

# Five coaching hazards

## USED CORRECTLY, COACHING CAN ENHANCE PERFORMANCE AND TALENT RETENTION.

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**(t)** The manner in which coaching is conducted poses a threat to talent retention. Coaching is commonly utilised in South Africa for problem employees instead of an investment in talent. Numerous companies spend their learning and development budget haphazardly on coaching without proper tracking of benefits. This in turn leaves future allocation of funds to learning and development at risk.

Coaches could in addition exacerbate relationship problems in organisations by unwittingly serving as surrogate managers or providing performance feedback that managers are too afraid to give. Some coachees are harmed by unprofessional coaching and labels of psychopathology on their personnel files.

Equally, leaders do not always get good feedback and adequate coaching on how to manage their “derailers” effectively. In organisations today, a few dysfunctional and even emotionally abusive executives rise to

senior levels. Arrogant leaders refuse to acknowledge the viewpoint of others. Perfectionists drill down into endless details. Some use fear as a management technique and thwart or demotivate others. The impact on the organisation is far reaching. (Dotlich, Noel & Walker, 2004)

The HR department, a virtual hub linking various stakeholders, is prominently placed to coordinate coaching. HR’s co-ordinating and positioning role could defy the following five coaching hazards:

### **HAZARD 1: LOOSE CANON VS CO-ORDINATED COACHING EFFORTS**

Unco-ordinated or “loose canon” coaching efforts create considerable scope for confusion. In the case of an inconsistent approach or lack of standards to purchasing coaching across the organisation, individual departments make sporadic and ad hoc decisions on people development issues. Coaching has become something of a fad in the western world. Not infrequently, senior managers will be susceptible to such a fad (this comes as a great shock to almost no one). In some corporate circles, having their own coach is the modern day of having the keys to the “executive cloakroom” (Hunt & Wientraub, 2007). Furthermore, they perceive coaching as a “personal” purchase from a specific coach, with no need to seek approval for their decision. On the positive side, these senior managers may openly talk about their experiences and even advocate for the use of external coaches or the development of a greater internal coaching capability.

Without organisational

consistency, however, opportunities to position coaching interventions may be lost as well as coordinated providers’ quality control (McAdam, 2005). In a world where one internet search will reveal over one million practitioners of coaching, with varying degrees of qualification, there is clearly a need for caution and some scepticism. The HR department plays a vital role in setting standards, screening providers, monitoring progress, building relationships and offering opportunities to a range of these coaching firms.

A large number of executive coaching outfits have less than five coaches; indeed, many are one person firms. Here lies a potential dilemma since a determinant of success in coaching is “choice”. Good practice will always allow the potential coachee the choice, and right, to determine whether a particular coach is right for them.

To this end, I subscribe to a co-ordinated coaching effort where HR maintains a central database on coaching providers and manage contracts.

### **HAZARD 2: INDIVIDUAL FOCUS VS ORGANISATIONAL FOCUS**

Coaching with an individual focus unintentionally colludes with the coachee in blaming the organisation for the coachee’s difficulties. Lacking a broader perspective, causes coachees to leave their current organisation. Some coaches, however, have a behavioural pattern which elicits the same responses from others yet in different organisations.

Conversely, an organisational focus recognizes that for coaching to be

effective for both the individual and the organisation, it has to manage a delicate balancing act between the two. Sometimes, individuals see their job and career growth in ways that clash with the ways the organisation needs them to develop. Coaches are to assist coachees reconcile this conflict. As coaches, we might help them to see or do things differently so that what once was a conflict now becomes a manageable paradox.

As the institution commissioning and paying for the coaching service, organisations clearly have an interest. Rosinsky (2003) encourages a triangular relationship between coaches, coachees and the organisation and emphasised regular communication between these parties. Ethically the relationship requires appropriate expectations and not to portray coaching as an activity focused solely on the goals of the individual. Coaches as a result are required to demonstrate empathy with both the organisational context and the individual coachee’s needs.

The issues coachees bring to the coaching session can and should be read against an organisational boundary as well as an individual one. Doing so can reveal insights for the coachee as both an individual and a member of an organisation and potentially for the organisation as a whole. To read the individual experience organisationally assists to arrive at solutions that not only deal with their own “problem” but also impact on the organisation in positive ways. (Meyer & Fourie, 2004) The effective coach must therefore, have solid understanding of business realities and organisational life.

When coaching takes place in isolation, it may be less effective and the organisation may lose an opportunity to learn from experience. Coaching should promote learning in the service of the organisational’s larger goals. Coaching in an organisational context, unlike most other helping relationships, has to serve two masters: the individual and his or her organisation. (Hunt & Wientraub, 2007)

Expert coaches could even feed back broader organisational themes

and comment on other aspects of the organisation from what they observe as they go about their coaching, which may assist the organisation in its development. Without HR’s coordination role, a feedback loop with regular progress updates, obviously without compromising confidentiality, is not created.

Consequently, I advocate a focus on the individual’s improvement of effectiveness within the milieu of the organisation and HR to contract feedback on regular themes and progress updates with coaches and coachees alike.

### **HAZARD 3: THERAPEUTIC PROCESS VS ACTION ORIENTATED COACHING**

Therapeutic processes often do a great job of making people aware of their flaws and the issues holding them back, however, they do not necessarily help them take action (Dotlich & Cairo, 1999). Although action orientated coaching is a psychologically informed development process, it is nevertheless not a treatment for an emotional disturbance.

Contracted coaching sessions, generally between four and 12, does not entail an adequate amount of sessions to bring about deep therapeutic intra psychic transformation. Even though, Hunt & Wientraub’s (2007) research emphasised that even one session can have a developmental impact, it calls for coaches to be sensitive to the possibility that some coachees will require more therapeutic support than is normally available within the coaching remit. In these cases, referral must be made to an appropriate source that is occasionally represented by Employee Assistance Programmes’ psychological support services or counsellors. Without this referral the coach may do more harm than good (Berglas, 2002).

Diagnoses of psychopathology are not palatable to organisations and these labels could leak from personnel files. Consequently, coaching conducted in the Organisational Development parlance and worldview rather than medical/therapeutic parlance is less hazardous. According to Hunt and Wientraub (2007)

coaching should not be “medicalised” or equated with psychiatric treatment, despite the fact that insights from psychology and psychiatry can be valuable in coaching under some circumstances. They equate coaching to an organisational development intervention. However, they acknowledge that if every organisation required every future leader to undergo a psychiatric evaluation before participating in leadership development, very little leadership development would take place. Most employees would rightly experience such a requirement as a massive infringement on their privacy.

Brunning (2006) also explicitly states that although all coaching is primarily a psychological endeavour and that coaches may have psychological background, it does not automatically lead them to “conduct psychotherapy in the workplace” at the expense of the employing organisation.

Additionally, coaches from an academic environment or private practice, although highly qualified, may have lost touch with organisational life. These coaches could be unrealistic about the landscape of organisations and the wider marketplace. Flaherty (2005) and Rosinsky (2003) suggest the political perspective as a useful angle coaches can learn to adopt.

HR’s coaching selection processes are required to take into account whether the coach has worked with similar situations. Is the coach familiar with the dynamics unique to the organisation or this specific type of business? Does the coach have insight into political issues as a hierarchical manifestation and have political savvy?

Coaching requires supervised practice over a period of time which cannot be achieved in the kind of brief workshops that are increasingly marketed as quick transitions from the boardroom or sports – field into coaching. Many psychodynamic therapy orientated coaches believe that coaches of other persuasions, such as action orientation coaching, provide mainly advice and “quick fixes” with little long term impact

on development. The popularity of these less rigorous approaches in the market, may well be linked to their reliance on providing a large dose of the “feel – good factor”, involving collusion (condoning the harmful behaviour of coachee) and mutual idealisation (Brunner, 2006).

Coaches from these perspectives, on the other hand, propose that a psychodynamic approach is engaging in an endless pursuit of insight at the expense of actionable outcomes and tangible results (Dotlich & Cairo, 1999). Whichever coaching approach used, inadequately delivered coaching can negatively impact individuals and their organisations as well as poison the water for future coaching initiatives (Berglas, 2002).

To this effect, I propose a clear distinction between therapeutic processes and coaching, unambiguous contracting on approaches and their limitations with coachees and distinct referral procedures for emotional disturbances.

**HAZARD 4: PERSONAL GROWTH AIM VS PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT AIM**

Linked to hazard 3 on therapeutic processes, we occasionally hear the comment in the market: “Coaching might help someone become a better person but not a better performer.” Coaching ought to be more than empathetic support for personal growth (Law; Ireland & Hussain, 2007).

For some, the issues are too complex today for a coaching intervention to do much more than help people learn more about themselves (Hargrove, 2003). This is a worthy goal in and of itself, but it does not give people a mechanism for dealing with the real – world ambiguities and paradoxes in their business environment, nor does it give a strategy for putting their self – knowledge to work to achieve individual performance and

organisational performance goals (Law et al, 2007).

The primary purpose or aim of coaching is to bring about external changes, such as measureable performance outputs or internal ones. Clearly, these are not mutually exclusive but useful as a distinction between that which is primary and which is secondary. The primary aim of coaching is to enhance the coachee’s work performance. It is not necessarily to help the coachee reach a better personal integration, to deepen personal insight, or to change self perception, per se, as might have been the case in psychotherapy. Masterful coaching is grounded in expanding people’s capacity to achieve what they need to achieve, not therapy (Hargrove, 2003).

Coaching focuses on fostering insight into organisational nuances and dynamics to improve project and team delivery (Williams & Anderson, 2006). Meyer & Fourie (2004) furthermore accentuated coaching’s role in the development of skills that are applied and implemented in the workplace. It is valuable when senior management defines the skills the organisation needs its managers to possess. Such a framework provides a context within which coaches can successfully work.

The process of goal setting in coaching involves a multiparty collaboration between the coachee, the manager of the coachee and the coach. The coachee could rely on previous performance appraisal and 360 – degree survey data to help focus the coaching. These individual performance goals, however need to be aligned with organisational goals. Hunt and Weintraub (2007) emphasised the importance of establishing the linkage between any coaching initiative and activities that are important to the primary task of the organisation. The value of the coaching initiative is greatly enhanced when the coaching is targeted at

helping people learn that which is important to them and the business.

Accordingly, I advocate for a performance framework and specific measureable goals to focus coaching on the organisational reality.

**HAZARD 5: REMEDIAL INTERVENTION VS LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME**

There are dangers associated with coaching entering an organisation as a remedial intervention for failing executives. Those employees may be least able to benefit from such an investment and in my experience, most likely to exit the organisation in the process. Coaching, particularly since it takes place behind closed doors, can create a perception that the organisation is about to take action against a problem performer. Furthermore, coaching under these circumstances runs a greater risk of failing, due to the coachee’s resistance to the coaching process (Hunt & Weintraub, 2007).

When coaching is used solely for the purpose of helping employees that are derailing, it can moreover be stigmatised. In the worst cases, coaching are used to disguise managerial and human resource failures, such as bringing in a coach since the coachee’s own manager is afraid to give honest performance feedback.

On the contrary, when coaching is rather offered to high – potential talent, it becomes associated, in the minds of the larger employee population with career growth. Coaching should therefore go to people who are talented business leaders, with the result that they become better at coaching and a coaching capability is furthered. Rosinsky (2003) also emphasises coaching skills for the coachee as an ideal outcome of a coaching programme.

In the absence of a tight linkage with the business needs, the coaching

**SUMMARY OF HAZARDS AND COUNTERMEASURES**

HAZARDS	COUNTERMEASURES
Loose canons	Co-ordinated coaching efforts
Individual focus	Balancing individual and organisational focus
Therapeutic processes	Action orientated coaching
Personal growth aim	Performance improvement aim
Remedial intervention	Learning and development programme

programme budget may be vulnerable. Such a link is usually represented by a clearly articulated leadership development strategy. This strategy connects leadership development efforts such as coaching with highly valued business goals. Positioning coaching in this manner as learning and development interventions could contribute to building a learning culture throughout the organisation and the development of a greater internal coaching capability.

Coaching could be for example, strategically targeted at individuals who are going through important leadership transitions or who are expected to do so within the next few years. Under these circumstances, those participating are typically more motivated and see it as a special investment in their development on the part of the organisation.

Organisations seem to be struggling to find the kind of relatedness they need to do business (Down, 2002). There is a reduction of face-to-face contact between people working together across the globe, often virtually. Coaching itself could paradoxically compound the problem if each director is getting his support from an external coach as a substitute for genuine connectedness across the team or organisation. The challenge appears to be to assist coachees in developing the kind of relationships in their organisations that will allow creativity to flourish, rather than encouraging a split – off outsourcing of support (Downs, 2002). Coachees

ought to be assisted to genuinely engage with the organisation in a collaborative way to perform in their work role.

- Individual coaching is therefore most valuable as an integrated organisational development process. Such a process would typically be conducted over a year and includes:
- ❖ defining a framework for leadership characteristics to support the ideal organisational culture;
  - ❖ group coaching with the management team to facilitate the formulation of a code of conduct and strategic direction;
  - ❖ classroom style executive education sessions on leadership development and strategy formulation; and
  - ❖ individual coaching sessions with team members to align around the code of conduct and translate organisational strategy to departmental strategies.

Individual coaching in this instance forms the learning bridge between strategic sessions, executive education classroom activities, alignment between team members and the practical application in the workplace.

In this regard I promote HR to proactively endorse individual coaching as an integrative part of a larger process of learning and development. [\(HRJ\)](#)

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