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‘We want coaching,’ say high-fliers

By Maxine Boersma

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Coaching has undergone a U-turn. Its makeover is so complete that what was once a potential embarrassment is now a badge worn proudly by people either in or heading for senior roles.

Gone are the times when sessions with an executive coach were left out of senior diaries. Today’s trend is for high-potential employees to be coached or mentored, rather than just those deemed to be underperforming and in need of help – and despite tough economic times, it is on the rise.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development defines coaching and mentoring as development techniques based on the use of one-to-one discussions to enhance an individual’s skills, knowledge and work performance.

Its Learning and Talent Development Survey 2013, based on a sample of 1,004 people, says: “Coaching and in-house development remain the most effective talent management activities. More organisations also rank mentoring and buddying among their top methods.”

Some believe the change of attitude and rise in its use are partly a result of the pressures facing business leaders during economic uncertainty – opportunities to reflect on their performance with a trusted outsider have become a “must”.

According to Sue Blight, head of learning and development at Dairy Crest, the Surrey-based dairy products company: “When executives are promoted into the most senior leadership positions in Dairy Crest they find it more and more difficult to find opportunities to reflect on their leadership. Sources of honest feedback also become fewer and fewer.

“Executive coaching is increasingly sought by senior leaders as a space where they can have reflective conversations about their work and be challenged on their thinking and approach.”

Alexander Kuilman, an executive coach at Mobius Executive Leadership, has noticed business leaders becoming increasingly isolated in the past five years, as organisations have become more complex. He says a coach, free of internal agendas, can help a chief executive spot patterns in how they relate to themselves, to others and to the organisation.

“We all have too many to-do lists but need to have more ‘to be’ lists,” he says.

Reasons for engaging a coach are diverse. A report by Ridler, an executive coaching practice, in collaboration with the European Mentoring and Coaching Council, says most respondents to its survey use coaching to support an individual's transition after an internal promotion (59 per cent of respondents).

Others use it to support new senior appointments from outside the organisation (34 per cent) or to address underperformance – 31 per cent of organisations surveyed used it "often" or "very often" for this purpose.

As well as finding an increased appetite for external coaching, the report says 79 per cent of organisations surveyed expect a rise in internal coaching over the next three years. Internal coaching is seen as a means of supporting the development of a coaching culture, and encouraging managers to use a "coaching" style in leading their teams and influencing others.

Internal coaches are often viewed as having a deep understanding of the organisation's business context and political environment.

Another growing trend is "team coaching". Only 5 per cent of Ridler Report respondents say they have no plans to introduce team coaching in the next three years. It aims to make teams more collaborative and is used in high-performing teams going through change that need to achieve peak performance quickly.

Grant Thornton UK, the financial and business adviser, is incorporating coaching into many aspects of its practice. Since 2008, the company has worked with an external provider to develop 66 people to be coaches within the business. Most of these are directors or partners.

The firm believes this emphasis on coaching can help unlock potential for growth. Examples of this coaching mindset at work include agenda-free meetings and enabling people at all levels increasingly to use reason and instinct in their communication.

The Chartered Management Institute has also seen a rise in coaching. Petra Wilton, its director of strategy and external affairs, says: "One of the mega-trends in management that CMI is currently exploring is the shift from controlling to coaching management cultures.

"When it comes to getting the best out of teams and fully engaging employees, a coaching style gets results. Through coaching, managers can encourage learning on the job, which ensures they get work done while also developing their team."

She says CMI's research shows managers rate coaching as one of the top five most effective means of developing management skills. "Coaching by external professionals is also well suited to helping senior managers think about the complex challenges they face by providing a new perspective. Many chief executives and senior managers wish they had had coaching earlier in their careers," she adds.

Individuals are advised to ensure they receive the right coaching and mentoring – internally, externally or at team level – by linking it with the needs of their role and organisational success, with more demanding it.

Mr Kuilman has seen a rise in both coaching and mentoring, particularly in the legal, management consultancy, and fast-moving consumer goods and banking sectors.

He says mentoring can be more directive than coaching, as the mentor tends to know more about the client's business sector, but a coach is more effective as an objective observer. A coach allows the executive's "internal wisdom to become conscious", and then helps them to take action if required, he says. A coach might look for mindsets that underlie a particular behaviour and help bring about change in the client.

Chris Jackson, president and executive coach at the European Mentoring and Coaching Council, has seen mentoring become part of the promotion process as employees progress from director to partner level, which means coaches and mentors have had to adapt their skills.

"Clients are increasingly asking for both mentoring and coaching and the ability to move between the two roles is important for certain work," says Mr Jackson. "The skills are broadly similar but it's a question of 'where the wisdom lies': with mentoring, the wisdom is in the mentor; with coaching, the wisdom is in the client."

For him, the popular idea of a mentor being "older and wiser" is not necessarily accurate. He says a mentor will have expertise and relevant sector experience, but younger people with "been there, done that" experience are increasingly mentoring even younger people.

Mr Jackson says the professional services and banking sectors are particularly adept at using mentoring to enhance performance, while Mr Kuilman sees more employees having a sense that they are "entitled" to coaching as part of a career package, seeing it as a necessary tool to achieve high performance – another indication of how far it has travelled since its days as a sign of weakness.