

# Managing the Internal Labour Market in a Manufacturing Company: Explaining Coaching's Perceived Ineffectiveness

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## Abstract

ABC manufacturing is a large publicly listed manufacturer and distributor. The mission of the organization is to deliver superior and sustainable returns through leading market positions in the construction, resources and industrial markets. It recognizes that people are a distinguishing feature of successful business and is committed to attracting, maintaining and building a skilled and motivated workforce. It has utilized workplace coaching over a three-year period as part of its development effort for senior managers, but because of its perceived ineffectiveness is no longer being pursued. The purpose of this paper is to examine coaching as a mechanism for the management of an internal labour market (ILM) at ABC manufacturing. Of particular interest is the perception of the ABC management that the coaching was not effective and did not meet its expectations. It utilizes an exploratory case study design and draws on data from interviews and documentation to explore the reasons for this from an ILM perspective. Three propositions are formulated to guide further research.

**Keywords:** Coaching, Succession Planning, Internal Labour Market, Retention, Evaluation

## Introduction

The ability of organizations to attract, develop and retain an adequate supply of labour with appropriate capabilities is critical to their survival and prosperity. The theory of the resource based view of the firm suggests that this is particularly true for organizations whose human resources (HR) are considered a fundamental component of competitive advantage. HR specialists can play an important role in helping organizations develop this advantage by developing core competencies and improving effectiveness (Luoma 2000; Karami, Jones and Kakabadse, 2008). For organizations like these, their human resources effort assumes strategic rather than simply operational significance, and whilst this highlights the value of labour for these organizations, it also underscores the potential for strategic risks and the need for a proactive strategic HR effort to ameliorate them. For ABC manufacturing, workplace coaching formed an important part of this risk strategy in that it helped them to develop an internal labour market (ILM). The coaching literature offers little insight into this dimension of workplace coaching, partly because coaching is traditionally examined in literature from a psychological perspective, rather than a management perspective. Of those that do investigate coaching from a management perspective, there also tends to be a focus on delineating coaching at an individual level rather than a strategic and organizational level. To this end, the purpose of this paper

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is to examine coaching as a mechanism for the management of an ILM at ABC manufacturing. Of particular interest is the perception of the ABC management that the coaching was not effective and did not meet its expectations. The study utilises an exploratory case study design and draws on data from interviews and documentation to explore the reasons for this from an ILM perspective. Three propositions are formulated to guide further research.

## **Literature Review**

As suggested above, HR specialists may have a role to play in helping an organization develop its core competencies and become more effective. This is consistent with discussion in the literature, which recognizes coaching as an organization development tool that plays an increasingly important role in helping organizations to change and achieve this (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; McLean, Yang, Kuo, Tolbert, & Larkin, 2005). However, there is only vague recognition of the importance of coaching at an organizational level. For example, some authors assert that workplace coaching interventions should be incorporated into organizational strategy (Tobias, 1996; Jones, Raffert, & Griffin, 2006; Walker-Fraser, 2011), whilst others simply acknowledge that coaching may not be of strategic significance to them (Kiel, Rimmer, Williams, & Doyle, 1996; Dean & Meyer, 2002; Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas, & Kucine, 2003). It has been suggested that some organizations utilize coaching strategically in response to workplace stress (Luthans & Peterson, 2003; Butterworth, Linden, McClay, & Leo, 2006), which assists organizations to achieve their agenda indirectly through an associated reduction in absenteeism, turnover, poor working relationships, low morale, commitment and work satisfaction (Joo, 2005; Daehler-Miller, Moeller, & Troester, 2008; Bussell, 2008). There is also some evidence that organizations may use coaching as a part of an organizational learning strategy to leverage organizational problem solving capability (Ellinger & Keller, 2003; Longenecker & Neubert, 2005; Hagen, 2010). Finally, there is some recognition that coaching is a mechanism for attracting and retaining talent and therefore a possible benefit or measurable outcome of coaching (Wasylyshyn, Gronsky, & Haas, 2006; Tyra, 2008; Jackson, 2009).

There are only two recent studies, which stand out in terms of their focus on strategic outcomes: Pollitt (2009) conducted a study about the effects of workplace coaching on organizational culture. The findings suggest that there were internal benefits to the organization in terms of fewer grievances, disciplinary matters and tribunals; and that coaching can help improve business metrics such as customer satisfaction and train reliability. Similarly, in a pilot study by Jackson (2009) into the effectiveness of coaching at a non-profit organization, a moderate improvement was found in executive roles in areas such as time management, work-life balance, confidence, management skills, stress reduction and interpersonal relationships.

### ***Managing the Labour Market***

For organizations reliant on their human capital for competitive advantage, a steady supply of skills and labour is crucial. A common source of talent is the external labour market, but this is often competitive and carries a high cost burden for an employer. Unlike smaller firms with a limited internal talent pool, larger firms can develop their existing human resources and recruit via an internal labour market, which is particularly important when supply of labour is tight. In fact, the literature suggests that there are three drivers for ILM within organizations: human, organizational and economic. Human drivers are thought to be a response to employee need for organizational justice and fairness (Folger and Cropanzano 1998; organizational drivers a response to the need for the reallocation of organizational structures which involve decentralization of decision making power and accountability. Finally, economic drivers are a response to labour shortages, to reduce overhead costs

associated with internal labour allocation, and increase the ROI on employees (Kotorov and Tsu 2002). Economic drivers are thought to be of greatest relevance to the case of ABC manufacturing.

A functional internal labour market can in turn help an organization to balance its needs around cost effectiveness, predictability and flexibility of labour (Osterman, 1994). For example, evidence suggests that ILMs have the potential to improve the retention of staff within an organization even when the broader economy is undergoing economic expansion. This is thought to be anomalous given that in an economic expansion many employees would be expected leave their current employer to secure a job which better meets their needs and aspirations; but it nevertheless testifies to the benefits of ILM (Auer and Cazes, 2003). Evidence also suggests that longer tenure and retention may correlate with large firms (over 100 employees) training in specific skills; this is significant given that training in specific skills is a feature of ILM (Dobbie and McMillan 2010).

It is argued by Kotorov and Tsu (2002) that the ILM approach works because it provides a 'win/win' for both employers and employees. For example, employees receive the opportunity to achieve their career goals via promotion, and managers have the opportunity to employ the best person as a replacement. It is reported that this results in better job-person fit, increased ROI and a more competitive organization. Also, when an organization fills a vacancy internally, they save on training costs, which would normally need to be invested on an external candidate; they also make greater use of the acquired skills of the employee being promoted (Bayo-Moriones and Ortú'n-Angel, 2006). Companies that invest in training to expand the knowledge of existing employees rather than just new ones have higher retention rates because they facilitate greater competitiveness and preparation of employees for promotion within the organization (Gorjup, Valverde and Ryan 2008). But Kotorov and Tsu (2002) warn that there are limitations to the ILM, which is mediated by the context. That is, organizations must engage in careful planning to identify redundant processes, as well as overcome resistance from line managers. The organization must also pay attention to its culture, norms and policies, particularly because best practices and policy may need to be re-evaluated to support the ILM.

These sentiments are shared by other authors with respect to training. For example, Gorjup, Valverde and Ryan (2008) suggest that training plays an important role in the development of an internal labour market i.e. it creates a pool of talent, a career/promotion pathway, and for that reason facilitates retention. However, the impact of training is limited to the extent that it is combined with other human resource practices. For example, Clarke and Herrmann (2007) suggest that adopting best practice with respect to training in organizations can result in low labour turnover and absenteeism, good retention and better workplace safety; however, it relies on well-developed and formalized procedures for identifying training needs and career development. For example, the linking of personal development reviews to business objectives and performance indicators such as customer satisfaction, product quality, safety and so on. The use of informal methods to establish training needs can indicate a reactive training policy.

So, it can be concluded that the link between training and ILM is limited by the organizational context and relies on compatibility with culture and effective integration with a strategic approach to human resource management. Of interest in this paper is ABC manufacturing's perception that coaching was not effective. Based on the insights gained from the ILM literature, a number of propositions have been developed to explain this with respect to the organizational context and integration of its HR practices. The insights developed may be useful for a better understanding the potential link between coaching, HR practices and ILM.

## **Methodology**

The following section outlines and justifies the methodology adopted in this study, including research design, recruitment of key informants, data collection and analysis.

### ***Research design***

An exploratory case study design was utilised for this study. According to Yin (1991), a case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” and an excellent mechanism for explaining the how and why of events or actions. Creswell, (1998) describes it as, “an exploration of a ‘bounded system’....through detailed in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context”. This is appropriate for the purposes of this study, given that workplace coaching is intimately linked to the context of the workplace and the study is particularly interested in understanding the how and why of events i.e. why ABC manufacturing utilized coaching and what they achieved (or perceived they achieved) by using it. To achieve this, there is a need for to collect in-depth information, which is a recognized strength of case study design (Creswell, 1998; Flick 1998; Gall et al., 2005).

The exploratory nature of the study was thought to be appropriate given that it is investigating a phenomenon that is little understood; identifying significant variables about a phenomena and generating hypotheses to aid further research (Creswell, 2003). This kind of research is needed because the coaching literature is conflated and under-developed, and lacking in empirical research. For example, there is confusion over the fundamentals of the field as evidenced by an absence of standard models of practice (most are proprietary); little or no agreement about definitions of coaching in management or the kinds of qualifications required for practice; nor how coaching contributes to organizational success. There is even confusion about whether coaching is a discipline on its own, or just another form of organizational development and human resource development practice (Hamlin et al., 2009). In summary, the management coaching body of knowledge is one that has no clear identity, and reflects the ad-hoc and proprietary nature of the commercial coaching industry. Accordingly, this study adopted an exploratory design and its purpose was to identify constructs and/or formulate propositions to stimulate for future research.

### ***Recruiting key informants***

There were two main levels of sampling employed i.e. at an organizational and individual participant level. At an organizational level, the snowball technique was applied and facilitated via a relationship that existed between the management faculty at the researcher’s University and the participant organization. The senior executive at the organization confirmed initial interest and provided contact details of the General Manager of Human Resources. A brief discussion was conducted by telephone and an information sheet forwarded to her via email. Within one week of receiving it, she agreed to personally participate in the study and to also facilitate access to other key informants. Information sheets were provided and she forwarded these to the relevant target informants. From this, one external coach, three coaching candidates (senior leaders), and two supervisors (of the coaching candidates) were selected, making seven informants in total including the General Manager of Human Resources.

Social researchers commonly select research participants most likely to provide data that is information rich about the phenomenon being studied. Ideally, this should be done in a systematic way (Patton 2002). Patton suggests that there are three potential strategies for selecting research

participants for a study: selection decisions made on the basis of i) key characteristics, ii) a conceptual rationale or iii) an emergent basis. In this research, the identification and recruitment of key informants was made on the basis of key characteristics, which is a strategy that applies when the participants exhibit characteristics of interest to the researcher. These characteristics are outlined below.

Because of the unregulated nature of the coaching industry, the literature suggests that anyone can call himself or herself a coach (Whitmore 1992; Hamlin et al. 2009). To counter this and avoid recruiting 'anyone' as a key informant, a rigorous criterion was applied to the recruitment process, informed by the significant debate about the kinds of qualifications that a coach should possess to be considered competent (Judge and Cowell 1997; Dean and Meyer 2002; Stern 2004; Dehaan 2008; Farmer 2011). But, because there is little agreement about the kinds of qualifications or characteristics a coach should possess, it was a challenge to identify a typical profile of an external coach (es). One usable piece of information in the literature is that 90% of executive coaches have post-graduate qualifications (at least a Masters degree) and 45% have Doctorates (Judge and Cowell 1997). Whilst this reference was relatively outdated, it does suggest that qualified coaches are generally educated to a high level with tertiary qualifications, and so this became a key recruitment criterion for the study.

The researcher was also concerned that the external coach (es) had extensive experience to avoid the recruitment of amateur coaches who had qualifications without commensurate experience. So, to ensure that the participants were qualified professionals, it was specified in the information sheet that the coach(es) met all of the following criteria:

- a degree (preferably Masters) in a related discipline such as psychology, adult education, management; or have 2-3 years of equivalent professional experience as a manager or trainer.
- have comparable experience engaged as an external coach.
- be earning above US \$50,000 per annum in this role.

The rigorous recruitment strategy yielded one very high quality respondent, who had an MBA from one of Australia's leading business schools and extensive experience coaching in exchange list corporations in Australia and the UK. He also had extensive professional experience in other domains, having been an Australian diplomat for several years and held senior management positions in the public service. Importantly as well, he had been recommended by the General Manager of Human Resources who spoke highly of him as a coach and suggested that he had gained the respect of many of the senior leaders he had coached in her organization. On this basis he was recruited to the study.

Whilst external coaches are key to the coaching process, there is an argument to be made about the importance of the 'coaching triad', which typically consists of coach, coachee and organizational supervisor, and on that basis to include all of them in coaching research (Judge and Cowell 1997; Joo 2005). For the purposes of this research, each member is considered an important stakeholder because of the different role they assume in coaching, and therefore the varied perspectives they can potentially contribute. The organizational supervisor's perspective is important because they very often adopt the manager as coach role. Their perspective is different to that of the external coach in that they represent an organization's strategic interests, and reflect this in the design and implementation of coaching programmes in which they participate. They are also a key support and sponsor of coaching that occurs between their sub-ordinate and an external coach. The third member of the coaching triad, the coachee, can also provide a unique perspective about coaching because

he/she experiences coaching first hand in the context of the operational role. They represent the perspective of the learner, who is often (but not always) learning to become a better manager as coach in their own role. To become a successful manager as coach, the literature suggests that people need focused developmental support to make the transition from a technical and task orientation, to a people orientation (Berg and Karlsen 2007; Lindbom 2007). The literature suggests that this learning support is something that an external coach can provide. Because there is no particular profile provided in literature about the characteristics of the coachee, the single criteria required for their participation in this study was that they were being coached by an external coach within the organization to improve their leadership ability. These criteria were provided to the General Manager of Human Resources who relayed the information sheets to a number of potential informants. Three senior executives replied to the invitation to participate and were recruited. Each was a national manager of departments which included manufacturing operations, IT and retail. Each had received coaching for a period of one year or more, conducted by the external coach who featured in this study. Each of the participants were also relatively new appointees having been recently promoted by the organization into a 'stretch position', and coaching was offered to them as a means of supporting their transition to a senior role. Their immediate supervisors were also recruited for the study and interviewed because of their role as sponsor of the coaching for their subordinate.

### ***Data collection***

Interview technique features highly in qualitative research (Brewer and Hunter 1989; Nelson, Treichler et al. 1992; Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Qualitative interviews are generally ethnographic in nature (McMillan and Schumacher 1989), ideographic and informal (Schwandt 1997) and consist of open-ended questions that the participant can respond to in their own terms. This research project adopted interview methods as the primary data gathering technique. A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared, which outlined the possible themes and areas for exploration. Topics included, but are not limited to: the coaching brief/purpose of the coaching; the content of the coaching; how it was conducted (coaching behaviour); the role of the informant in the coaching; the effectiveness and implications of the coaching at an individual and organizational level.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994) data collection methods in interpretive research need to be situated, and require the process to be characterized by intimacy, context, and an ability to represent adequately the perspective of the participant. Accordingly, during the interview process the researcher sought to create an intimate and safe environment conducive to sharing. Therefore, the interviews were conducted in a secure location free of interruption; in most cases they were conducted in the work office of the participant with the door closed. In addition, the researcher encouraged the interviewees to be honest about their true thoughts and feelings about their experiences of workplace coaching. To facilitate this, the confidential nature of the interviews was emphasized; specifically, that all identifiers such as names would be removed from interview transcription and recordings destroyed.

In total, there were seven recorded in-depth interviews spanning three coaching triads consisting of the coach, coachee and coaching supervisor. All of the interviews (except for the coach and General Manager of HR) were approximately 1 hour in duration. The coach and General Manager's interviews were approximately 2 hours in. Once the interviews were completed, the recordings were professionally transcribed.

Case study researchers also use written communication as sources of data found in the field setting. This research used documentary analysis to collect in-depth data regarding the phenomenon of workplace coaching. Certain documents were loaned to the researcher, including case notes from

two coachees and one supervising manager, as well as policy documents and copies of surveys used in the workplace coaching process by the coach and organization. In general, most coachees struggled to find reflective notes about the coaching, however one coachee did produce a two-page document that contained scribbled notes that he had made during one coaching session. Another coachee made available for loan one of the standardized 360 surveys utilized during the coaching, as well as one copy of the Birkman survey utilized during the coaching programme (the Birkman Survey provided insight about the behaviour change that the organization sought to achieve). In addition, one manager provided copies of the policy/protocol documents that outlined the procedures surrounding the use of coaching in the organization, and a copy of a second 360-degree survey that the organization had recently developed. Whilst the majority of the data collected was generated via the in-depth interviews, the case documentation provided an additional comparative source of data and aided in strengthening triangulation.

### ***Data analysis***

The method of qualitative data analysis adopted in this study was interpretational (Tesch, 1990) since it allowed the researcher to make inferences about the data and use a systematic set of procedures to code and classify the data to ensure that the important constructs, themes, and patterns emerged (Gall et al., 2005). The ability to make inferences from the data was considered to be important given that the interpretation of the data relies on reconciling the accounts of informants within the specific organizational context.

Accordingly, there were six steps involved in the analysis of the data: the interviews were transcribed; codes developed to categorize the data; the data was then coded according to any codes meaningful to it; the data was coded into groups according to codes; finally, construct, themes, and patterns were generated. For the purposes of the research, two main means of tabulation were used, which included both the use of word documents and an extensive excel spreadsheet. The first level coding schema consisted of two main themes including organizational and individual constructs; the organizational level constructs form the basis of the analysis for this paper. Second level codes further delineated these themes in more detail. The following convention is used to identify the participants. The leaders who received coaching i.e. the coaching candidates are referred to as 'coachee 1, coachee 2, coachee 3'. The supervising managers, including the general manager of human resources are referred to as 'manager 1, manager 2, manager 3'. And, the external coach is referred to as the 'coach'.

An important factor in ensuring the credibility of the analysis is triangulation and disconfirming analysis. Essentially, these are a process of drawing on confirming or disconfirming evidence and in that sense involves the collection of data from multiple sources. The benefit of following this process is that inconsistencies in the data can be 'unearthed' and then reconciled. Triangulation was facilitated in two ways: by the collection and analysis of multiple sources of data about the same phenomena, which included interview data, website, documentation such as case notes, policy documents outlining the coaching protocols and psychometric assessment surveys. Whilst the majority of the data was generated from the interviews, the documentation provided a valuable source of data for the purpose of triangulation and provided contextual information about the organization featured in the case, as well as some of the tools utilized during the process.

Triangulation was also achieved by collecting data from the key participants in the coaching triad, so as to capture perspectives about the phenomena based on their role or involvement in coaching i.e. the workplace coach, coachee, their supervising manager and General Manager of human resources.

## Case study of ABC Manufacturing

### *The strategic context*

The organization chosen for this research project was ABC manufacturing. Its website and other official promotional documentation indicate that it is a large publicly listed manufacturer and distributor, with revenues of \$3 billion Australian dollars derived from 200 operational sites and 30,000 customers. It employs approximately 7,400 people. The mission of the organization is to deliver superior and sustainable returns through leading market positions in the construction, resources, and industrial markets through its people, manufacturing, and distribution capabilities. As an employer, ABC recognizes that people are a distinguishing feature of successful business and is committed to attracting, maintaining and building a skilled and motivated workforce. It recognizes the strategic importance of employees for achievement of its mission, as evidenced by its recruitment and selection, which targets people with appropriate competencies, behaviours and values. It mainly utilizes traditional approaches to employee development including graduates schemes, cadetships, apprenticeships, and traineeships throughout its businesses across a variety of disciplines.

The use of workplace coaching as a part of its development effort has been reserved for high performing senior managers, which is consistent with the workplace coaching literature. It provided documentation indicating that it has informal protocols that it uses to guide the coaching i.e. identifying coaching opportunities, structuring, implementing and concluding the coaching assignment. There is also a summary document that outlines a summary of the goals, roles and responsibilities of the various coaching stakeholders and participants. The protocol documentation indicates that the goal of the coaching at an operational level is to achieve behavioural change specific to effective leadership and to support the orientation of individuals into new roles.

Reinforcing its strategic commitment for coaching, the protocol documentation specifies that there be a clear business benefit, so that the behaviour change is closely linked with the organization's goals. It also specifies that there needs to be alignment between the desired coaching outcome and the participant's personal and professional goals for this to occur. The coaching must be sponsored by the coachee's manager, who actively supports the coaching. To ensure coachee readiness, the coachee must be placed in a 'stretch' position so that coaching becomes more meaningful and focused. A stretch might occur because a manager is in a new role, facing a particular business challenge or has been in receipt of recent feedback. These protocols were developed over a period of three years as the coaching programme developed.

### *Reports of Coaching's Ineffectiveness*

A strategic goal of the coaching for ABC is organizational effectiveness. Essentially, this was based on the idea that it will be effective as an organization if its leaders are also effective in their roles. The path to effectiveness was thought to be achievable by overcoming barriers to success in key people within the organization. As per the coaching protocol documentation provided, the barriers were ineffective leadership behaviours, which might in turn be attributed to a specific business related challenge facing the leader, promotion to a new and challenging role, or adverse employee feedback. If more effective leadership behaviour could be realized, then there would be a trickle down affect, whereby the performance of sub-ordinates would also be improved. In this sense, coaching was meant to provide strategic leverage for effectiveness by helping individual leaders in the organization overcome their barriers to success, with the goal of improving performance across the whole organization.

According to Manager 1, the ineffective leadership behaviours were thought to be manifested as derailers, where derailers are undesirable behaviour:

*“.....[derailers are]those things that could potentially cause you to come off track....and because these could be different for different people, individual attention is needed to overcome these barriers to them being continually successful....”*

In practice though the data suggests that much of the coaching was focused on remediating those who were considered to be ‘problem children’ and some of it on enhancing those employees who had unrealized potential. The former seemed to contradict the coaching protocols set out by the organization, which specified that it was only high performers that would receive coaching. Further analysis of the data revealed that some of its key leaders were high performers, but many had significant derailers.

For both the organization and the employee, the prospect of promotion to a significantly more challenging role is associated with significant risk. Manager 1 suggests an unsuccessful transition would be problematic:

*“..if they [the coachees] are not successful in transition...it is hard to recover.... We don’t want to give someone a significant step up, and then not cope with that...”*

The Coach also supports idea that coaching is about helping a candidate transition to a new role. He says that coaching becomes a solution for manufacturing, for which it is difficult to attract talent:

*“...coaching’s role is to bring people to the next level....good leaders are rare and it is even harder for a business in the manufacturing sector to attract talent...”*

Because of this, there has been some discussion in ABC that coaching should be a compulsory support whenever people are transitioning to a significantly more challenging role within the organization. In part, these discussions have come about because of a possible merger between ABC and another organization, and have been noted as one possible future use of coaching:

*“...the coach would work with the coachee to develop a 100 day plan, and they might also be part of that process and work on ... how you can increase...effectiveness..”*

Over forty leaders at ABC have been coached over a three-year period, but despite this coaching is no longer viewed by ABC as a strategic lever and its use has declined. However, the coaching still continues with five coachees and the HR department still receives occasional requests for coaching. As Manager 1 suggests:

*“..there is still a little bit going on, but it is not a strategic lever that we are intentionally using at this stage... I think we are sitting back, going ‘that didn’t really work’. So, as I said, I am not sure as to what extent we got it wrong. We didn’t have the right structure in place and we had a sort of one coach for everyone, so there are a couple of areas where we might have got it wrong. But, I guess I have also been wrestling with, to what extent coaching really works in an ongoing business environment...”*

The change in strategy is linked to the failure of the coaching to live up to initial expectations. Manager 1 believes that the variation in results could be in part explained by the approach ABC took to the coaching. For instance, the organization initially adopted a one-coach policy, rather than choosing coaches to suit each coachee. The other factor may have been a lack of structure to the

coaching. Although, there was a sense that the coaching had been useful and may prove to be useful in the future, there is uncertainty about the effectiveness of workplace coaching and its strategic fit for the organization.

Manager 2 also supports the view of Manager 1, suggesting that coaching may not be adding value:

*"...I suppose if I was perfectly honest – there are times I guess that perhaps I still think that I should have cut my losses and ran.... While things have got a hell of a lot better, there is always that thing in my mind that maybe at any time, if similar circumstances come up, I might be faced with the same problem... I think maybe at times coaching can be a little bit overdone and it tends to go on and on and on. So, I think from an organizational point of view, there is a cost to the business with that and you have to evaluate and say well what value is it really adding?"*

Manager 1 says that other managers support this sentiment, and although not used to the same extent, the coaching is not necessarily being replaced by an alternative approach:

*"...I think we are at a bit of a crossroads at the moment in terms of what we think is the value of coaching. ....there has been a little bit of a backing away from coaching as well. Not necessarily to be replaced by anything else. A couple of months ago when I was working out whether we would renew the coach's contract and talking with all of my peers - there was definitely a sense of 'I don't see the value of having a coach anymore, we are not really sure of the effectiveness'. That wasn't people saying that is a reflection of the coach, it was just saying, I don't know about this coaching, have we really got the value out of it?..."*

### **Reports of Coaching's Effectiveness**

Despite the reports of Manager 1 and 2, there is disconfirming evidence that suggests that the coaching had been successful. The evidence suggests that when evaluating coaching at an individual role level of analysis, that it been successful in helping retain individual employees who might have been terminated or resigned, and was able to expedite the development of employees to help them be more effective in their roles.

For example, the Coach who conducted the coaching believes that it had been successful. He cites examples of individual coaching candidates who he believes have been successful in part because of coaching:

*"...there had been some pretty notable results. People had been turned around and rather than go somewhere else they stayed in the business....there is [also] a [coaching] candidate in this organization who has just been given a relieving role as a General Manager, so he has gone forward to a big role..."*

He does acknowledge though, that it is difficult to quantify the impact that coaching can have:

*"...the thing that annoys most people about coaching, especially who are interested in results, is that it is almost impossible...with a whole range of other micro and macro [factors] to know exactly what is the organizational impact... I wouldn't put my name to any study that I have seen today that says 'we have improved leadership by three per cent'. I have seen people write that crap and I just laugh at it..."*

Similarly, Manager 2 says that coaching helped him to avoid terminating an employee:

*"...it was a situation of...someone who has been with the company for a fair while... if we did lose her... to replace her and to get someone up to skill, up to capacity in the ABC environment; without her...would have been a fairly sort of serious position to be in... At the end of the day, I have actually removed her out of the role*

*that she was in and placed her into another role...[because of] the relationship stuff. She still reports to me, but she doesn't have the involvement with the other people that she did. Some of those potential issues that were there have now been resolved by that approach [through coaching].....it would have been the exit strategy because we just could not have tolerated what was going on..."*

Finally, Manager 1 believes that coaching and retention go hand in hand in that the coachee remains with the organization because they feel that it is taking an interest in them and investing in them. This is also the experience of Coachee 3, who says that without coaching she believes that she would not have been able to perform her role effectively and therefore may not have been retained by the organization or would have resigned. She says that the coaching has helped her rise to the challenge of the job:

*"...Definitely. I might not have lasted in the job... It could have ended up that way or it could have ended up with me leaving..."*

As well as helping to retain key leaders, it helped others to expedite their development. In terms of achieving the goal of employee development, there was some sense amongst managers that the coaching of their sub-ordinates resulted in expedited achievement of developmental outcomes. Manager 2 believes that development of his employee would probably have happened over time anyway, but that the coaching sped the process up:

*"...we would have got there in the end anyway just by working with him and bringing him through....but the coaching achieved the result a bit quicker..."*

In part, this point of view is supported by Manager 3, who agrees that a coachee will become a better manager more quickly because of the coaching than if left to their own devices. However, this is in direct contrast with Coachee 3 who disagrees with the notion that the development would happen over time, suggesting that without the coaching there is a chance that change would not have occurred at all. As already indicated, she believes that without the coaching she may have resigned or been terminated by ABC before development could occur.

### ***Overcoming Deficiencies***

The findings suggest that coaching is a unique approach to development that provided ABC with an opportunity to resolve challenging issues that they had not been able to with traditional approaches to development. Before using coaching as a strategy, ABC utilized a range of development behavioural techniques, which include the giving of feedback from managers to their sub-ordinates about individual behaviours and in more recent times the use of a 360-degree feedback tool. Manager 1 says that dealing with problem behaviour in this way might include feedback:

*"...[it involves] sitting down with a person and raising the behaviour; having a conversation about it and how to fix it; and, setting up ...feedback mechanisms where the manager can give feedback on a regular basis..."*

Another strategy used is based on modelling or vicarious learning, which involves arranging for the coachee to spend time with other employees who exemplify and model appropriate behaviour. But, these approaches have not always been successful for the organization. According to Manager 1, the individual and complex nature of people issues means that they can be "... *incredibly difficult to fix...*". So, even though their coaching programme has not been as successful as she would have liked, her department is reserving judgment about the effectiveness of coaching because they also acknowledge that the 'non-coaching' methods used at ABC to 'fix' people issues are insufficient for the task.

Similarly, Manager 3 also supports the idea that coaching is different to traditional approaches to development. He distinguishes coaching from the one day leadership programmes that ABC currently sends their employees to. The manager describes these programmes as a “...one-step-approach to development of people, which is dangerous”. Coaching on the other hand, he views as a more controlled process that allows coachees to develop at their own pace and reflects their choice to be involved. He notes that the organization could do the coaching itself, but lacks the capabilities to do what a coach does; does not have the time or resources to do so; and because coaching is not the organization's core business, does not have the inclination to do so. This is illustrated in the case of Coachee 3 - he says that the senior management team could see her potential and could see that she did not have the self-belief or the tools:

*“...she did not have the self-belief to bring that capability to the fore...but, we did have the capability to change the situation thanks to coaching...”*

Consistent with an awareness of the deficiencies in their traditional approach to employee development, coaching at ABC has been used as a way of addressing the personal needs of an employee that may not be met by their managers. The Coach believes that coaching is unique, because it provides a forum for the sorts of intimate and need focused discussions about an individual that leaders at ABC are not having with their sub-ordinates. The coach says a typical, but problematic management style at ABC might be “...to give the goal, the resources and then measure the performance...” He says that conversations around this management style are focused on task and the missing element is the discussions about the person executing the task “... [conversations] about me, about my development needs...”

The Coach believes that it is this high level of attention that is needed to release discretionary effort and which retains a person in the organization. The coach cites an example of a ‘star performer’ who has recently progressed to senior level:

*“...[he has] made the organization a lot of money. He was going to leave, but because of coaching didn't. His boss wasn't going to keep him - he was leaving because of his boss. I actually got him and his boss together so that they could develop rules of engagement that kept him, then he got moved and then he stayed in the business ...”*

The value of high levels of attention and coaching conversations is consistent with the experience of Coachee 3. She believes that because of her limited experience as a leader of a group of people, simply reflecting on her own experiences would not be enough for her to become a better leader. She needed someone with expertise to help her reflect on experiences, to gain an objective point of view, to give her insight into the needs and workings of groups and how to get the best out of the group as leader:

*“... I think I came to understand it fully through the process, but certainly drawing from the coach's experiences and those conversations, he certainly made me more aware of what a good leader does. I guess more of a difference between a leader versus a manager versus, you know. I suppose I hadn't really, I didn't really have a good model. You know - someone that I could look to and say you know you are a good leader; I would like to model myself after what you do. I haven't had a lot of that...”*

Finally, the Coach is reported to have had a number of specialized skills that were not present within the organization, but were needed to achieve the organizational objectives. For instance, the coach had skills implementing feedback and assessment tools such as the Birkman, which predicts

how they might respond in stress situations and 360-degree feedback questionnaires. The coach also had facilitation skills, which enabled him to engage coachees, enhance their capacity for interpersonal dealings with others and develop their loyalty to the organization. He says that he is the facilitator that leaders in the organization are not:

*“...coaches are often commissioned to fill this gap and to make ground in this area, which is seen to be deficient by the General Manager...”*

This perspective is supported by Manager 2, who acknowledges that he did not have the skills needed to manage a problem with one of his sub-ordinates:

*“...the coach brought another dimension to the problem and provided her (the coachee) with an opportunity to change...”*

## **Discussion**

### ***Explaining coaching’s perceived ineffectiveness***

One of the observations made in this case study is that coaching did not deliver the expected return for ABC manufacturing and was no longer being pursued at a strategic level. But at the same time, as a consolation, it was acknowledged that they had using coaching to address some issues that were difficult to address. For example, the use of coaching at ABC involved supporting ill-equipped employees during a period of a substantial role transition. But, it is evident from the case that a successful transition under the challenging circumstances may not have been possible without high-level support provided by coaching; however, this appears not to have been sufficient to satisfy the organization about its effectiveness. This raises the question, how does one measure whether coaching is successful?

Certainly, from an ILM perspective, an internal promotion and transition is a likely sign of a healthy ILM in action. But, whilst the organization recognized that a high level of support was needed and factored this into its evaluation of coaching, it did not appear to recognize its other ILM related benefits. As the literature on ILM suggests, by using coaching to support internal candidates they would have saved on significant costs associated with recruitment and training external candidates. In promoting internally, they also made greater use of the pre-existing skills of those managers developed from previous training investments thereby increasing ROI. And finally, by promoting the managers internally, they also created a role vacancy, which in turn would have provided opportunities for more junior employees to satisfy their career aspirations. These are all valuable economic and humanistic benefits consistent with a healthy ILM.

Conversely, it is worth noting that if they had employed externally and invested the training dollars in the external candidates instead of the internal ones, they might have experienced a higher labour turnover. This is something that the literature suggests can occur if an organization does not develop their ILM and a scenario that ABC was trying to avoid based on the reports of supervisors and coaches who suggested that there might have been terminations and resignations. If the employees promoted had left the organization because of a lack of support or role failure, it would not only have been a knowledge management disaster but the company would have had to recruit new employees to fill the gaps left by them, and invested heavily in training to orient them to their roles. Furthermore, there would have been several months of downtime in these senior roles, which would

have a cascade effect down the chain of command. These hidden costs would have been significant, and if factored into an evaluation of the effectiveness of coaching might testify to its value.

On this basis, a proposition might be that the use of coaching to develop an ILM can potentially generate substantial economic and humanistic benefits. This is because it supports the successful development and transition of labour to new and challenging roles, and in doing so it can also help to avert role failure and facilitate retention. Another proposition is that an instrumental evaluation of coaching should occur both at a role level and also at a strategic/organizational level. This is because a role level analysis might yield false positives or negatives about the effectiveness of coaching as it neglects the broader organizational benefits. If ABC manufacturing had done this, then their assessment of the coaching's effectiveness might have changed, and in turn their decisions regarding the ongoing use of coaching.

### ***The Importance of Context in ILM***

ABC appeared to have an economic motivation for their ILM, but the lack of perceived success might have been a function of contextual considerations as discussed in the ILM literature. A key point here is that the coaching at ABC was utilized as a part of a relatively informal strategy. For example, the data suggests that it seemed to lack clear expectations in terms of policies, contractual, and psychological obligations for coaching stakeholders, which may be a reason for its failure. The ILM literature is clear that training conducted as an ILM strategy can only be successful if it is integrated within the organization's HR practices. If it is successfully integrated, it creates a pool of talent, career pathways and therefore facilitates retention. As per the literature, 'better integrated' broadly implies a consideration of contextual factors pertinent to functional ILM, which includes:

- alignment with key values and objectives so that the approach is strategic rather than reactive;
- formality around HR policy;
- formality around instructional design as opposed to ad hoc;
- consideration of the compatibility of existing HR processes, such as performance management, and whether adaptation of these key systems is required; and,
- support for an ILM approach from key managers, which if lacking may have implications for cultural change.

These factors form a kind of checklist that organizations need to attend to around ILM.

It could be argued that ABC were attempting to be strategic because they recognized the potential labour market risk and were trying to prevent role failure and employee turnover; but this was not accompanied by sufficient formalization of procedures and policies as suggested by the literature. In a sense, ABC were reacting to the challenges of their external labour market situation by 'giving coaching a go' rather than as a part of an ongoing, defined and broader ILM strategy. For example, indications are that they only had a vague notion of what they were trying to achieve, which was very broadly defined as behavioural change for the sake of role effectiveness. By their own admission they did not have specific objectives and 'may have got it wrong'. Similarly, they had not developed formal benchmarks for evaluation of their coaching approach and therefore had no way of determining its success. As asserted earlier, they also tended toward the evaluation of the programme almost exclusively based on role level analysis rather than organizational level analysis, and in doing so missed seeing the potential longer-term benefits. This is of course a reflection of an informal and operational level approach rather than a strategic one.

There is little evidence beyond a set of protocols that ABC utilized a best practice model or integrated their approach with other HR systems. For example, the determination as to whether a leader required coaching was made based on a subjective judgment by the leader's supervisor. There were no formal processes in place from which to make these kinds of decisions. As the coaching literature suggests, this may have left the system up for abuse particularly with regard to scape-goating whereby a leader selects an underperforming sub-ordinate for coaching, when the problem is not the sub-ordinate but the supervisor's poor leadership skills (Tobias 1996; Kilburg 1997; DeHaan 2008). Given that many of the coaching candidates were acknowledged as 'problem children', this is a likely scenario and highlights the need for more formality and objectivity.

Consequently, if viewed within an ILM framework the following proposition about coaching might apply: for coaching to be an effective tool of ILM strategy, an organization using it must consider the extent to which its HR systems are integrated with the strategy. Specific considerations include the degree of alignment of key values and objectives; the degree of formality of HR policy and processes, including instructional design, performance management and career development.

### ***Limitations of Coaching***

There are some additional lessons to be learned from an understanding of this case and a final proposition. Despite the potential of coaching to contribute to ILM, organizations need to understand that coaching and coaches have limitations. As the literature suggests, a coach may have behavioural expertise, be able to offer insights, be ethical, objective, a facilitator of specialist assessment surveys and so on. As the case suggests, coaching may also be useful in expediting development of a leader and particularly useful in situations where intensive one-to-one support is required. However, no matter how skilled or experienced, a coach cannot fix problems that are due to structural deficiencies within key HR systems related to ILM, i.e. lack of career development, poor leadership supervisory practices, performance review and so on. Similarly, coaching cannot be used as a scape-goat for deficiencies resulting in perceived ineffectiveness, or to fix so called 'problem children' who may in fact be products of the organizational system. There is no substitute for a clearly develop HR strategy and objectives, or formalization of policies, systems and processes that support ILM to guide decision making around initiatives such as coaching. The consequences of the alternative appear to be apparent in the ABC case.

### ***Questions for Practice***

Based on the propositions developed in this paper, a number of related questions might be considered to guide practice:

What are we trying to achieve by utilizing coaching, and how is this likely to benefit our ILM strategy (if we have one)?

What benchmarks are we going to use evaluate and measure the effectiveness of coaching at both a role and organizational level?

What formal procedures can we put in place to guide the decision making around the use of coaching within the framework of our key HR systems e.g. performance review, career development, and instructional design?

Are any of our HR systems and processes redundant? If so, what changes are required to bring them into alignment with the ILM strategy and to facilitate the use of development approaches such as coaching?

## Conclusion

This exploratory case study investigated the phenomenon of workplace coaching at ABC Manufacturing from an ILM perspective. Its purpose was to explore the organization's perspective that the coaching was not effective, and to seek to explain this using insights from ILM literature and the case. These insights were captured in a number of propositions, which might be useful for stimulating further research.

ABC manufacturing was operating in a competitive labour environment and appeared to understand the strategic significance of its human resources; on that basis it sought to retain and develop employees that can help to achieve its mission. There is however, some doubt about the integrity of its approach to ILM and integration with its key HR systems. Of concern is its focus on coaching individuals to achieve behavioural change at a role level with the expectation that this will somehow translate into organizational effectiveness, but with seemingly little consideration of the organizational and ILM context in which the coaching occurred.

A key proposition of the case is that an instrumental evaluation of coaching should occur at two levels i.e. individual role and organizational levels. This is because a role level of analysis provides only a limited indication of the effectiveness of coaching and might yield false positives or negatives because it neglects the broader organizational benefits. Because ABC manufacturing only evaluated the effectiveness of coaching at a role level, their assessment was that coaching was not effective. However, as this paper proposes, there are potentially many economic benefits of coaching that can be seen when evaluated at an organizational level as well. An evaluation of this kind might have affected their decision regarding the ongoing use of coaching.

A second proposition related to the integration of HR systems with the ILM strategy. For coaching to be an effective tool of ILM strategy, an organization using must consider the extent to which its HR systems are integrated with the strategy. Specific considerations include the degree of alignment of key values and objectives; the degree of formality of HR policy and processes, including instructional design, performance management and career development.

A third and final proposition related to coaching's limitations. Despite the potential value of coaching to ILM, it does have limitations that must be understood concerning ILM. A coach may have many specialist skills and knowledge, but this is no substitute for deficiencies within key HR systems related to ILM, for example, career development, leadership supervisory practices, performance reviews and instructional design. Coaching cannot be used to fix problems due to these deficiencies. In summary, there is no substitute for a clearly develop HR strategy and objectives, or formalization of policies, systems and processes that support ILM to guide decision making around initiatives such as coaching. The effect of deficiencies is apparent in the ABC case.

### *Contributions and Limitations*

This paper has introduced the concept of ILM into the coaching body of knowledge. Given the lack of research in this area of coaching (specifically about the management context) and that coaching is a popular approach to development, this study has both theoretical and practical significance. Whilst this research does not directly propose a conceptual theory, it does provide a series of propositions that might stimulate further research in this area of ILM and coaching. These propositions might be suitable for further development and empirical testing and thereby help to extend the body of knowledge about ILM. The study potentially provides a useful comparison for

organizations considering utilizing coaching to develop an ILM. In particular, it may provide insight to organizations about the contextual factors that might need to be considered if they desire their coaching effort to provide organizational rather than just role level benefits. It also highlights the potential value of coaching as a tool of ILM, which may not be readily apparent to an organization which focuses on role level evaluation of coaching's effectiveness.

There are a number of limitations of the research. As case study design is by definition an exploration of phenomena in a bounded system, the findings need to be understood within the context in which the research was conducted. The findings are therefore limited to the ABC manufacturing case, and there is no suggestion that they can be statistically generalized beyond these boundaries. At an analytical level though it may be possible that there are other organizations in manufacturing industry that face similar challenges to those highlighted in the case study and accordingly the insights developed may be applicable. Of importance to exploratory research is the focus on the richness of the data rather than quantity, which necessitated the participation of only a small number of key informants to this study. It is noted however, that a broader empirical base for the study would have potentially yielded additional insights regarding the perceived ineffectiveness at ABC manufacturing. However, as indicated in the methodology, despite the limited empirical base, the small number of key informants recruited to this study is consistent with the goals of exploratory research. The existing findings can therefore be considered suggestive at best and from a practical perspective the insights applied with these limitations in mind.

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