

How Coaching Conversations Contribute to Organisational Development

Research Abstract

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Introduction

I would like to share with you some aspects from my doctorate research. Key findings from my research include:

- Leaders in the BBC show an outward and increasing spiral of shift in thinking and acting;
- Through this journey leaders in the BBC recognise an increased potential/capacity in self as a leader and others;
- Leaders have an expanded conversational repertoire leading to improved team performance;
- Single, double and triple loop learning was evident;
- A wider perspective on leadership was developed, an ability to step back, to be strategic and see the unseen;
- Leaders are able to use coaching as a participative conversation both for themselves within the coaching and outside with their wider network;
- A methodology to track learning in and from practice.

Organisational Context

In 2000, the BBC embarked on a radical programme of change, designed to make it *"the most creative organisation in the world"*. Great leadership was seen as the "critical fuel" which would propel the MIH programme. Coaching would be the spark to ignite that fuel. The coaching proposition aimed to support leaders to discover and develop a positive, individual approach **and** focus on the leadership practice in context. Coaching was positioned to support leaders to work on self as leader as well as who they are in relation to others and the wider system within the context and challenges of the BBC.

The Research

The research included both a quantitative and qualitative elements. An on-line questionnaire went to 515 leaders who had worked with a coach and completed their four sessions during the survey period 2005 – 2006. A further 10% of the 515 leaders were invited to participate in a one to one interview.

The research adopted an appreciative inquiry stance making the assumption that coaching is valued as a developmental intervention and leaders are already contributing as leaders.

On-line Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to explore the applicability of coaching to individual, team and business challenges. It also looked at whether respondents were doing anything differently as a result of the coaching and what they would want to use coaching for should they be offered it again. Some of the key findings included:

- 48% reported that their experience of coaching increased their confidence as a leader.
- 36% reported that their experience of coaching helped them to lead better in uncertainty
- 45% of leaders reported that coaching had been largely successful in helping them to manage individual performance.
- 51% reported that coaching had been largely or completely successful in helping them to develop strategies for the future.
- 87% of leaders endorsed the contribution of coaching.
- 91% said that they would work with a coach again on issues about their leadership style, confidence in a leadership role and managing poor performance.

What emerged from leader's own stories about coaching?

The different stories showed that through the coaching relationship, coachees were co-creating an outward and increasing spiral of shift in thinking and acting more likely to build sustained change. They had identified how they were creating new or revised realities for themselves. The data also identified what the coachees had "*privileged*" in the coaching conversation, or in other words what was an important focus to them in the coaching. Who they were as a leader was a key focus. Working with new ideas about leadership by applying them to real time issues enabled them to re-construct, in a personally meaningful way, their leadership role. They recognised how this was personal learning, specific to them and yet in the context of the organisation, so they were learning in and from practice. At the same time, they realised this was a personal journey which led to recognising an increased potential and capacity in self as a leader.

The nature of the learning from the coaching conversations was evident at all three levels of single, double and even triple loop learning.

Leaders' reported how they had shifted from controlling to open; from dominating to accepting; and from feeling overwhelmed to being calm and confident. The cumulative effect of these shifts with so many leaders learning in and from their practise has the potential to shift the nature of leadership for the BBC.

Implications of this research

Through my inquiry, a number of key themes surfaced. Coaching should be situated in the context, culture and challenges of the organisation. What is the organisation for, what's its purpose and what is the environment in which it operates? How do things happen within this organisation, how are things done? And what are the particular challenges facing the organisation, what is the organisation seeking to achieve? My inquiry has reinforced the need to clearly articulate the coaching proposition and to engage both the coaches and the coachee in this through an orientation process. The coaching conversations help leaders deconstruct their mental models of leadership and reconstruct new or improved ways of leading, including self-led learning. It is this which is likely to leverage sustained change. Furthermore, when multiplied across an organisation through a critical mass of leaders it has the capacity to generate organisational learning by creating the know-how both to sustain leadership effectiveness and support further change.