



The telecom industry is hugely competitive and the margin for error small. TalkTalk knew it needed to develop the right culture to stay ahead of the game, so now coaching is available for every employee, say **Wendy Wilson** and **Dr Carmelina Lawton-Smith**



YOUR CALL

Traditionally, coaching has been reserved for senior executives (Walker-Fraser, 2011)¹, but within TalkTalk

Telecom Group, coaching is now available to all employees regardless of seniority, and it is resulting in significant benefits.

TalkTalk operates in a highly competitive, technologically driven and rapidly changing market in the UK. In recent years, it has experienced high levels of expansion and change, driven by growth and acquisition.

It became clear that the organisation's learning and development (L&D) strategy would also need to change to help develop the skills needed in this new business environment.

The HR team saw coaching as a potential vehicle for achieving its objective of increasing individual professional development to encourage greater personal responsibility. The aim was to 'democratise' coaching so that a wide diversity of individuals from across the organisation could take advantage of its benefits, to use it as a positive L&D strategy and to encourage individuals to take ownership of their own L&D.

However, this needed to be achieved in a cost-effective way. Nicola Woods, TalkTalk's talent management consultant, says: "We spent a lot of money on one-to-one coaching for our senior leaders, but what about nurturing our talent throughout the organisation to help develop the

right culture? A culture where people take responsibility, who are accountable, who have an understanding of what they want to do? Because development starts with the individual."

However, to support the aim of increasing ownership for development, it was vital that coaching was a choice, requiring employees to exercise personal responsibility for their commitment to the process.

Nigel Sullivan, group HR director, says: "I'm a convert to coaching. It makes a difference to people's performance and, if the individual drives it, they'll get more benefit from it. That's why we haven't forced it on people."

The way the programme was introduced, therefore, signalled a





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clear cultural message that individuals needed to take the initiative, and it showed one of the main aims of the programme.

The typology

The traditional model of coaching in organisations which focuses on the development of senior leaders (ICF, 2014)², uses external coaches to provide specialist confidential support to address individual development needs. Typically, these engagements span many months and achieve good outcomes, but can be prohibitive for wide-scale use. One potential solution is to train employees in coaching skills, thus widening the application of coaching to gain the benefits reported from internal resources.

The most common approach to bringing coaching in-house has been to train managers as coaches. However, it is often difficult for managers to devote the time required to formal coaching meetings. In fact, the effectiveness of coaching by line managers appears to have fallen from 51 per cent in 2010 to 39 per cent in 2013 (CIPD, 2013)³.

While managers can be trained as effective coaches, they occupy, in the minds of employees, a particular role that limits the coaching relationship. This is not to undervalue the skills of managers, but to highlight that managers can never offer the same independent relationship as an external coach.

We know that the coach/client relationship is a key determinant of coaching success (De Haan, 2012)⁴, and the manager's ultimate position of power and authority inevitably affects the coaching interaction. The employee is unlikely to want to express their real fears and failings to the person who may do their appraisal, no matter how good the relationship or the coaching skills of the manager.

The manager also has ultimate accountability for the performance of their whole team, so may find it hard to prioritise the development needs of the individual if it may have an impact on this month's trading figures.

Such issues mean that expecting managers to coach their staff in a formal, structured way may be unrealistic and, ultimately, a poor use of managerial time and effort. At TalkTalk, it was also felt that managers were not ready to drive coaching, due to the extensive restructuring and organisational change taking place.

To deliver effective internal coaching, some organisations have therefore added coaching to the services offered by L&D or HR specialists. However, there remains a potential concern by staff that the relationship may not be entirely confidential and it can become confused with performance management and remedial or disciplinary processes.

At TalkTalk, the HR team was relatively small so was unable to support individual coaching throughout the organisation.

One way to address such an issue of neutrality and capacity in larger organisations is to train specialist internal coaches from a broad set of departments (ILM, 2013)⁵. These coaches are then offered to other teams or areas of the business with which they have no contact. This brings a degree of separation and independence to the relationship and can significantly increase the coaching resources available.

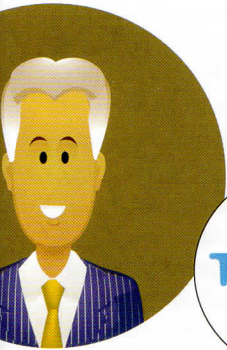
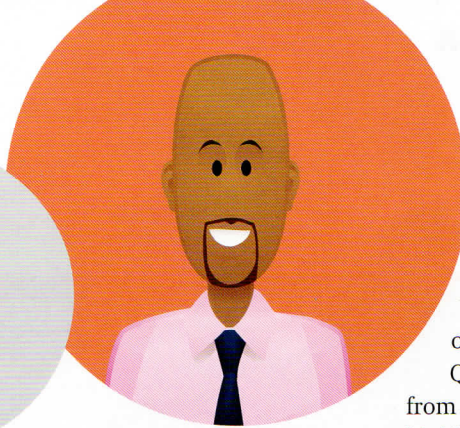
However, such schemes require a large pool of employees and can still suffer issues. Those in a similar cultural frame may collude rather than challenge thinking, and confidentiality can limit uptake.

Spot coaching

Jo Taylor, head of resourcing and talent management at TalkTalk, has designed a more innovative coaching solution for nurturing and leading talent through organisational change, called 'Spot Coaching'.

The idea was to make coaching accessible ad hoc to all employees in the TalkTalk group, by providing experienced external coaches to anyone in the organisation for up to three sessions per year. External spot coaches are available on site on specific days and anyone can book a 90-minute session to discuss relevant personal or developmental issues.

The coaching topic is client-driven and coaches focus on confidential positive personal development. This means the coach remains client-focused and is seen as independent. This results in a high calibre of coaching support across the organisation, but limits financial exposure.



Woods describes the aims of the scheme: "Its intention was to get in touch with as many people as possible, to help them be better in their roles and to help them take more responsibility for their development, because once you start having coaching you are taking responsibility and you start changing."

The scheme has proved a huge success. In the initial 10 months, more than 219 employees took part, many of whom had never experienced coaching before. The demand took the HR team by surprise: "It just took off and we couldn't keep up – demand outstripped supply," says Taylor.

Evaluation and feedback

Despite this apparent popularity, TalkTalk was keen to carry out an independent evaluation before the first anniversary of the launch.

We were asked to assess the scheme's contribution to the business and recommend enhancements. The aim was to identify the key elements driving

success and to define how it had contributed to the business change initiative. This would help decision-making about future investment.

Using a case study approach we gathered data over a three-month period from a wide variety of stakeholders, to measure aspects of the spot coaching programme. The stakeholders included spot coaches, clients, HR, HR business partners and managers.

We gathered both quantitative and qualitative data from an online survey, followed by one-to-one interviews and a focus group.

Internal documentation, communications and processes were also reviewed. This generated extensive data that has informed best practice for the continued expansion of the scheme.

Feedback from all stakeholders has been very positive. Taylor reports that clients gain "a sense of empowerment. They feel really, really excited afterwards. They feel that the experience has been invaluable. It gives them real food for thought on how to approach

things differently or how to take a difference stance on something".

Quantitative survey results from spot coaching attendees also highlight the positive outcomes achieved. A total of 100 per cent of survey respondents felt spot coaching could be useful for everyone and is something they would like to continue. Many described the experience as life-changing or an 'epiphany'.

Spot coaching has certainly succeeded in increasing personal responsibility for professional development. Some 98 per cent of survey respondents reported that it has helped them appreciate their own role in their personal and professional development. Some 90 per cent feel more confident to manage their own professional development and more than 92 per cent have subsequently taken positive action towards their own professional development.

One HR business partner reflects: "There were a couple of people who were really negative about where they were going and about their career and what was available to them. They were very much not taking responsibility for their own destiny. Following coaching, you can see a significant change in their mindset."

Other reported significant individual and organisational outcomes including increased confidence, improved communication skills and enhanced resilience.

Learning

The first year of the scheme proved a great success in achieving the desired objectives and gaining staff engagement. In addition, much knowledge was generated about how best to manage a scheme of this type.



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First, having an effective process in place is key to gaining commitment and to ensuring efficient use of the coach's time. Woods, who was managing the scheme at the launch, says: “My advice in a nutshell is to be prepared to spend time on it, to invest in it. It's not just about sending communications out and individuals scheduling sessions. What makes the difference is HR actually investing time in it, listening to people.”

Second, not all coaches are suited to this type of work. Many expect to build a long-term relationship and to use extensive tools or psychometrics. Spot coaching is far more immediate and coaches need to be happy with that style of working. One of the TalkTalk spot coaches says: “You need to be comfortable to work without a long-term agenda and without knowing the eventual outcomes of your work.”

Strategic alignment with the organisation is vital. Taylor explains that “the quality of the coaches is critical because you need to be able to have very honest conversations with them and you need to feel that when they're in the room they understand your business”.

Third, because these coaches are external and independent, they're well-placed to gather information about the ‘temperature’ of the organisation. Since they see a broad cross-section of individuals across all the TalkTalk office



locations, harvesting themes from spot coaches proved valuable. The common patterns identified can inform HR policy and practice.

TalkTalk has gained essential information about how managers are perceived, how individuals feel about the organisation and how well staff are adapting to the rapidly changing environment.

Conclusion

Despite operating in a fast-paced results-focused context, TalkTalk has implemented effective, innovative, on-demand coaching that supports the growth and transformation of the organisational culture. By providing independent professional coaches, it has been able to support individual personal responsibility for L&D in a cost-effective, inclusive way.

Bringing professional coaching to a broader population has delivered enhanced skills to the business and encouraged individuals to take greater personal responsibility for their own contribution and learning. They are becoming more agile in a fast-changing environment. ■

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