

The Transitional Space Provided by Coaching and Mentoring

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Abstract

A qualitative, interpretive case study approach was developed to explore the role of coaching and mentoring in supporting the development of academic staff and organisational strategy during a period of organisational change. One of the study findings indicated that coaching and mentoring provided a transitional space to support staff as they worked through the challenges presented by the external expectations placed on them and the internal challenges generated by their feelings about those expectations. The study is unusual in that the participants experienced both coaching and mentoring, and it has been possible to identify the particular role provided by coaching and by mentoring, as well as where they offered support in similar ways.

Key Words: Transitional space; coaching; mentoring; alignment; academic staff

Introduction

For those working in organisations, the concept of individual and organisational alignment has long been a challenging one. Changes to government agendas, a competitive market place and rising student expectations present a challenging context for Higher Education (HE) institutions globally, which in turn has impacted organisational strategy and placed different demands on the nature of academic staff roles. Higher Education (HE) therefore provided an interesting place to explore the research question: “*How are coaching and mentoring being used to support the alignment of academic staff and organisational strategy?*” A case study approach was developed to explore how coaching and mentoring were used by a university in the South of England to unravel some of the tensions around aligning academic staff and a new and ambitious organisational strategy, which affected not only the processes and systems by which academic staff achieved their work, but which set new expectations of their roles and implemented a new academic career structure. The University had previously focused on the delivery of professionally focused subjects which meant that a significant number of staff had been recruited for their ‘professional’, rather than their academic, experience and their performance had previously been measured in teaching inputs and outputs. The new vision was for an academically-led University where four areas of academic practice: education, research, enterprise, and professional practice, were equal partners and all academic staff were expected to demonstrate quality outputs in three of the four areas.

The paper begins by outlining some of the literature that informed the study and sets out the methodological approach, followed by an introduction to the case organisation. A brief description of how the participants in the study conceptualised alignment will be given before presenting findings about the ways in which coaching and mentoring provided a transitional space for academic staff when dealing with the internal and external challenges that they were facing. The role of the coach and/or mentor as a translator between the inner and outer world of the academic will be explained and the model of the transitional space provided by coaching and mentoring developed from this research will be presented. A brief outline of how the organisation and academic transformed over the period of the study will show how things were different after the coaching and mentoring had taken place. Opportunities for further research are mentioned in the concluding section of this paper.

Alignment, Coaching and Mentoring

Alignment is a term that has mostly been used within organisations during the last decade, but was not a term that was widely used to describe the relationship between organisations and their people during the last century. Harding (2012) sets out a review of the literature that explores some of the widely held views on and individuals and organisations which are, perhaps, antecedents of the current use of the term 'alignment' in organisations. More recently it has been argued that the individual is often portrayed as being in opposition to the social structures that surround them in working life (Billett, 2006). Reasons for this have been attributed to organisational systems and managers which discourage employees and suggest that the organisation does not benefit from the creativity and innovation of individuals in solving organisational problems (Gilley, 2001). Maximising the people asset in organisations is also fundamental to achieving business strategy (Holbeche, 2009). An increase in proactive methodologies to align strategy, processes and people often focuses more on the success of aligning the structural aspects and, whilst these acknowledge the importance of aligning people, they are limited on advice on specific ways to align people in organisations (Kaplan and Norton, 2006). Nevertheless, the benefits of providing organisational support were shown in a meta-analysis of studies by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) which indicated that when employees perceived that they had received beneficial treatment through fairness, support, rewards and conditions, they benefited from job satisfaction and positive mood, and the organisation benefited from their performance and commitment. Practices such as career development, coaching and mentoring schemes to support individuals in organisations is suggested by Gilley (2001) as a way of ensuring that organisations benefit best from the contribution of individuals.

Coaching has been identified as a useful tool for bringing humanity back to the workplace (Downey, 2003), to support the integration of individual and organisational goals (Watt, 2004), to support both professional and psychological issues (Cavanagh and Grant, 2009) and to provide a supportive environment that can benefit both the individual and the organisation (Stober, 2008; Redshaw, 2000). Mentoring has been shown to increase motivation and commitment to the organisation (Hegstad, 1999), increase Perceived Organisational Support (Kraimer et al, 2011) and to impact on Organisational Citizenship Behaviour (Kwan, Liu and Yim, 2011). However, there is no research that looks specifically at the role of coaching and mentoring in supporting the alignment of individuals and organisations. Whilst the evidence on organisational alignment in the literature appears to focus more on the alignment of systems and processes, the need to find ways to align individuals and organisational strategy is discussed (Kaplan and Norton, 2006), for example, Montuori and Purser (2001) highlight the need for more humanistic approaches to supporting staff in organisations and not just a focus on the bottom line.

It has been suggested that coaching and mentoring are two of the most powerful ways of helping people to undertake the inner dialogue that brings together the potentially conflicting dynamics of organisational and individual ambition and drive to succeed (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2007), however the definitions of coaching and mentoring are often blurred. This means that it is unusual for organisations to make a decision to offer both coaching and mentoring within the same programme of support for staff, and unusual to have a study that looks at both coaching and mentoring within the same organisational context, with the same people, at the same time. Hence there is a lack of published research that shows how coaching and mentoring can be used to support individual and organisational alignment, and also a deficiency in research which shows the similarities and differences between their roles in providing such support.

In addition, not only are there potentially conflicting dynamics between individual and organisation, but the potentially competing agendas of strategic alignment and coaching and mentoring are also recognised (Garvey, Stokes and Megginson, 2009). Organisational alignment

appears to imply a more managerial discourse with a focus on structural elements such as aligning processes and procedures, paying only lip service to the alignment of people (Kaplan and Norton, 2006). This means that alignment can be perceived as a top-down driver, rather than being something that is of benefit to the individual. Conversely, coaching and mentoring approaches are more likely to focus time and attention on supporting and developing individuals to reach their full potential, rather than the primary purpose being to develop organisational potential. There could therefore be risks in identifying coaching and mentoring as 'tools' for organisational alignment. If they were to become part of a structured approach to strategic alignment, then there is a very real possibility that the individually focused processes and relationships that provide foundations for effective individual coaching and mentoring could be in jeopardy. There could be a risk that they would lose some of the 'genuine and authentic intent' essential for coaching and mentoring in an organisational context, because such development is only achievable in a 'wholesome and honest environment' (Garvey, 2010, p.351). Thus, whilst this study aimed to identify the ways in which coaching and mentoring could support the alignment of individual and organisation, it was done so with the intention of finding something that was good for both individual and organisation, rather than something that would benefit one over the other.

Methodology

The research aimed to achieve a greater understanding of individual perspectives within an organisational context and utilised a qualitative interpretive approach for collecting the data in order that those involved in the study would be able to talk about personal experience from an individual perspective, thereby allowing them to create their own meanings from their own experiences (Gray, 2004).

Case study was chosen as the methodological approach as it provides an opportunity to explore the situational uniqueness of a case (Stake, 2006) and can help to build knowledge of the individual and the organisation as well as an understanding of any complex social phenomena (Yin, 2003). The range of approaches that can be used in case study fit with the interpretive approach (Lee et al, 2007) and allow for sensitivity to place and situation in the research (Creswell and Miller, 2000). As the organisation was already four years into a seven year change programme, a case study approach provided opportunities for 'capturing the emergent and changing properties of life' in the organisation (Hartley, 2004, p.323-333), as well as helping to make links with micro-processes, such as coaching and mentoring, and macro-structures, such as the impact on the organisation (Willig, 2010).

The study utilised documentary data, semi-structured interviews with senior leaders, coaches, mentors and academic staff, and a questionnaire with academic staff to identify, at a given point in the University's change programme, how the alignment of academic staff and organisational strategy was perceived and to gather data on their experiences of coaching and mentoring. Data was collected from the following sources:

- (i) Government and Higher Education policy papers to identify topical issues facing HE that would set the wider context for the case study
- (ii) Institutional documents at the case organisation and these were explored for issues relating to the organisational strategy, the change agenda, and the support that was being provided for academic staff
- (iii) Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 senior leaders of the organisation and designed to explore their perspectives on alignment, the expectations of academic staff and the support provided for academic staff

(iv) Thirty six academic staff who had received coaching and mentoring on staff development programmes. A questionnaire was used in order to find out about their perceptions of alignment and their experiences of coaching and mentoring

(v) Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with two external coaches, 11 internal mentors (including five in a group interview) and six academic staff who had received coaching and mentoring to explore their perceptions of alignment and experiences of coaching and mentoring.

The approach to analysing the interviews and questionnaire was influenced by the Grounded Theory approach, as it is useful for studying social phenomena and employs a systematic method for fracturing data through a series of coding structures. At Level 1 of the analysis the data was reviewed separately for each participant group: leaders, coaches, mentors, academics, as well as the questionnaire and then open codes and their properties were identified. At Level 2 relationships between codes were established to generate categories and then the categories and their properties from the different participant groups were brought together to undertake a 'holistic' analysis of the three participant groups and to identify the categories that were typical of all of the groups. Approaching the data in this way helped to compare the data from the perspectives of the different participant groups and to establish where there were similarities or differences between the ways in which they viewed the phenomenon under investigation. At Level 3 the relationships between the categories were brought together to identify themes from the data. At Level 4 the themes were brought together to create common concepts or theories and this was where a coherent story emerged from the data.

Introduction to the Case Organisation

The complex political agenda for HE means that universities need to focus more on strategy, measures and accountability in order to compete in a competitive market (Shattock, 2003). Changes have therefore been made to the ways in which universities are managed (Deem et al, 2008; Barnett, 2000). Such changes in activities challenge the frameworks by which academics have previously understood the world and present them with the kind of 'super complexity' that can challenge self-understanding and self-identity (Barnett, 2000, p.6). The nature of academic staff roles has also changed. For example, staff are required to engage in research and to undertake post-graduate qualifications (Fielden and Malcolm, 2005) and to be more accountable in areas such as teaching and research quality (PA Consulting Group, 2000). Whilst universities recognise the benefits of recruiting more staff from the professions, they also recognise that they find the transition to academia challenging (Boyd, 2010; Griffiths et al, 2010; Bandow et al, 2007; La Rocco and Bruns, 2006; Coleman et al, 2006). Although Scottish universities have started to align staff development to organisational objectives in order to support the alignment of individual staff (QAA, 2009; Gordon,1999), Human Resources (HR) practitioners in all UK universities need to be better at aligning their activities to institutional imperatives (Guest and Clinton, 2006). The challenge for HR in universities is to have a deeper understanding and connection with academic staff (Blackmore and Blackwell, 2006) and to focus more on issues such as career planning for academics (Strike and Taylor, 2009).

Fundamental to the change in institutional culture at the case University was the alignment of staff with the organisational strategy in respect of developing outputs for education, research, enterprise and professional practice. Two groups of staff were key to the change agenda, the first being those on academic contracts who were not currently research or enterprise active but had the potential to become active. At this post-1992 university academics were often mid-career, having entered from industry, or having been predominantly teachers (or researchers) up to this point. Some of these staff had doctorates, but were not research active and had limited academic outputs such as publications and successful funding grants. The measure of an academic was to be someone who

contributed in three out of four areas of academic practice, and an associated reward structure for those who contributed to the required standard included a new pay progression scheme, new academic career structure and annual promotion round. The University strategy made new demands on academic staff and in so doing changed the existing 'way of being' for individual academic staff in the institution.

The second group of staff who were key, were members of the professoriate, a group of staff who had hitherto been engaged in their own research and enterprise agendas, but who had not necessarily been actively sharing their knowledge, experience and expertise with colleagues. The University launched its Releasing Research and Enterprise Potential (RREP) Programme in 2006/7, which was targeted at both of the key groups: meeting the needs of academic staff and in engaging the Professoriate in the leadership of the University. A second cohort of the Programme ran from 2007/8. The programme had five components:

1. Personal and professional development planning with an external career coach
2. Mentoring to support the individual through and beyond the programme. Members of the professoriate and other senior academic staff with established academic portfolios were invited by the Vice Chancellor to act as mentors
3. Action learning provided opportunities for collaborative learning and reflection on personal and organisational challenges as well as opportunities to network across the institution
4. Workshops and master classes facilitated by members of the professoriate and other senior academic staff. Thirty five events took place each year, based on six key competences: grants and bids; publications; conferences and networking; balanced workloads; research team leadership; and research-informed teaching
5. A final poster event gave staff the opportunity to showcase their research and enterprise interests and experiences on the programme

A single career coaching session was offered by an independent, external career coach at the start of the RREP Programme in order that staff could consider the development of their future careers in the context of the University's strategic plans. The coaches were external consultants with experience of working in HE who worked for the institution at key stages along the four-year journey of the Programmes, including returning to the University to work with academic staff for up to three further coaching sessions on a sequel Programme in 2008-2010; participants also had further opportunities to work with an internal mentor on the sequel programme.

It has therefore been possible to make a distinction between participant experiences of coaching and their experiences of mentoring as each academic participant worked with both an internal mentor and an external coach.

How Participants Conceptualised Alignment

In order to understand how the participants conceptualised alignment, they were asked questions about what alignment meant to them in the interviews and in the questionnaire. The findings that emerged were based on the responses from all four participant groups: leaders, coaches, mentors and academics. The responses were analysed and categorised and four main themes emerged: (i) the clarity of vision and direction for the University (ii) the support provided for academic staff (iii) the expectations placed on academic staff and (iv) the challenges for academic staff.

There was a strong sense that clarity of the organisation's vision and direction provided a clear steer for academic staff and this made clear the expectations that leaders, coaches and mentors had of academic staff and the expectations that they had of themselves. It seemed that there was synergy between the expectations from the four different participant groups and all were focused on 'what it means to be an academic'.

The University had also put in place a range of supporting mechanisms at organisational and individual level. At organisational level these included an academic career structure to provide annual promotion opportunities and a pay progression scheme to reward performance. In addition a Balanced Workload model and a review of the curriculum were designed to release academic staff time from teaching to concentrate on a wider portfolio of academic activities. At an individual level support included the opportunity to work with a coach and/or mentor on four different staff development programmes, through research centres and as a result of completing a personal and professional development plan.

Notwithstanding the support that had been put in place, the expectations around the alignment provided the challenges for academic staff that were analysed into four main themes: career challenges; role challenges; time challenges; and psychological challenges.

The new academic career structure meant that academics could aspire to greater things for their careers within the University and participants viewed this as a positive challenge. However, the expectations around academic outputs were challenging because in some cases academics were being managed by people who had not experienced developing a rounded portfolio of academic outputs themselves. This pointed to the need for academics to work with role models who could support them in their endeavours. Academics were challenged because what they could aspire to for their careers and what was being demanded of them in their roles was different from what had been expected of them in the past. These two challenges related to the 'external world' of the academics and related to expectations that would result in external indicators of performance.

The time challenges for academic staff included coping with the speed of change and needing to juggle competing demands, particularly when tired. In addition where teaching loads had been reduced, staff were actually challenged by having more time, as they sometimes lacked the confidence or competence to engage in other activities. The leaders, coaches and mentors in particular discussed the psychological challenges faced by academic staff as they encountered feelings of denial, anxiety and lack of confidence in meeting expectations. Whilst some had been in denial of the changes, others felt anxious because they were uncertain about whether or not they had the ability to respond to expectations and therefore whether or not they would be good enough to keep their jobs. The anxiety was thought to be caused by lack of self esteem and lack of confidence due to the need to work outside current levels of competence. Whilst the career and role challenges provided external indicators of academic staff performance, the time and psychological challenges appeared to be something that academic staff needed to internalise in order to be able to deal with them and related to their 'internal world'. Thus the findings indicated that, although the concept of individual and organisational alignment was not perceived as a tension in the way that may have been expected, it was more about the need to focus on the gap of what it means to be an academic.

The Transitional Space Provided by Coaching and Mentoring

When the data from on the experiences the coaches, mentors and academics was brought together, the categories and the properties that emerged indicated that some support was provided by coaching, some by mentoring, and that other support was provided by both coaching and mentoring. The relationships between the categories and their properties were brought together into themes that showed that coaching and mentoring both provided support for four main areas: future focus; role

implementation; forward momentum; and psychological support. At this point it was possible to make a link between the support provided by coaching and mentoring and the challenges experienced by academic staff described above. Thus the connections were made as shown in Table 1. It has been possible to make a distinction between participant experiences of coaching and their experiences of mentoring as academics worked with both an internal mentor and an external coach and at different points in the programmes by different people meant that participants were able to separate their experiences of coaching and mentoring.

Challenges for Academic Staff	Coaching and Mentoring for ...	Coaching for ...	Mentoring for ...
Career	Future Focus	Vision	Inspiration
Role	Role Implementation	Performance Exploration Advice	Performance Exploration Advice
Time	Forward Momentum	Focus	Motivation
Psychological	Psychological Support	Reflection Reinforcement Tailored to individual needs	Nurture Support

Table 1 Connection between Challenges and Coaching and Mentoring Support

One of the mentors in the study talked about their role in providing a transitional space for academic staff and helping them to translate between their ‘inner’ and ‘outer worlds’. The mentor described their role in supporting academics within the challenging expectations placed on academics at the University:

“I’m really interested in helping a person to develop into an academic...I’m interested in transformation... I’m in this middle position...to represent transitional space in which I can translate between these two worlds, between their inner world and their outer world.” (M17/11)

The mentor described the ‘outer world’ as expectations and the ‘inner world’ as feelings and it is possible to draw parallels between this mentor’s explanation and the career, role, time and psychological challenges faced by academics. For academics in this study their inner world could be described as their feelings about the expectations placed on them, such as those set out in the sections on time and psychological challenges; and their external world could be described as the expectations where the results would be visible to the outside world, such as career and role challenges. The issue of transition during organisational change is described by Bridges and Mitchell (2000), where change is manifested as an external process, but transition is also an internal process whereby an individual needs to undergo a psychological reorientation before change can take place, with the need to let go of the old and to move through a neutral ‘space’ before being able to move forward. Hultman and Gellerman (2002, p.106) suggest that internal conflict occurs when there is an ‘intrapersonal misalignment’ when a person is torn between beliefs about themselves and their desire for personal growth, with the result that the person shifts between confidence and fear, hope and despair, self-doubt and certainty.

In considering the notion of transitional space in this context, it seemed that coaching and mentoring were supporting the alignment of academic staff in two ways. Firstly, the coaches and mentors provided both a transitional space for academics within which they could step back from their everyday concerns and work through the expectations and the challenges that they faced. This can be likened to the transitional space described by Winnicott (1999) who describes transitional space as the

territory between the internal (psychic reality) and external world of individuals. Dubouloy's (2004) research explores coaching using the concept of Winnicott's transitional space when working with managers finding their 'true' selves when they work in challenging environments. In this study the transitional space could be described as the physical time, place, resources and support provided by the coaches and mentors where they helped academics to work with their internal time and psychological challenges in order to better deal with their externally measured career and role challenges.

The Coach and Mentor as Translator

The second way in which coaching and mentoring could be considered to be providing a transitional space in supporting academic staff in their alignment relates to their role. One of the mentors said:

"I can translate between these two worlds, between their inner world and their outer world, especially in a culture and a context in which their inner world is under-represented and they don't have a voice for that." (M17/11)

In this respect the coaches and mentors could loosely be said to be fulfilling the role of the 'transitional object', described by Winnicott (1999) as a thing or phenomenon used by children as a defence against anxiety, which could be something like a teddy bear, or their mother, providing support within the transitional space. To quote the word used by the mentor above, the term 'translate' has been defined as to 'move from one place or condition to another' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2012) and could therefore be used to describe how in the transitional space, the coach or mentor helped to move the academic from where they were towards where they wanted to be. The skill of facilitating a transition shift is discussed by Hawkins and Smith (2010, p.59) who suggest that to help a person shift their levels of consciousness, their current level of being and thinking needs to be moved from their current way of operating. One of the mentors described their role in helping academics as they were able to step back from the detail to facilitate the academic in making a transition:

"And what you've done is avoid the detail, you've come at it much more open ended as someone looking in, rather than someone being in, and that enables [the academic] to fill in all the bits and pieces and often come up with the problem or solutions more effectively." (M21/7)

Thus the idea of how the coach or mentor operated within the transitional space was important to the ways in which coaching and mentoring supported academics. The idea of 'space' between therapist and client is discussed by Bridges (2007) as the need for a therapist to attend carefully to the manner in which they meet with the client and the physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual manifestation of their presence with the client. However, it appeared that the role of coaching and mentoring was to provide a 'transitional space' in which academics could access support in order to work through the challenges that they faced.

Model of the Transitional Space Provided by Coaching and Mentoring

The experiences of the participants in the study have been brought together as a 'Model of Transitional Space Provided by Coaching and Mentoring' in order to describe the role of coaching and mentoring in providing a transitional space for academics and the role of the coaches and mentors as translators between the internal and external world challenges. The Model is shown in Figure 1 and described more fully in Harding (2012). The support attributed to coaching and/or mentoring can be identified by the letters 'C' or 'M' on the model.

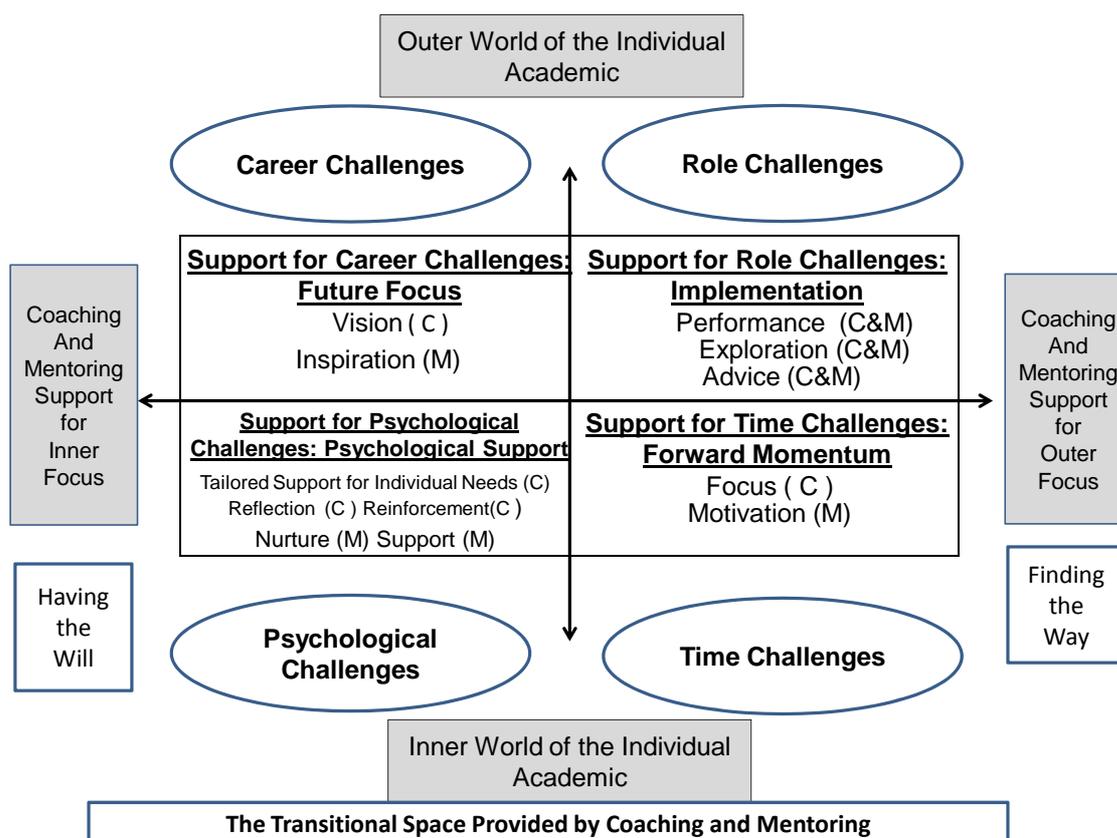


Figure 1 The Transitional Space Provided by Coaching and Mentoring

A description of the model follows supported by examples of quotes from the interviews and questionnaire with participant groups, which can be identified from the following reference prefixes:

- C Coach
- M Mentor
- A Academic
- AQ Academic staff questionnaire

The vertical axis in Figure 1 indicates the dimension between the outer world of the individual academic and their inner world. The outer world can be recognised as the external demands placed on the individual that have outputs and measures that can be recognised externally. In this study the outer world represents the context for HE that influenced institutional strategy, which in turn placed demands on the academics that were different to what had been expected of them before: they needed to contribute outputs in three of the four areas of academic practice, as well as being passionate about their subject and providing a good experience for their student. These expectations materialised in career and role challenges for academic staff. The inner world represents the way that individuals felt about the expectations placed on them. In this organisation academics faced psychological challenges, as achieving the expectations required a change of mindset and the need to deal with emotions such as denial, anxiety and lack of confidence, as well as concerns about the speed of change and the amount that they would need to achieve in a short period of time.

Support for Career Challenges

The top left quadrant in Figure 1 indicates how coaching and mentoring can provide an opportunity to focus on the future. The external coaches in the study supported the academics in creating a vision of the future, which in turn helped them to think about their career aspirations as academics. A coach and an academic described their experiences as an opportunity to:

“Talk about where they are going...where they see the future...directing the path.” (C15)

“[The coach said] first of all you draw a picture...where you are, in three years’ time, in five years where you’ll be.” (A26/33)

The mentors were experienced academics who acted as role models since they were already contributing outputs in a range of academic activities and provided inspiration to the academics that they worked with. A mentor and an academic described them thus:

“[They say to me] I see how you work and I want to have the same focus, or the same x,y,z...I aspire to that – and I try to provide that for them.” (M20/36)

“Gives me very practical help, but it’s also the inspiration. And I think it’s important to surround yourself with positive people who have the skills and attributes to which you aspire.” (A27/11)

Thus coaching supported academics in developing a vision and mentoring provided them with inspirational role models to work with.

Support for Psychological Challenges

The bottom left quadrant shows how coaching and mentoring offered psychological support. In this organisation coaching provided tailored support for each individual, helping academics to reflect on where they were now, which raised their self-awareness, focused on development plans and gave reinforcement for their positive actions. Coaches and academics all gave examples of how the coaching was tailored to individual needs and how it provided support for reflection and reinforcement. In terms of providing tailored support they described it as:

“Tailored exactly to the issues I was facing.” (AQ14/24)

“[An opportunity to] work on individual career plans.” (C15/9)

They described how it provided opportunities to raise self awareness:

“Reflect and do a complete assessment of life.” (C16/9)

“Develop sense of self.” (C16/21)

“Opened my eyes to myself.” (AQ14/20)

And to provide reinforcement:

“Coaching reinforced what I was doing right.” (AQ14/11)

“If it hadn’t been for these sessions I wouldn’t have had the courage of my conviction to apply for funding.” (AQ14/14)

The mentoring provided a supportive relationship where they could find nurture and support/ The mentor supported them by focusing on their needs as a whole person, not just on the problem or issue that they brought to the mentor.

“Nurturing the whole individual, not just the problem they bring because that’s a moment, an opportunity that you can change the process of their thinking rather than just focus on an individual situation.” (M21/6)

“Calms me down, makes me feel not alone.” (A26)

And by providing a space where academics felt supported:

“[They can] experience their thoughts being valued, their ideas being valued, and their values being valued [which] mitigates against highly competitive, critical feeling.” (M17)

“Emotional back up.” (A24;A26)

Thus the two quadrants on left of the figure represent the support provided by coaching and mentoring for career and role challenges, as they provided helped academics to focus on the future and provided psychological support. These quadrants reflect the dimension of inner focus at work and this type of coaching and mentoring appeared to focus on possibilities and to support the academics in developing their *will* to align and to meet the expectations that were demanded of them.

Support for Role Challenges

The top right quadrant in the figure indicates how coaching and mentoring can support individuals in implementing expectations required of their role through a focus on performance, exploration and the giving of advice. In this organisation this support was provided through both coaching and mentoring, although this may not be typical of all organisational contexts. For coaching the focus on performance supported the individual in thinking about their performance in ways that could benefit both them as individuals as well as the organisation. Twenty five of the 36 academics who completed the questionnaire said that coaching was quite or very useful in supporting them in ‘Thinking about my long-term performance’ and 17/36 said that it supported them in ‘Improving my performance’. One of the coaches described it as supporting:

“Changes that can be measured in terms of productivity and output of value to the organisation.” (C16)

The mentors were focused on providing stretch and challenge for the academics to help them to improve their performance; this type of support is untypical in mentoring, but may have been appropriate in this organisation as the mentors understood from their own experience exactly what was expected of academic staff and that the time in which they needed to achieve it was challenging; their support was therefore likely to have been more inclined towards mentoring for performance than is typically the case. One of the mentors said:

“If you can’t raise difficulties and problems in performance and make suggestions on how to improve it, you’re not effective as a mentor.” (M21)

And the academics welcomed the opportunity to be challenged a bit; one of them said that they needed:

“Someone to kick me along a bit.” (A24)

The coaching provided opportunities for academics to explore the blocks and barriers that were preventing them from achieving what they wanted to achieve and there was more data on coaching for exploration than there was for mentoring. This may have been because the coaches in this study were external to the organisation and because academics appreciated the independent perspective provided by the external coaches. A coach and an academic described this stage as:

“Explore what will make the individual happy; what will make the organisation happy.” (C16)

“Brought to the surface several key issues that I was aware of, but had failed to acknowledge to myself and not dealt with.” (AQ14/17)

There was more data on the mentors giving advice than on mentoring and exploration, one of them described it as:

“Looking out for them and see opportunities for them; linking them across Schools into things that they might not know about.” (M20/9)

The academics who completed the questionnaire said that it was quite or very useful in supporting them in:

‘Writing/submitting items for publication.’ (17/36)

‘Writing/submitting bids for funding.’ (14/36)

‘Developing a research proposal.’ (14/36)

Although the giving of advice is largely untypical in coaching, the coaches in this study gave advice on a range of issues, including developing an academic career in the wider HE context and how to deal with organisational politics:

“My academic insight gave useful levers, some advice I could share.” (C16/10)

“Telling you what to do to improve stuff.” (A27)

“How to do it, deal with things, and do them the right way.” (A26/39)

Although the coaches were external to the organisation, they had previously worked in universities, one as an academic, and were experienced coaches in HE. This may have had some bearing on the ways in which academics in this study accessed advice through their coaching experience. Thus coaching and mentoring both provided support for role implementation by focusing on performance, providing opportunities for exploration and giving advice.

Support for Time Challenges

The quadrant on the bottom right of the model shows how coaching and mentoring can provide support for forward momentum. Coaching created an opportunity to stand back and to see things more clearly, focusing on what prevented the academic from moving forward, and also provided a structure that set a framework for focusing on goals and milestones; two academics described it thus:

“Enabled me to see how I need to structure my time in order to maximise possibilities for research and enterprise.” (AQ14/20)

“Gave clear direction...identified milestones or key tasks.” (A28/4)

Mentors supported the academics in creating forward momentum by facilitating a process that created a spark for action; they did this by encouraging academics to focus on what excited them and by breaking things down into manageable chunks so that when they called academics to action they were ready to move forward; two of them described it as:

“Talking to them about what aspect of what they do they really love and what excites them...try to find ways to make as much as possible point to that.” (M19/19)

“Facilitating a process that sparks that ‘aha’ moment.” (M21/3)

The two quadrants on right of the diagram therefore demonstrate how coaching and mentoring provided support for role implementation and forward momentum. These quadrants represent the dimension of outer focus at work and this type of coaching and mentoring appeared to have a task focus and to support the academics in developing the way to align and to meet the expectations that were demanded of them.

Thus the Transitional Space Provided by Coaching and Mentoring model could be useful in other organisations who could use it to show how coaching and mentoring can provide a space in which individuals within organisations be given room to focus on alignment. This space can give individuals within organisations the opportunity to work with a supportive person who can help them to identify and understand alignment challenges, and to provide support and space to fill the gaps. In this way the coach and/or mentor can create a supportive space and provide time, resources and support to help the individual to translate between their inner and outer world by working through what is expected of them, what is important to them as an individual and how they can move forward to achieve what both they personally and the organisation want to achieve. Work undertaken by Cavanagh and Grant (2009) indicated that there were significant overlaps between the personal and professional when coaching executives within organisations and that for coaching to be most effective, the coach must pay attention to personal and professional issues when coaching on business-related issues, as a person’s psychological processes impact on all aspects of their life, both personal and at work. In this study there is evidence that coaching and mentoring both supported personal and professional issues for academics involved in the study by providing support for career, role, time and psychological challenges.

Transformation over Time

It would not be appropriate to talk about ‘transitional space’ without including some findings about what was different after the coaching and mentoring had taken place. There was evidence that changes had taken place and there were three main sources for these findings. The documentary data showed how the number of successful academic outputs such as funding applications and publications had increased. The academic staff provided evidence of how their careers had changes over the period of the study, with eleven of them achieving promotion. The coaches and mentors also provided observations of how the academics had changed over the four years that they had been working with them. A coach and a leader said:

“Most of them have forgotten the alignment with the organisation... they are actually focused on their individual careers and on publishing in the right places and making a name for themselves...they’re more confident, can see more clearly. I don’t think any of them would want to go back to the way they were before.” (C15/27)

“We’ve ignited a little spark in there and we’ve blown on that spark and we’ve ignited them and they’re going to fly.” (L13/31/32)

Conclusion

This research used documentary data and participant perceptions of alignment and experiences of coaching and mentoring to explore the role of coaching and mentoring in supporting alignment of individual and organisation. Data was collected from three different sources and with four different participant groups which enabled 'triangulation' between sources and groups to establish patterns within, and credibility of, the findings.

However, the ability to generalise from this study is limited as it is a case study of one university, at a particular moment in its history, and undertaken with a particular set of people working within a particular context. The very individual nature of coaching and mentoring means that a different set of participants may have had different experiences. Although there were 11 mentors involved in this study, there were only two external coaches involved. Opportunities therefore exist for further research to take place with other individuals to continue to build knowledge about the experience of coaching and mentoring.

The findings indicated how academic staff had transformed over time, both in terms of academic performance and behaviour, but also in their attitudes towards the expectations that had been placed on them. The University had put in place a range of organisational and individual level supporting mechanisms and therefore it is not possible to isolate the coaching and mentoring and attribute them to the reason why academic staff had improved their confidence and competence in engaging in a wider portfolio of academic activities. Unlike Frantz et al (2011) and Geber (2010) who claim that research outputs were increased as a result of coaching, in this organisation it would be difficult to claim that the coaching and mentoring were the only reasons why the outputs and performance improved.

However, coaching and mentoring did provide support at an individual level and so worked with other supporting mechanisms to facilitate the development of academics. For example, the new academic career structure could have inspired academics to develop their careers, but coaching and mentoring helped them to work on developing vision at an individual level and provided role models for inspiration and techniques to motivate themselves to work towards their aspiration. Opportunities to balance workloads and to review the ways in which the curriculum was delivered could have provided academic staff with additional time to spend on activities other than education, but the coaching and mentoring provided support and advice at an individual level to explore and focus on how best to use the time. Coaching and mentoring also provided tailored support focused on individual needs with nurturing relationships providing opportunities for reflection, feedback and reinforcement to develop self confidence. However, this could be seen as a strength of the coaching and mentoring provision in this organisation as the purpose was to support academic staff in aligning to the vision and strategy and it complemented the other supporting mechanisms that had been put in place; as such coaching and mentoring was embedded in the support structure, rather than being a stand-alone initiative.

At the beginning of this study, it appeared that the concept of alignment would be a tension for participants. The coaching and mentoring and other support provided reciprocal benefits for organisation and individual academics. By working towards University goals the academics developed their own outputs and in turn their careers; likewise supporting the academics to develop their careers was helping to achieve the University's goals. Thus at this University, alignment has emerged more appropriately as a way of supporting emerging academics in developing their careers and identities in a new world, rather than as a top-down initiative that academics resisted.

Whilst at first it may have appeared paradoxical to study the ways in which coaching and mentoring could support individual and organisational alignment, it seems that at this University it was possible for both the concept of alignment and the support provided by coaching and mentoring to co-exist. At this organisation this happened without damaging the existing frame of reference by which coaching and mentoring, as a way of supporting individuals, has previously been understood. It is likely that this was able to happen as the decision to provide coaching and mentoring support was grounded in a genuine intention to support individuals in a challenging and changing environment, rather than with the objective to make academics do what the organisation wanted them to do.

This study adds to the theoretical debates on the definitions of coaching and mentoring by distinguishing between the particular support provided by coaching and the particular support provided by mentoring for the same staff within the same organisational context during the same staff development programme. The evidence indicates that both coaching and mentoring can provide an important transitional space for individuals in working through their alignment with organisational strategy through future focus, role implementation, forward momentum and psychological support. Whilst both coaching and mentoring could support each of these four dimensions, what became clear in this study is that there could also be strength in offering both coaching and mentoring, and there are opportunities for further research to be done in this area.

These findings could be used in a practical way to support the development of coaches and mentors as they distinguish between the roles that they could play. For staff developers the model can provide some clarity on the potential benefits of using both coaching and mentoring in supporting individual and organisational alignment. Further research would need to be undertaken in order to establish if there is indeed a benefit in providing both coaching and mentoring to support alignment, or if similar results could be achieved through the provision of only one of the interventions.

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