

News

Coaching under the microscope

Once seen as a passing fad, coaching is growing up. The challenge now facing the profession is to develop global professional standards. And as more and more coaches flood the market, the challenge for individuals is to create their own niche. Dr Sabine Dembkowski, Fiona Eldridge, professor David Lane, Wendy Johnson, and Stephan Oberli all contribute to an examination of where coaching is at.



Executive coaching is still a relatively young profession which presents both opportunity and challenge - at the moment 'executive coach' is a title which anyone can use to describe themselves and their professional services. And unlike other professions, there are few barriers to entry and no formal requirements.

Buyers are often confused by the number of business and executive coaches out there. And with no clear professional qualifications and standards how do they decide which coach to use? The lack of defined standards can create problems for acceptance of the profession as a whole.

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In an attempt to standardise coaching many organisations have created standards of their own, which are then used for pre contract assessments. Organisations tend to feel more comfortable knowing that coaches in their midst have been through a proper assessment. But there is little sharing of these standards and coaches can find themselves going through new assessments for each organisation. Whilst the development of standards is to be applauded it is surely a poor use of resources for each organisation to 'reinvent the wheel'.

So, who can lead the development of universally accepted standards? The profession has responded by developing competencies and standards within leading bodies such as the International Coaching Federation, the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches, the European Mentoring and Coaching Council and the Association for Coaching.

But so far, no universally-agreed standards have been developed and different organisations creating slightly different ones does nothing to help. Professor David

Lane started the Global Convention on Coaching to develop a global standard and individual organisations have begun to talk with each other to identify common ground.

Coming of age: more professional services

Over the last two years we have seen a marked growth in the professionalism of companies and individuals providing coaching. This is a sign that the coaching profession is maturing and also an indicator of the increasing demands of clients.

The move towards adopting professional standards ranges from providing formal contracts - setting out roles and responsibilities and clarifying expectations - to well-produced websites and other marketing materials.

Growing your own: internal coaching activity

In a bid to keep costs down, some large organisations have developed their own internal coaching. These coaches receive varying degrees of training and supervision.

In some organisations, individuals take on coaching responsibilities in addition to their existing day-to-day activities. In others, staff are trained as coaches and then devote all their time to providing a service across the organisation and, in some cases, to external organisations as well. In this way the organisation develops an entirely separate coaching service.

Internal coaching activities are seen as a cost effective option for organisations - especially for lower and middle management levels - and hence this is a trend which is likely to spread more widely. Although, internal coaches tend not to operate at senior levels.

For external coaches operating at the lower levels this trend presents a potential threat to market share and business growth and puts pressure on professional fees. However, within organisations strongly committed to a coaching culture, external coaches are often used as trainers and supervisors of the internal coaches and this is an emerging area of business.

The constant flow of new coaches into the market also puts pressure on fees, which is most marked in coaching at the lower management levels.

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These market forces are leading towards a more tailored approach, with bespoke coaching for individual clients. In particular there is a small premium market emerging for senior executives. For this group it is particularly important that coaches market themselves effectively. Their services have to be pitched at the level of the client - or to the level to which he or she aspires.

Meeting more sophisticated demands

In the early days of executive coaching it was usually sufficient for a coach to be trained within one field of expertise. Today's market is more sophisticated. The trend is for buyers to demand a greater breadth of techniques, experience and training from their coaches.

In response, coaches - particularly those in the premium market segment - now follow several training programmes and understand a great variety of methods and techniques. Increasingly, methods and techniques are integrated, with experienced coaches able to work with a diversity of clients and situations.

This trend is reflected in the executive coaching field where, particularly at masters level, course content is drawn from multiple disciplines to produce coaches with a great breadth of techniques in their toolkit.

Another way of achieving integration is through supervision. For example, coaches with a psychology background choose a supervisor from the business world and vice versa. This is an increasingly valid path to ensure integration.

Where did our discussions lead us? It seems to us that the profession is gaining in confidence and status and what once was regarded as a passing management fad has become widely used and accepted.

However, with increased maturity comes increased challenges. For the profession as a whole the challenge is to define, agree and monitor professional standards. For individual coaches and coaching companies, the challenge will be to stay agile in response to client demands and provide a 'different' service.

About the authors

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