

How Central Government Departments Select External Coaches

Research

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This summary covers a presentation on my research into how central government departments select external coaches to work with their Senior Civil Servants (Ellis 2007). The purpose of the research was to inform the Ministry of Defence (MoD) about what other government departments did, in order that the MoD could make an informed decision about how it would select coaches to work with its strategic leaders¹.

During this research I was an Assistant Director in the Defence Leadership and Management Centre (DLMC) which is part of the Defence Academy of the UK. As part of my role I was responsible for establishing a pool of 'approved' coaches to work with our strategic leaders (the top 0.25% out of 250,000) in the Armed Forces and MoD. Given the unregulated nature of the coaching industry (Freas 2004; Grant 2006), there is some concern about who organizations use as a coach (Berglas 2002). The MoD recognised that coaching involves a trusting, confidential, relationship between coach and client, which places the coach in a potentially powerful position to influence the client. While coaches do often subscribe to a code of ethics, such as the one offered by the European Mentoring and Coaching Council, the question the MoD faced was: how did we know a coach was qualified to work with our leaders?

A review of the literature revealed very few examples that looked at how to select coaches, *Coaching and buying coaching services* (Jarvis 2004) is the most cited but has only eight pages specifically about procuring a coach. Although there is a case study from the private sector (Horner et al, 2005) nothing was discovered for the public sector. As a result of the paucity of literature, the research methodology chosen to look at other Government Departments was a questionnaire based survey.

The questionnaire explored three elements. The first was the coaching context, this was necessary because there remains considerable debate about what is involved in coaching, and given the lack of research it was not known which, if any, departments were using coaching; how they defined it, and what they used it for. The second element examined what happened when there was a selection process. While the third part asked how coaches secured work when there was no selection process. The research focussed on central government departments, defined as having a minister of Cabinet rank at their head, as such organisations are the closest in function to the MoD.

The Coaching Context

Of the seventeen departments surveyed, twelve responded, all of whom used external coaches to work with their Senior Civil Servants (SCS). However of those twelve, only six offered any type of definition of coaching, and these contained considerable differences. All twelve departments could cite a purpose for using coaching with some connection to leadership development being the most common reason. However, coaching itself was not that widespread, with over 50% of the Departments saying less than a quarter of their SCS had actually used a coach. Those coaches that were used came predominantly from organisations who offered a range of services, not just coaching.

¹ The research was also undertaken as the final part of a Masters degree programme in coaching with i-coach academy.

The Selection Process

Seven of the Departments had a selection process as explained in the research questionnaire that: while a selection process can be informal or formal, for the purpose of this questionnaire a selection process refers to a formal process which is consistently applied to prospective coaches. It can consist of a variety of tools and techniques.

The first set of questions aimed to establish what qualifications and experience those involved in the selection processes had. The most common response was previous experience in Human Resources (HR); closely followed by experience of being coached; academic or professional qualifications in HR; and training in assessment techniques. In only two instances were academic qualifications in coaching reported, though three departments had staff that had completed a professional course in coaching.

All the Departments asked for multiple criteria from the coaches as part of their selection process. All seven departments asked for three particular types of information: membership of professional bodies; what process the coach uses when they coach; and details of previous coaching experience. The least requested information was: a reference from the supervisor; whether the coach held professional indemnity insurance; whether the coach was receiving coaching themselves. Interestingly despite hostile press reporting of the use of coaching services in government (Chapman 2006; Oakeshott 2007; Walker 2006) only two departments set a maximum hourly rate for coaching services as part of the selection process.

The Departments collected data from coaches by a variety of methods: six departments had their own criteria checklist; five held a formal structured interview; four asked for a demonstration of a coaching session; two asked for a presentation by the coach on their experiences. Four of the departments used a combination of a criteria checklist, demonstration and formal structured interview to gather the data.

Of the coaches asked to go through a selection processes, none refused. If any failed they were allowed to reapply. Failure rates varied across the departments, with most departments (four) seeing between 0-20% of those undergoing the process failing to pass.

The departments were asked about the benefits of running a selection process and six of them cited the selection process as ensuring value for money. While five departments also mentioned that the information collected subsequently helped with the matching process.

What happens where there is no selection process?

Five of the twelve departments did not have a selection process despite using external coaches. In those departments the most common way for coaches to secure work was because their company was already an existing supplier working with the Department. Other common reasons cited were that the coach was employed directly by a member of the SCS; or they had previously worked with the Department.

While these Departments did not have a formal selection process, three of them still asked for details from coaches including client references and previous coaching experience. And one Department asked for information in seven areas which raises the question of when a selection process actually becomes a formal process. Two of these Departments had plans to introduce a selection process in the 2007-08 period.

What could this mean for the coaching industry?

One of the results of this research is to show that the use of selection processes is common and becoming increasingly so. What could this trend mean for the coaching industry? Those involved in coaching often talk about the 'coaching triangle' the relationship between the organization, the individual receiving the coaching (normally referred to as the client) and the coach themselves; so it is useful to consider the implications of selection processes based on these elements of a coaching relationship.

From an organizational perspective; perhaps the first benefit is the ability to demonstrate a duty of care; that they are not putting in just any coach with their senior people, rather they have a considered process to select coaches who are fit for purpose. In order to do this, organizations have to think about what they want to use coaching for; is it just a perk for senior management or is it part of an organizational learning package designed to build organizational capacity? Using a selection process allows HR departments to know the coaches they use, which supports a more effective matching process, and allows them to promote in an informed way the coaching support that is available. It allows HR to benchmark the coaches they use, which helps with the value for money issue. However, running a selection process can be expensive in time and resources. While the outcome of a selection process may reduce uncertainty about coaches, it doesn't remove it, so the procurers of coaching services still need to play an active management role.

For the client receiving coaching, a selection process can offer reassurance that they are being offered individuals who are fit for purpose, and therefore possibly a more effective procurement process. If the clients can feel more confident about the coaches, it may help to establish the relationship between coach and client more quickly. The assumption is that the coaches on the organizational approved list will meet the client's requirements. If client's have a pre-existing relationship with a coach, who has not done the selection process, then they may have to finish that relationship, this might seem disempowering for the client.

For coaches, the possibility of more selection processes may create a concern about the increasing challenges to obtain work. Indeed it could be argued that coaches do not want informed HR departments; perhaps preferring to ply their trade with the minimum of interference. However, if the trend in government is any indication of the wider market, participation in selection processes may become a common event for coaches. The increased use of selection processes is not necessarily a bad thing. For a selection process to be effective, it has to look at the coach, not the company, therefore independent coaches might find they have the same opportunities as companies who offer coaching. Organizations who use a selection process are likely to be more educated about coaching, allowing a better dialogue between coach and HR. Clients may also be better informed allowing coaches to be able to work with issues quickly and spend less time on contracting and explaining what coaching is. A selection process may also start to weed out coaches who are not qualified or capable, and therefore offers the possibility of a consolidation in the coaching industry as ineffective coaches leave the industry. However, undergoing a selection process takes time, money and resources, and is not income generating in the short term. On the positive side the selection process does offer an opportunity to learn about your own coaching and possibly compare with others (Dolny 2008).

Possible future trends?

In summary if the use of formal selection processes for coaches does continue to grow, then we are seeing HR departments raise their knowledge of the coaching industry which will see them become more informed users of coaching. The industry is likely to see increasing use of selection processes. And perhaps in the long term the result will be to see better quality coaching and rising standards in the industry?

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