultural background or ongoing support and guidance. Also, indirect channels of sharing info about a person can be sought in areas or places where feedback from a coach is not acceptable.

The most important task of the leader is to ensure that the person that needs to be coached is coached and the person's performance is improving. Important guiding questions to always ask are "What do I need to do to coach this person? How do I help this person develop?" the coach can then leverage on the shift in objective to easily navigate cultural barriers that may derail the coaching program. The 3 guidelines stated above will surely apply to all aspects of coaching. The leader is afforded the latitude to adapt to the uniqueness of individual and cultural differences, as well as the ability to flexibly adopt the principles of how people change. Irrespective of culture, these principles are effective.

Leaders basically have 3 main avenues for orchestrating an environment that supports continuous learning.

1. They can be development role models. When leaders make it open to all that he/she is still learning, a powerful message is sent to all members of the team that the process of learning is for all and that everyone is encouraged to try out new things with the aim of advancing learning techniques. Activities like sharing and learning, seeking feedback and coaching or trying out new skills in front of others can significantly improve the environment that supports continuous development. Even in the cases where the development climate is about to be changed, coaches have to pay extra attention to ensure that only the behaviors that can heighten the learning process is modeled.

2. The local learning climate can be influenced by each leader, irrespective of their role or position. When setting up group goals and tracking them, they can highlight the role of development and integrate discussions of development into meetings, performance reviews and project debriefing. They can also create an atmosphere of trust, where people feel safe and this supports easy transfer of information.

3. Leaders have the capacity to influence organizational practices and policies; they can make their opinion known even if they do not have the formal responsibility for development and performance initiatives (Conger, 2015; Hackman & Wageman, 2005; Bass & Riggio 2006). They can say what they feel about issues like reward systems, succession management, performance reviews, and competency models. The behavior of leaders and their expectations of individuals to change are guided by cultural beliefs (Hunt, 1991; Hughes, 1993; Robertson 2016; Kets de Vries, 2005). Coaches continually adapt their coaching methods as they uncover different norms and beliefs that may influence their coaching style. In a culture that promotes personal privacy and traditionally employs more indirect communications, it would be foolhardy to continue with open discussions about personal development. Some cultures see a coach as weak or effectual if he admits self-development efforts and as such the coach cannot be emulated. A coach also has to monitor levels of development stretch and risk taking which may be considered appropriate in his quest to establish an environment for development. All strategies require each coach to apply relentless vigilance and questioning to ascertain the approach that will best suit the circumstance.

Conclusion

First, leaders know themselves as well as what they can offer in terms of development techniques. They are open to new methods, capabilities and assumptions. Second, the process of coaching is something leaders pay close attention to. They are always searching for the next ingredient that

will enhance the learning process and help them connect better with others (Goleman 2000; Porras & Robertson, 1992). Third, leaders adjust to the person being coached and their individual goals and values in the cultural context. In situations where such a person is trying to create a radical change, the leader has a responsibility to accommodate the person's foundation and build on the unique capabilities of that person. With the help of these 3 sources, a leader can be adaptable, creative and adaptable in maintaining the coaching relationship and processes.

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