

Can coaching help improve management quality?

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International comparison studies show that management quality in New Zealand is in the lower middle rankings – above Poland, Mexico and other countries, but below the wealthy North American and European countries we often like to compare ourselves with (Bloom, Genakos, Sadun, & Van Reenen, 2012). Public services have particular problems, and often rate worse in management practice than private organisations. In New Zealand, public organisations seem particularly bad at managing people, with problems around bullying, poor change management, collaboration and adapting to change (e.g. Plimmer et al., 2017). International studies show that at the individual level, managers often fail at their jobs, – which raises the immediate question of what can be done about it (e.g. Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2010; Williams, 2018).

One popular response is coaching. Coaching has a lot of advantages compared to other interventions such as training courses. It can help people deal with problems as they emerge, and it avoids the scheduling problems and difficulty transferring the knowledge back to the job that can occur with event-based generic courses.

Consequently, there has been a growth in workplace coaching. The ICF Global Coaching Study (2016) estimated global total revenue from coaching in 2015 was \$2.356 billion USD, representing a 19% increase over the 2011 estimate. This growth might be because coaching seems to be effective across a range of outcomes. A meta-analysis (which statistically combines multiple studies) found meaningful gains in performance and skills, wellbeing, coping, attitudes, and goal directed self-regulation (Theebottom, 2014). A more recent, and better, meta-analysis also found coaching to be effective but with some surprising twists: the number of sessions did not make a difference to the outcome, and face to face or blended techniques are more effective than online coaching. Also, and surprisingly, multi-source feedback did not help. Other studies have found multi- source feedback works provided it is well designed (often it is not), and the client wants to improve.

Coaching is a well-recognised, powerful tool for developing management, leadership and team capability. Coaching has potential to prevent workplace bullying by developing management skills and improving the perceived fairness of organisational processes, such as performance appraisals (Plimmer et al., 2017). Although some quibble about definitions, it can include: mentoring, counselling, peer support, supervision (Aas and Vivik, 2015).

Work with the organisation, not just the individual

Although one on one private coaching is effective, a coach who works with several people in an organisation seems to achieve better results. (Jones, Wood & Guillaume, 2016). This is possibly because the coach has a better idea of what is happening in the organisation. For the participants, being part of a coaching cohort in an organisation means they can support and learn from each other.

Coach quality matters

Effective coaches create a “working alliance” where they are trusted to act toward the same goals as the person they are coaching. They also have good interpersonal skills, communicate well, and provide practical support, such as techniques (Baron & Morin, 2010; de Haan & Sills, 2012). Coach skill matters (e.g. listening, questioning, ability to foster a relationship), as does commitment (emotional involvement) (Rekalde, Landera and Albizu, 2015). Overall, the relationship quality matters, so the coaching should not continue when the relationship between the coach and coachee does not feel right. In some studies gender similarity between coach and coachee seemed to matter, but a recent meta – analysis found that overall it did not, except that male/male dyads seem better at encouraging self-awareness than other combinations (Williams, 2018).

Overall, coaching seems to be needed, and quality coaching seems to be an effective tool to improve management and leadership development programmes.

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