The Argument Against Coaching Cultures

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The Argument Against Coaching Cultures

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In recent years, a number of articles and books have been written on the subject of how to create a coaching culture in the belief that this will have a positive effect on organizational performance and other outcomes such as employee morale and retention. In this article, it is argued that this is a leap of logic derived from evidence that coaching improves employee performance. In fact, the author argues that while coaching cultures may result in improved employee satisfaction, they may actually have a negative effect on organizational performance. As such, organizations that are striving to use coaching to improve their performance are better served by focusing on the purposeful development and use of coaching skills or, alternatively, embedding coaching as part of performance-oriented contexts such as innovation cultures.

Just as there are many definitions of culture, there are multiple perspectives on the meaning of the term coaching culture. For some, it refers to an organization that “fosters, rewards and expects managers to be effective coaches and mentors” (Lindbom, 2007, p. 101). Others take a broader stance and position a coaching culture as embedded in the way that people at all levels interface and work together. Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005a, p. 19), for example, define a coaching culture as “a culture where people coach each other all the time as a natural part of meetings, reviews and one to one discussions of all kinds.” Implied in most, if not all, definitions is the belief that a coaching culture provides the organizational environment where employees feel valued and respected, can effectively develop their skills and knowledge, and in so doing contribute significantly to the growth and performance of the organization.

This argument is supported by empirical research that shows a link between coaching and improved individual and organization results. One such study reported a 36% increase in the performance of salespeople as a result of intense coaching provided by their managers for three months following a two-day coaching workshop (Yu, 2007). Similarly, a 2009 report by BlessingWhite indicates that more than two-thirds of employees who receive coaching report that it has a significant positive effect on their performance and job satisfaction. In the same study, 88% of managers reported that coaching helps them to achieve their goals (BlessingWhite, 2009). Other intangible benefits include increased employee engagement, morale, collaboration, and teamwork (Anderson, Frankovelgia, & Hernez-Broome, 2009). Yet, there are indications that, despite the investment, coaching is not being effectively utilized in many organizations.
In fact, our research indicates that the majority of managers (73%) have taken a coaching skills course in the last five years, but their organizations, their teams, and they themselves all admit that coaching doesn’t happen as often or as successfully as it should. (BlessingWhite, 2009, p. 5)

One of the main reasons for this is the failure to provide an environment where coaching behaviours are valued and supported (Whitmore, 2003). This includes the failure of leaders to make coaching part of the strategic agenda (Lindbom, 2007), as well as an emphasis on speed and action at the expense of reflection and dialogue (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2005b). As a result, managers and employees perceive coaching to be added work and a distraction from the activities that they need to perform (Whitmore, 2003). They may even perceive it to be an attempt at manipulation by leaders who are trying to disguise added workload demands under the guise of a developmental opportunity (Agarwal, Angst, & Magni, 2009). The recommended solution is to create a coaching culture where coaching is embedded in the way that people work on a day-to-day basis. In other words, create a culture where coaching occurs formally and informally, between people at all levels, within and across functions and departments (BlessingWhite, 2009; Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2006, 2005a).

This raises a number of questions including: What exactly is a ‘coaching culture?’ and What is the evidence that a coaching culture will achieve the performance outcomes that its proponents suggest exist? To answer these questions requires that we shift our field of inquiry into the broader realm of organizational culture and its link to performance in order to discover insights that will help us to better understand coaching cultures.

**ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

Organizational culture provides employees with a way of giving meaning to their daily lives, setting guidelines and rules for how to behave, and, most important, reducing and containing the anxiety of dealing with an unpredictable and uncertain environment (Schein, 1993). In other words, an organization’s culture tells people what is right versus wrong and explains cause and effect, thereby influencing their decisions and actions. Organizational culture can be defined as follows:

*Organizational culture is the values, underlying beliefs, and assumptions that identify the ‘correct way’ to behave, and that are learned and shared by members of groups as they strive to achieve the organization’s goals and fulfill its purpose.*

Simply put, underlying assumptions refer to the widely held beliefs that guide behaviour and tell people how to perceive, think, and feel about things. These are deeply embedded in an organization’s way of working and serve a purpose of reducing anxiety, building

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identity, and guiding decision-making (Argyris & Schön, 1996). This is so effective that it is commonplace to see people engage in rationalization and denial when shared beliefs and assumptions are threatened or challenged. These defensive routines are why culture is ‘sticky;’ it is tenacious and difficult to change (Mason, 2004; Schön, 1975).

When coaching is embedded in an organization’s belief system, we observe it manifested in a variety of ways such as the heroes that the organization recognizes and celebrates, and the stories that are told. We observe leaders creating the conditions and circumstances where people at all levels help others to get better and, in turn, we see evidence of coaching in day-to-day interactions throughout the organization. We see employees listening, asking questions, and probing in a manner that encourages understanding, reflection, learning, and change (Ulrich, 2008). In other words, observable manifestations of culture, also known as cultural artefacts, provide evidence that employees share the belief that coaching is an effective way to develop people, change behaviour, and improve performance. It is embedded in the shared assumptions that guide action.

**Figure 1. Coaching embedded in an organization’s culture**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artefacts (observable)</th>
<th>Coaching is observed in the organization’s heroes, stories, symbols, behaviors, practices, and structures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Values (what ought to be)</td>
<td>Coaching is the desired and expected way for people to interact and behave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Assumptions (beliefs that guide action)</td>
<td>Coaching is an effective way to interact and work together to achieve the organization’s goals and fulfill its purpose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shared assumptions are distinct from values, which are the standards of behaviour leaders believe are to be held in high esteem and that employees should strive to emulate. However, stating that coaching is one of our values is not the same thing as living it on a day-to-day basis. This is not to say that there isn’t the potential for an organization to benefit by clearly stating that coaching is important and valued. In fact, various authors suggest that values are the key to high performance (Barrett, 2006; Rosenthal & Masarech, 2003). However, the benefit is only realized if it is backed up by leaders and managers who demonstrate a coaching philosophy.
This would be reflected in the way that they work and interact with others, the resources they invest to build coaching capability, and the encouragement and support they provide to employees to develop and use coaching skills and behaviours. In other words, a value of coaching is only effective when it is backed up by the shared belief that coaching is essential to achieving the organization’s goals and/or fulfilling its purpose. If this is not the case, it becomes merely a word on paper and raises questions regarding the authenticity of the organization’s values, vision, and its leaders.

Figure 1 summarizes this discussion. When coaching is embedded in an organization’s culture, employees at all levels believe that coaching is more than a skill and approach to be used to develop people. They genuinely believe that coaching is the way that they need to interact and work together to achieve the organization’s goals and fulfill its purpose. As a result, coaching is part of the organization’s values that “influence the way people select action and evaluate events” (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, p. 550). It is based on leaders’ beliefs regarding what is important and describes the desired and expected way for people to behave. Finally, a wide range of cultural artefacts make it possible for us to observe that coaching is embedded in the way that things are done in the organization. The heroes that are celebrated, the stories that are told, the behaviours we observe, and the practices that are used all demonstrate coaching in action.

This is, for the most part, reflected in the approaches that proponents describe for creating coaching cultures and assessing the stage of their development. This typically includes positioning coaching as important to the organization’s strategy; developing leaders who are role models of effective coaching; providing skills training to managers; and embedding coaching in human resource processes such as performance management, leadership competencies, and recognition programs (see, for example, Boehle, 2007; Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2006; Hawkins, 2008). A few also suggest that creating a coaching culture requires that leaders believe that coaching is important to developing people and achieving the organization’s goals, and that they demonstrate this in their approach to strategizing, planning, problem solving, and other management practices (BlessingWhite, 2009; Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2005a). Regardless, the message is that it is possible to create a coaching culture by taking a top-down, logical, and systematic approach that involves implementing a series of carefully chosen initiatives in an orderly sequence. The alternative, as suggested by Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005a), is an organic, systems approach that relies on the gradual building of momentum through practice and learning starting at the grassroots level.

However, the current literature on coaching cultures leaves a number of important questions unanswered. Specifically, although there is evidence that links coaching to performance improvement,
there does not appear to be solid proof that coaching cultures, which are much more encompassing, deliver the same results. It is also implied that coaching cultures are universally beneficial and applicable in any organization. However, the implications for different organizational contexts are not explored.

**ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND PERFORMANCE**

A number of empirical studies have investigated the relationship between organizational culture and performance. The outcome of this work is a solid body of evidence in support of the finding that organizations with strong cultures are able to achieve higher levels of performance and reliability that provides a strategic advantage over organizations with weak cultures (Denison Consulting, 2006; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Gordon & DiTomaso, 1992; Burt, Gabbay, Holt, & Moran, 1994; Sorensen, 2002). For example, Denison Consulting (2006, p. 4) reports that culture has not only a short-term impact on performance but lasting effects as a competitive edge in the industry. Specifically, this research has shown a premium of almost 2% on ROA, sales growth that is 15% higher, and a 90% greater market value for organizations scoring in the top (vs. bottom) 25th percentile (on their organizational culture survey).

Based on this result, as well as similar findings from other studies, they state that “culture makes a difference in bottom-line performance” *(ibid.)*.

In this and other related studies, a strong organization culture is believed to exist when there is “a set of norms and values that are widely shared and strongly held throughout the organization” (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996, p. 166). This contributes to enhanced coordination and social control, effective alignment of goals, and highly motivated employees that care about the organization and what it stands for (Chatman & Cha, 2003; Boisnier & Chatman, 2002; Sorensen, 2002; Hogg & Terry, 2001). However, there is also evidence to suggest that a strong culture may actually interfere with performance in volatile or dynamic environments. In this situation, a strong culture can stifle the flexibility and adaptability required to stay in step with external and internal developments (such as a change in the method of business) (Sorensen, 2002; Tushman & O’Reilly, 1997). One solution is to make learning and adaptability part of the organization’s culture (Gordon & DiTomaso, 1992). Unfortunately, this is only likely to work in organizations where this is rewarded (Sorensen, 2002). For example, if an organization says that it values coaching and independent thought but rewards compliance and command-and-control behaviours, it is unlikely that the former will be embedded in the culture.
This appears to have positive implications for coaching cultures. Earlier, it was argued that coaching must be embedded in shared assumptions and belief systems, values and artefacts for it to be a sustainable part of an organization’s culture. If this happens, it meets the definition of being at least a strong part of an organization’s culture with the implied potential to positively affect organizational performance. Furthermore, by its very nature, coaching helps employees and organizations to learn and adapt to dynamic situations and environments. This assists the organization in overcoming the rigidity that sometimes accompanies strong cultures and gets in the way of sustained, long-term performance. In other words, when coaching is effectively embedded in an organization’s culture, it enables the organization to develop the strong and healthy culture it needs to achieve high levels of performance. At the same time, it provides the learning and adaptability that it requires to survive and thrive in dynamic environments. This is obviously an attractive proposition; however, it is merely a hypothesis unless it is supported by evidence.

Coaching, culture and performance
Intuitively, it makes sense that organizations with healthy cultures comprised of highly motivated, enthusiastic, and focused people are likely to benefit from superior performance outcomes (e.g., Peters & Waterman, 1982; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 1993, 1999). Hence, the argument that organizations need to create a coaching culture because of the positive effect that this has on employee morale, satisfaction, and ultimately organization performance (Anderson et al., 2009). But, is this actually the case?

There is solid evidence that intense and effective coaching improves individual performance (i.e., Agarwal et al., 2009; Yu, 2007). However, it is not clear the extent that a coaching culture results in or contributes to improved organizational performance. To understand this relationship we look to recent research exploring the connection between leader values and organizational culture, and organizational culture and firm performance. This relationship is depicted in Figure 2 (Berson, Oreg, & Dvir, 2008, p. 626).

This supports the widely held view that there is a direct link between leader beliefs and values manifested in behaviours and practices, and the culture of the organization which in turn affects performance. It is, however, important to remember that this is not a simple relationship.
It is widely accepted that leaders have a central role in shaping the culture of their organizations and in so doing affect its performance (i.e., Agle, Mitchell, & Sonnenfeld, 1999; Carpenter, Geletkanycz, & Sanders, 2004; Mackey, 2008; Schein, 1993; Stewart & O’Brien, 2005). For example, Mackey (2008) provides evidence that CEOs directly affect the profitability of their organizations by as much as 29%. They do this in a number of ways, including consistently demonstrating through their words and actions the values that they believe are important for organization success (Barrett, 2006; Block, 2003; Schein, 1993). Furthermore, when leaders’ values and corresponding behaviours are congruent with the context of the organization, they have a direct impact on performance outcomes. This is the finding of an empirical study involving executives in 26 publicly traded Israeli organizations conducted by Berson and his associates (2008):

…we found that cultures of leaders who value freedom and creativity tend to hold a higher emphasis on innovation as a key cultural characteristic. In turn, such cultures are likely to contribute to performance outcomes such as company sales growth. CEOs who value stability, order and predictability are more likely to use strict and formalized rules and procedures, as are embodied in bureaucratic cultures. In turn, such cultures have a positive association with firm efficiency and a negative association with employee satisfaction. Finally, organizations of CEOs who value benevolence tend to exhibit an emphasis on support and cooperation among employees. Such supportive cultures are, in turn, associated with greater employee satisfaction. (pp. 626-627)

Furthermore, Berson and his associates report that there is a strong negative relationship between supportive cultures and revenue growth (ibid.). The proposed explanation is that a trade-off exists between a focus on employee welfare and a focus on organizational goals. This is consistent with the task versus people orientation identified in studies of organizational culture. While task-oriented cultures emphasize the completion of work, people-oriented cultures focus on employee well-being (Hofstede, 1991; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). It is also consistent with the findings of earlier studies that determined that employee job satisfaction does not necessarily translate into improved performance and vice versa (Iaffaldano & Muchinsky, 1985).

This supports the widely held view that there is a direct link between leader beliefs and values manifested in behaviours and practices, and the culture of the organization which in turn affects performance. It is, however, important to remember that this is not a simple relationship. In fact, organization context, among other factors, plays a crucial role in determining the extent that this relationship plays out. For example, if a senior leader that values...
stability, order, and predictability is hired to lead an organization that is striving for growth and innovation, the result can be disastrous. The message, therefore, is that congruence between the values of senior leaders and organization context is essential for the desired culture and performance outcomes to be achieved.

This creates a bit of a quandary. Leaders that value coaching are also likely to place importance on support and cooperation among employees. This is consistent with the universal value of benevolence (Schwartz & Bilosky, 1987) that is congruent with supportive cultures that have a strong positive relationship to employee satisfaction and a strong negative relationship to revenue growth or performance (Figure 3). However, proponents of coaching cultures suggest that there is a positive relationship between the intense use of coaching skills and improved performance, as well as job satisfaction. Unfortunately, this argument is one of inference rather than evidence. The link between coaching cultures and improved performance appears to be disproved by the findings of Berson and his associates.

Based on these findings, it appears that organizations are better served by focusing on the purposeful use of coaching skills to improve performance of individuals rather than on creating a coaching culture. This clearly positions coaching as valued and important, but as secondary to the primary purpose of the organization which is defined by its context. In other words, coaching can be used to assist leaders in innovation cultures, bureaucratic cultures, and so on to achieve their goals. In this scenario, the benefits of investing in and effectively implementing coaching can be realized by a much narrower focus than one required to create and sustain a coaching culture.

**Case study: Coaching values in a culture of innovation**

My colleagues and I are currently working in an organization that is trying to shift its leaders from command and control to a developmental coaching way of managing. The organization has a history of innovation and entrepreneurialism that has been fuelled by the energy and vision of its leaders. However, the recent retirement of its CEO, accompanied by significant ongoing changes
in the environment and competitive marketplace, has created the need to drive innovation and entrepreneurialism down into the organization. Instead of leaders being the engine of creativity and innovation, they need to be enablers that nurture and harvest the ideas that emerge from employees at all levels.

While this is a significant change for leaders, it is equally challenging for employees who undoubtedly would be sceptical about the new direction and especially the proposed new way of managing. However, not everything is changing. Many of the beliefs and values that have guided thought and action are remaining. Others are changing, and a few new ones are being added. For example, the belief that creativity and innovation is essential to the organization’s success is not changing. Neither is the importance placed on speed and agility in decision-making and execution. The difference is the positioning of the employee at the center of innovation rather than at the end when the ideas are put into action.

To make this happen requires that employees are provided with new skills, knowledge, and ways of working that are supported by constructive and developmental feedback to improve their ability to generate and act on ideas. Initially, this means that the emphasis is being placed on helping leaders and managers shift from a command-and-control way of managing to one that uses developmental coaching behaviours and approaches. Eventually, this is expected to permeate across the levels in the organization and be an important part of the way that people work together in teams and one-on-one.

At this point, coaching is positioned by senior leaders as a characteristic of the organization’s ‘aspired to’ culture. Although they don’t refer to coaching as one of their values, the leaders agree that it should be role modeled and encouraged as the expected and desired way for managers to work with their employees and, to a lesser extent, each other. They have discussed and agreed what it means to them personally as well as to others in the organization. The behaviours and practices that they have agreed to personally demonstrate and use are:

- Do not immediately provide solutions.
- First ask questions, then, if appropriate, explore alternatives or potential solutions.
- Get inside the other person’s head. Really try to understand where they are coming from and the thought process they used to get there.

The identification of these desired behaviours was accompanied by examples of situations when leaders had demonstrated them when interacting with others. When they got stuck and couldn’t
recall a positive experience, they described situations involving other people where they had observed the behaviours in action. They also discussed what needed to happen for this to become part of the way that they interacted and worked together and with others on a day-to-day basis.

The outcome of this discussion was the decision to begin to use these behaviours in their interactions with each other during (and eventually outside of) leadership team meetings. To create a safe environment, they asked an external coach to work with them until this becomes part of their unconscious, and an accepted way of interacting and working. Each leader is also working with a coach to provide him or her with individual developmental support and feedback. It is up to the individual leader to decide when they are comfortable and confident to use these behaviours in other interactions, such as with direct reports and people in other organizations.

This may seem pretty basic. However, this is a huge change for the majority of senior leaders. It is also consistent with a culture dynamics approach to change. The premise is that sustainable culture change requires that leaders’ values and beliefs are congruent with the organization’s ‘aspired to’ culture or its cultural context. To accomplish this requires that they personally own and are committed to demonstrating the behaviours and practices that are required in the culture. A safe environment is also required that includes the support system necessary for success. This safe environment provides a learning laboratory where leaders can try new ways of managing, make mistakes, receive constructive and developmental feedback, and learn without the fear of censure. For this reason, the initial set of behaviours is small (no more than three), and no time frames are set for completion. It will take as long as it needs.

One of the powerful benefits of this approach is the potential for leaders to influence cultural values and norms by simply demonstrating the importance of coaching behaviours in their interactions with each other. In our experience, employees notice absolutely every subtle nuance in a leader’s words and actions. He or she doesn’t have to say a thing about the importance of using coaching behaviours for people to see what is happening and begin to copy the behaviours themselves. This also has the advantage of avoiding the scepticism and cynicism that often accompanies planned and publicized change.

While this is just the beginning of the culture change process, it is perhaps the most critical. This is the stage where leaders’ perspectives on the value of coaching are going to take root or fade away. Only when coaching behaviours and practices have repeatedly demonstrated that they contribute to higher levels of creativity, innovation, and performance will they be accepted as

*The premise is that sustainable culture change requires that leaders’ values and beliefs are congruent with the organization’s ‘aspired to’ culture or its cultural context.*
a correct way to manage and interact with others (Schein, 1993). This can take time, and there are likely to be bumps along the way that need to be overcome. This is obviously not the only thing that leaders are dealing with on a day-to-day basis. Coaching is also not the only element of the organization’s ‘aspired to’ culture that is new or needs to change. In this case, execution excellence, agility, idea generation, openness, trust, customer focus, and teamwork also define the expected and desired way for people to behave and work together. These are values or, in their words, characteristics that the organization needs to be innovative and achieve its performance goals.

When these values are in action, they interact in a dynamic manner called a network effect that shapes the culture of the organization. They do not operate as separate sets of related behaviours and practices. In other words, coaching behaviours and practices influence and are influenced by other cultural artefacts that are manifestations of other values and beliefs. In some cases, these are going to work symbiotically with positive outcomes in both areas, such as coaching and customer focus or idea generation. In other cases, there are tensions that need to be resolved, such as agility (speed, nimbleness, flexibility) and coaching. The outcome of these synergies and tensions may well be the innovation culture that leaders desire. Regardless, it is going to be unique to them. While the design of practices and arguably behaviours can transfer and be applied in different contexts, the dynamic interactions that occur between elements of the organization’s culture cannot be replicated. This is the power of understanding and using culture dynamics to create sustainable culture change.

Finally, no matter how effectively or completely coaching is embedded in the organization’s assumptions, beliefs, values and artefacts, the organization will have (hopefully) an innovation culture that values coaching, not a coaching culture that values innovation. In our experience, this is the case in the vast majority of organizations where the culture that leaders aspire to create is focused on the differentiating capability that the organization is striving to achieve.

**CLOSING REMARKS**

This paper has argued that most organizations are better served by focusing on the value that coaching can provide as part of a culture that is aligned with its strategy and goals than by creating a coaching culture. Using a culture dynamics approach, coaching is embedded in an organization’s culture. However, it plays an enabling or secondary role to the primary cultural context. For example, in an innovation culture, coaching can be a way of managing and interacting that enables creativity, idea generation, and the development of ideas in groups. In this manner, coaching is part of the shared assumptions, beliefs, and values that create the rich cultural landscape of the organization. Thus, the challenge while the design of practices and arguably behaviours can transfer and be applied in different contexts, the dynamic interactions that occur between elements of the organization’s culture cannot be replicated.
is not to create a coaching culture but to identify the ways that coaching interacts with and acts upon other elements of an organization’s culture to achieve its goals and fulfill its purpose.

Author’s note: Throughout this article, I have touched on concepts and examples in the area of culture dynamics which is an approach to achieving sustainable culture change. This is an introduction to a complex subject and has not been fully described or explained. It is the focus of a separate article that is planned for a later date.

**REFERENCES**


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**Issue 29-32 themes**

**Issue 29, 8(1):** Organizational Coaching and Organizational Development/Organizational Effectiveness  
**Issue 30, 8(2):** Organizational Coaching and Coaching Culture  
**Issue 31, 8(3):** Organizational Coaching in Health Care  
**Issue 32, 8(4):** Organizational Coaching and Change

**Issue 33-36 themes**

**Issue 33, 9(1):** Planning for the Future in Uncertain Times: Organizational Coaching and Strategic Planning  
**Issue 34, 9(2):** Organizational Coaching in Non-profit Organizations  
**Issue 35, 9(3):** Organizational Coaching and Psychometrics: The Role of Testing and Assessment in the Coaching Process  
**Issue 36, 9(4):** Organizational Coaching for Innovation
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