



Go where the action is! Implementing Coaching in a large international construction company

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This paper describes the process of introducing, implementing and embedding coaching in an operating company of a Dutch multinational construction company. The implementation concept used here is based on a mix of assessment, training and facilitation under the motto: “go where the action is”. The aim of the concept is to initiate, strengthen and sustain a process of change and then to build on it with new activities. Action research plays an important “flanking” role in this.

We will describe the various interventions and share our experiences in using surveys. We will also describe how we used the principle of “go where the action is” to generate and utilise the commitment of employees on all organisational levels. We conclude with the lessons learned from the perspectives of both the client organisation and the consultant.

Keywords: Coaching, Commitment, Action Research, 360° feedback instruments, implementation

Description of the client organisation

The company carries out major construction projects, including infrastructure. It was grown out of a number of mergers and acquisitions of various construction companies. The company has a complex structure since it carries out various large projects at the same time. Most of the employees work on site in dedicated teams. The organisation’s culture is characterised by a strong focus on action and results. It is a culture of action rather than words. The organisation felt there was a need to introduce coaching.

Aim of the project

The aim of the project was and is to create a coaching culture by creating a permanent pool of (voluntary) coaches who can make an active contribution to the development of a substantial

section of the company's workforce. The target is that at least 25% of the staff members are represented in the pool of coaches.

The factors that led to starting the project were:

- the need to align the various HRD practices in recently merged organisations;
- a relatively high staff turnover among young employees;
- the desire to become an employer of choice and thus retain more ambitious young professionals;
- to anticipate the introduction and implementation of a performance management system.

Description of the project

The structure of the project was based on a phased approach that is familiar to the organisation:

1. the introduction phase, which focused on familiarising the employees with coaching and interpersonal skills, generating enthusiasm for the project and raising awareness among the employees of their personal interests in the process;
2. the implementation phase, which concentrated on the actual large-scale and widespread implementation of coaching in the organisation;
3. the embedding phase, which focused on consolidating the system of coaching and making it an integral element of the "organisation's routines."

The leitmotiv and the main points of the process were devised and structured in advance. The plans were constantly adapted to questions that arose along the way, making use above all of the enthusiasm and the activities that were initiated in the organisation. This was characterised by the serious commitment shown by the company's directors and management, who encouraged and promoted the process from the outset.

The points of departure for the project are straightforward:

- the management team serves as the role model: they were the first to take part in the project and constitute a pilot group in the different phases of the project;
- anyone can become a coach; it is a personal choice. Assessment and selection takes place at the start of the project;
- your coach should preferably not be your immediate superior;
- everyone chooses for themselves whether or not they want a coach;
- interviews between the employee and the coach are confidential and the coach does not discuss the subject matter with anyone else.

Interventions in the various phases:

1. Introduction phase: introduction, information, mobilisation and adoption of the basic plan.

At the start of the project a Coaching Working Group was formed which included the most important stakeholders including a director (the client), the HR manager (the person responsible for HRD), a project director ("coaching champion"), a work planner (representing the target group and to provide administrative support) and an adviser from ABLE ("expert"). The working group designed and managed the project.

The coaching process was initiated in the organisation's regular internal consultation, such as the project manager meetings.

The first step in the programme was a general introductory block for all employees. This block was presented by the company's coaching champion in order to make the programme as accessible as possible for employees. After this first block, employees decided for themselves whether they wanted to take part in the assessment and training programme for coaches.

In consultation with line managers and the working group a reference profile for coaches was adopted. This profile defined the competences necessary for the role of coach and identified the level to which these competences needed to be developed. This reference profile was subsequently used as a benchmark for the assessment, selection and instruction and/or training of employees who signed up to be coaches. This standard profile was used as a 360° feedback instrument in the implementation phase.

2. *Implementation phase: assessment, selection, training and creation of facilities.*

During this phase two workshops were organised to train the coaches and the standard profile was used to determine whether the coach in question met the required standard or required further development. The coaches were informed individually of the results, which were also used during the training. These workshops were provided by trainers from ABLE.

An intranet application was developed to provide support for the new coaches and the employees they were coaching with resources such as information and practical tools. The majority of the coaches were assessed, selected and trained within just six months. At the end of this phase all employees were invited to select a coach and register with him or her as a "coaching couple." Roughly 50% of the employees have already found a coach.

3. *Embedding phase: consolidating, internalisation, making coaching routine and monitoring progress.*

An action research approach was adopted to embed coaching in the organisation and so make it an integral part of the company's activities. This approach involved establishing the current situation and identifying practical issues and/or problems that needed to be addressed. The research commenced in the implementation phase.

Intended effects:

1. to motivate and support the coaches;
2. to bring coaching to the attention of the employees again;
3. to encourage the employees to look for a coach;
4. to identify additional areas where coaches required further training /development. These workshops are held on a regular basis.
5. To produce an instrument that the MT can use to ensure that coaching is a permanent topic for discussion in the regular forums of consultation.

There were other special actions as well. For example, participants received a special quality game after completing the two workshops in the implementation phase and a coaching calendar was distributed to all coaches at the beginning of the year. Articles on coaching were

published in the staff magazine and an article on coaching appeared in the annual social report.

Lessons learned

Meanwhile, the company has started the implementation of performance management. Since coaching plays an important role in this it has as it were been embedded in the organisation.

The project has not yet been completed. The practices still have to be further “broken in,” new coaches must be supported and trained, etc.

A number of lessons have already been learned.

The client’s perspective:

- importance of senior and executive management as role models and front runners (pilot group);
- direct involvement of own staff in the workshops ensures that domestic examples can be used to outline significance of various items;
- involvement of a relatively small and flexible consultancy firm to ensure that the workshops are tailor-made;
- contribution of assessments to the coaches’ understanding of their own leadership style. The individual discussion of the results of the competence scan has given many managers/supervisors cause for reflection. Not only on their role as coach but also on the way in which they currently lead their teams;
- importance of surveys and interaction in response to results in creating a culture of sharing knowledge and learning;
- the implications of the project for day-to-day communication between managers and employees.

The consultants’ perspective:

- “go where the action is” as an important principle in generating and utilising commitment on all organisational levels. There was a highly motivated MT member who convinced the rest of the MT. Coaching is a choice: if you don’t want to participate that is up to you. We focus on the people who are interested in taking part or who think they might learn something.
- a good understanding of the client’s culture and the issues at play in the company is essential to ensure that workshops can be tailored as much as possible.
- importance of surveys among participants to create focus and increase participation; evaluations and interviews were used in crucial phases of the project to stimulate and (re)direct the commitment of the leadership on the one hand and the efforts of coaches and employees on the other.
- continuous alignment of the programme and the interventions, instruments and activities with the (development) needs of the coaches. The programme for the coaches was linked with performance management when the latter was subsequently introduced.

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