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FINANCIAL TIMES

January 29, 2013 3:41 pm

Can coaching make the difference?

By Maxine Boersma

Andy Murray's success in winning the US Open tennis championship and reaching Sunday's Australian Open final have been attributed by many to the coaching he has received from former champion Ivan Lendl, who has helped him to pace his performances and stay calm.

One-to-one executive coaching also helps business leaders prepare for their individual challenges – and it is on the rise.

According to the International Coach Federation's Global Coaching Study for June 2012, released in partnership with PwC, there are about 47,500 professional coaches worldwide. In the UK, 91 per cent of the 745 respondents were external, rather than in-house, coaches, and nearly 55 per cent reported an increase in clients during the past 12 months. More than two-thirds expect an increase in clients in the next year.

Keith McCambridge, an executive coach with Wickland Westcott, has witnessed this increase: "I've definitely seen a rise. Before 2008, there was an increase in 'remedial' coaching, where people were put forward for coaching if they were seen as an organisational problem.

"However, the reverse is now true with a focus on high performing candidates who are deemed to be worth the investment. Companies now want actively to enhance strong capability, manage potential risk better and help the 'rainmakers', so there is a strong return on investment."

External coaches range from retired chief executives, who provide sector-specific or broad expertise, to trained facilitators and niche players.

Although coaching appears aimed at corporate performance, it is not just for the private sector. Jan Sobieraj, managing director of the NHS Leadership Academy, says: "The NHS is going through a period of unprecedented change, with organisations clustering, growing and closing.

"Through all of this, the leadership community remains tasked with leading the workforce to continue to provide care of the very highest quality. Our Top Leaders programme is about enabling NHS leaders to develop the knowledge, skills and competencies needed for the most complex jobs in this transforming system.

"Executive coaching is one of the core elements and can be offered as part of a development plan after each participant undertakes a diagnostic process.

"It is well recognised that the bespoke development that coaching offers is one of the most effective development interventions. An objective coach can help leaders develop self-awareness and recognise blind spots in their approach.

"Participants can also develop the confidence to handle better the challenges that come with leading complex organisations in a rapidly changing operating environment."

Coaching is not "therapy" or "counselling" but intervention to address specific work related issues. As defined by author and expert Janice Caplan in 2003, a coach "is a collaborative partner who works with the learner to help them achieve goals, solve problems, learn and develop".

At best, coaching is aligned with organisational goals and linked with the HR department. Coaching addresses issues such as how to resolve conflict, manage dispersed teams or cultural changes.

Tony Page, a coach with Middleground, which coaches leaders across four continents, says people increasingly need coaches, as the economic downturn means work can be an "unsafe" place: "Coaching gives individuals some core conditions in which to function well. A sense of not being split apart, of being aligned with yourself and others.

"Coaching helps leaders think collectively. It is about widening their vision and thinking systemically, eventually 'cascading down' the good practice they've gleaned.

"In the public sector smaller budgets and greater accountability mean coaching is useful, especially because leaders can't 'hand-pick' teams. Coaching helps explore personal options, choices and impact so that managers can discover their own stance.

"The ultimate goal is that the client becomes the 'steward' of a functional organisation. Or, at the other extreme, it may lead an individual deciding that that workplace is no longer for them."

John McGurk, learning and talent development adviser at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and author of "Coaching: the evidence base", a CIPD research report from September 2012, is more sceptical. He says: "The jury is still out on

the evidence base for coaching. The amount of rigorous and peer-reviewed research is small.

“Often, success is attributed to a coaching episode but, for example, an upturn in sales could also be linked to a better database or a wider media platform. At its most basic it’s about a helpful relationship.”

Some believe that “bad” coaching can even prolong poor performance by not challenging it.

Characteristics of an effective coach include professional accreditation, and a willingness to undergo supervision. They should be positive yet challenging and link their work with the priorities of the organisation and any other stakeholder concerns, such as those of shareholders.

Critically, there needs to be a strong “working alliance” with the employee. The 2011 Ridler Report, compiled by Ridler, a senior level coaching practice, revealed that for buyers of coaching, personal chemistry is the highest rated characteristic (74 per cent from a sample of 64 companies).

Effectiveness can be measured, for example, by psychometric testing, 360 degree appraisals, key performance indicators, employee surveys, HR data on talent management and financial data such as levels of profitability.

The latest debate is about how best to integrate coaching to ensure longevity of effective interventions and a “trickle down” impact.

Dr McGurk suggests good coaching skills can be learned by a line manager, for example. This move towards “insourcing” has seen some large companies hire professional internal coaches.

Ian Paterson, coach and managing director of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council, thinks the top 10 per cent of UK coaches are external but recognises internal coaches have the benefits of greater flexibility and organisational sensitivity and understanding, which makes them able to find a solution quickly. He believes some sectors, such as law, prefer external coaching for reasons of perceived expertise.

Indeed, for some, the detachment of an outside coach is very powerful. Mr McCambridge says: “Who can challenge the unchallengeable internally? An executive coach gives you a perspective which is not conditioned by the environment in which you work. They have complete independence and can help you appraise the fundamentals.

“As they have worked with a range of global executive teams they have gleaned a wealth

of good practice and an ability to assess the different dynamics of boards and the psychology of chief executives. This professional currency can be invaluable."

Mark Schlageter, managing director at Thomson Reuters, adds: "An external coach is a valuable independent adviser who can bring out the vital 'softer skills' of running a business. They can bring more global advice based on their own experience.

"Often in business, you don't have the benefit of a natural peer group. As you rise up the career ladder, the peer group shrinks. So a coach provides a useful sounding board.

"A good coach is usually an independent thinker with some industry sector knowledge. They should be well-matched in terms of personality and offer a broader perspective within an impartial context."