

Coaching and mentoring

A practical approach to management development

The training of managers has never been more important. Enthusiasms such as re-engineering may come and go, but what will stay is the pace of change and the need for organisations - public and private - to develop managers to work in increasingly flexible and adaptive structures.

Traditional approaches to management development are no longer adequate. New approaches are required for equipping managers with new skills. The role of the trainer will be more one of personal coach and mentor. Trainers will have to act more like consultants (operating in the real work place, not in the class room). Meanwhile consultants will have to act more like trainers (emphasising the transfer of skill over the solving of client problems).



Managers and staff at all levels will need new skills to survive.

If we look at the received wisdom of organisational advance, it will be seen that managers need new ways of doing things - new skills are required.

- Middle managers and supervisors, if they survive at all post re-engineering, will have to operate with less certainty and few rules. They will have to manage "empowered" teams who expect, and can cope with, a fair degree of autonomy. "Middle" will be less of a vertical construct (being between the senior executives and the workers) and more of a horizontal notion (managing the boundaries between different semi-autonomous groups).

- Senior managers will come to rely less on an army of intermediates to carry their messages down and to prepare and report information upwards. Information technology will put senior managers in greater touch with the performance of their part of the business and they will (in theory) be able to make better informed decisions. They will also have to cope with wider spans of "control", often managing remotely located staff.

- Multi skilled, semi autonomous teams will be required to meet the relentless pressure for quality and efficiency improvement. It will become less clear "who's in charge" as staff are encouraged to take more control themselves. They may also find themselves working in more temporary structures than at present - moving from one team to another, often working on projects rather than "doing a job". Staff will have to become more flexible and have to cope with a good deal more ambiguity.



Traditional training has not always delivered

The following scenario is all too common.

Managers return, well fed, from a week or more in an expensive hotel fired up with new and powerful techniques taught to them by charismatic and highly skilled trainers. The (now almost ubiquitous) course assessment sheets, filled in on the final afternoon, show a high degree of satisfaction; the course met its objectives, content exceeded expectations and managers have a personal action plan that they will implement on returning to the office.

Sadly, on returning to the office, the manager is reminded of the world he or she left behind: paper work has built up, the boss is as difficult as before and the staff still have the same

concerns and needs to be met. At best, good intentions are replaced by frustration that things "shouldn't be like this". At worst the now well trained manager leaves, disillusioned, in search of a more enlightened employer.

So where has traditional training gone wrong? The root causes can be traced to some false assumptions and to some practical failings :

False assumption 1 : "Fix their attitude"

This relies on the notion that some how if you can change peoples attitude, you will change their behaviour. In the past some Quality Training, and , more recently so called "Empowerment" training have taken this route. It often fails for the obvious reason that attitude is inextricably bound up with environment. Attitude change will be short lived if that is all that changes.

False assumption 2 : "Fix their knowledge"

Give managers the latest theories, case studies, and conceptual models and hope that they can convert this into new ways of working. There is, of course, no guarantee that managers can turn abstract theory into practice.

Failure 1 : Lack of reinforcement

Training is often not given the importance it deserves. Managers sent on training courses sometimes feel they have done something wrong (not that they are being invested in). Senior managers send people on courses they have not attended themselves and so cannot reinforce the messages. Often the existing working environment prevents the manager from practising the new skills.

Failure 2 : Treating symptoms

This involve identifying any trying to fix specific weaknesses. The danger is that the weakness is a symptom of a wider cause. For example a manager who appears to make poor use of time gets sent on a time management course, while the real problems lie in the clarity of the job and its objectives.

A failure of formal training is not, then, always fault of the trainer, but what trainers can do to help is to get out of the class room and work in the work place.- helping managers to solve real life problems in real time to make the training immediately useful, relevant and ultimately more memorable. This is where coaching and mentoring comes in.



How coaching and mentoring can help

Coaching is the process of giving the individual trainee specific (task related) guidance and using feedback to develop and consolidate a new skill. Mentoring encourages the individual to reflect on the job as a whole, so that current and new skills may be most appropriately applied.

This approach starts from the trainee's current skills and abilities and helps them to work from there. This is in contrast to teaching them how they ought to be and then leaving them to work out how to bridge the gap. Since it is all about how they behave in real situations, the coaching is given in the working environment, using real problems as the case study material.

At OCP we have delivered coaching to managers at a number of levels :

- Working with senior managers who are introducing major change. They maintain full responsibility and control of the changes, we bring experience of doing similar work elsewhere. In the early stages, the relationship can be a very intense partnership but this changes over time until we act simply as a sounding board or challenging stimulus.
- Helping front line managers develop performance management skills. Systems do not improve performance, people do, and yet often companies expect new Management Information or control systems to deliver unrealistic benefits. We have found that time spent helping managers to learn what decisions and actions they can take and helping them to develop the necessary skills ensures that the systems changes deliver their benefit
- Helping managers settle in to new roles. As roles change, managers need new skills. Often they do not have time for costly external training, nor is it always appropriate. Through coaching and counselling, managers can work from their own experience while absorbing and learning how to use new skills.



OCP's credentials

The development of managers through coaching and counselling is a core part of our change management consulting portfolio. In the last year this has played a significant part in our work in Insurance and Manufacturing, and in the public sector for Agencies and several functions under-going market testing.

Neil Bentley, Partner, OCP. May 1995