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step guide to better bosses

You're totally convinced – leadership talent is central to your future success. Among your executive team, there are those who are great role models, highly ambitious and need constant stretch to be kept performing at their peak. These 'superstars' are not just highly visible internally, but externally too and are easy targets for headhunters. Then there are the 'problem children'; they might be

Melinda Beckett-Hughes of Portland International Consulting and Trevor Clawson show how to create an executive coaching programme with bottom-line results

great at the 'what' but not so good at the 'how'. Their leadership and interpersonal style may need developing, but you believe they can

make it if they can adjust their style.

An executive coaching programme is your ticket to meet these diverse needs. It's a big investment for the business and you want to ensure such a programme will deliver the intended value. Here, then, is your guide to help create a coaching programme that will produce not only better bosses, but also have a positive effect on your bottom line.



1 ESTABLISH THE BUSINESS CASE

As with any major programme, coaching must have buy-in at the highest level. If the coachees are executives already on the board, the chairman and CEO must be prepared to commit time as well as money to the project. It will require their input, individual feedback and commitment as mentors for its full duration. If the coachees report to the board, the same applies, and their board sponsors (usually their line manager) must be committed to the aims and objectives.

The idea that executive coaching is just a remedial

intervention should be dispelled. BUPA, for example, has focused its coaching programme on those with potential for promotion to more senior management positions. 'Coachees tend to be people who are department heads and who might go on to fill more generalist management roles, such as unit managing directors,' says group HR director Bob Watson (pictured).

The aim, he says, is to help them handle situations that they would not have had to deal with previously. 'It covers areas of operation at the most senior level of the company,' he adds. In this context, BUPA's coaching is often focused on practical issues such as dealing with regulators,

and the company uses coaches with managerial experience.

How do you not only ensure buy-in from the key players, but also establish the credibility of the programme in the eyes of all those likely to be involved? According to Nicola Wilson, head of human resources at Loop Customer Management, acceptance is more likely if the aims are communicated by a senior figure such as the CEO or MD. Certainly, that was Loop's experience when the firm was preparing to launch an initiative to improve the leadership skills of its board of directors. 'We had to get the MD to communicate the programme so that it didn't come across solely as an HR initiative,' she says.

2 DECIDE WHO YOU WANT TO DEVELOP

You have to choose whether to restrict executive coaching to a very select group, or make it more accessible to a wider range of individuals but perhaps on a more restricted basis. Also ask yourself what exactly you are looking for – coaching, mentoring, executive/leadership training or just-in-time consulting?

While there is some overlap between these development approaches, it is wise to be clear about the differences. Coaching, in its purest form, doesn't assume that the coach imparts any particular expert knowledge. Instead they merely guide the coachee's own learning process.

In practice, the selection of coachees is likely to be

determined by the wider aims and objectives of the business. For instance, in the case of Loop Customer Management, it was felt that in order to grow the business further, a new style of management was required at board level.

'To move the company from where it was to where we wanted to be, we needed visionary management,' says Loop's Nicola Wilson. 'We had lots of good technical people on the board, but we needed vision in terms of moving from tactical to strategic management.' Hence the decision to focus the coaching programme on board members with the emphasis on bringing out latent leadership qualities.

It may be more appropriate to select employees on a case-by-case basis. Dick Etches, head of HR at GKN, which recently won the *Human Resources Excellence*



Dick Etches, head of HR at GKN

Award for the Best Executive Development Programme, says the decision is made on an assessment of the individual's requirements.

GKN also has a structured programme of mentoring by senior executives to aid the development of up-and-coming managers. It's a case of deciding on an approach that is right for the company in question.

assessments. This was done in order to measure the gaps and establish the goals and objectives of the coaching programme.'

4 LEARN ABOUT DIFFERENT COACHING STYLES

One size doesn't fit all. There is a wide range of different routes to becoming a professional coach and their approach will be determined by their own professional experience, education and training, as well as values and philosophy gained through their own life experience – something that is much harder to check out. Coaches will generally have come to the profession from one of the following routes: therapy or counselling; consultancy; leadership training and development; occupational psychology and business coaching. This can be quite a bewildering array of choices for the organisation that comes to it completely cold.

According to Loop's Wilson, finding a way through the maze of options can require a significant amount of spadework, particularly if you are choosing individual coaches rather than hiring a consultancy. 'I had to do a lot of research,' she admits. 'That included word of mouth but I also read a lot of magazine articles.'

If you are in doubt, ask for some further advice from an objective expert on what approach would be best for your people before entering into any one commitment.

3 CHOOSE YOUR FRAMEWORK

Love them or loathe them, a good set of competencies are the foundation stones of large corporate HR development programmes. The best competency frameworks are simple, widely accepted and workable; the worst are over-complex and sit in large binders on the bookshelf. If you need to develop a framework, a little outside expertise can help you get there quickly. If you are proceeding with a programme without in-house competencies, fine – there are plenty of generic leadership competency frameworks with their own assessment methods you could consider using. Otherwise, you would need to consider using your key performance indicators and recent appraisals to evaluate and link to the outcomes of some measurable performance improvement projects.

Retailer Matalan launched an executive coaching initiative aimed at developing the leadership qualities of senior management reporting to directors. 'We used generic measures of leadership character rather than management competencies,' says

Nicky Little, a former head of HR at Matalan, who launched and managed the early stages of the programme. 'A 360° assessment was based on these, together with other style and ability

Competencies are the foundation stones of large corporate HR development programmes



Matalan: managers used generic measures

5 MAKE SURE IT FITS

Many companies embarking on new executive coaching initiatives can be tempted to disregard some of the good work that has already been done elsewhere. This can be confusing to employees at all levels and may at worst give the impression that the initiative may be 'just another HR fad', shortly to be abandoned when the next good idea comes along. Instead consider how the new coaching initiative fits with other strategic change and development programmes, and use it to help deliver and support other plans, ►

such as culture and attitude change, organisational restructuring, assessment, selection and retention campaigns.

In the case of law firm Addleshaw Goddard, the coaching programme was part of a much wider 'partner development' initiative that ranged from formal education through to help with personal issues such as work-life balance and wealth management. While the coaching was aimed at those taking on leadership roles for the first time, there was clearly a wider commitment to the professional development of its staff. This in turn made it easier to get buy-in. 'Communicating it was easy for us, because it was presented in the context of an overall programme,' says HR director Judith Hardy.

Do make sure that your coach gets a really in-depth briefing that allows them to put their coachees' development needs in the larger organisational context and see the business issues through eyes other than their client's.

6 SELECT YOUR COACH

Once you are informed about the different approaches, you will be in a position to proceed to select your coach. Should you turn to one of the larger, market-leading firms or to one or more independent coaches to provide the service? Both have pros and cons.

A larger firm may provide a more consistent approach if you want a standardised offering for several people, and may also have greater resources. However, the approach might be slightly more prescriptive and less adaptable. Independents, on the other hand, might be more flexible and accommodating to your needs, providing high commitment and good quality coaching. Most independents are also part of larger networks and can offer back-up resources in this way.

One of the best places to search for such coaches is through the International Coach Federation (www.coachfederation.org), which provides an accreditation process for coaches. Do ask for references,

7 COMMUNICATE CLEARLY

Decide what your communication strategy will be from the very outset. Will you invite selected individuals discreetly to participate in the coaching programme, and let the results attract further candidates? Or will you announce and market the programme and then select the successful applicants to be sponsored? Remember that whichever coachees you select for the launch, this will tend to colour perceptions going forward. If you select all 'superstars', it will have huge kudos and value as part of a benefits package and as a positive message to others, while those not selected may feel that they missed the boat. How can this be avoided?

Asda has been using coaches for about five years and



Iain Scott of Asda

selects around six senior managers annually for a programme aimed at grooming them for more senior roles. Asda's Iain Scott accepts there is a danger that those not chosen will feel passed over but he doesn't believe that this is the case with Asda. 'I have never been approached by anyone complaining about not being selected,' he argues.

Scott says that this is partly because of people's awareness that the selections are made as part of a succession planning process that takes place annually – in other words, there is a clear reason why certain individuals are chosen. Also this is just one strand of the company's commitment to management development. 'There are other development options open to them,' he says. 'People know it's not a case of coaching or nothing.'

Of course, if you select all 'problem children', there is a danger that those involved will see the decision as having negative connotations. And without good pre-selection, some of these employees might not be very coachable either. A good strategy is a mix of both – let the results decide the benefits to the individuals and the organisation for future selections.

confidential case studies and the names of some individuals as well as corporate clients who are willing to speak about the coach's style and approach and, ideally, the

Consider how the coaching initiative fits with other development programmes



Nicola Wilson of Loop Customer Management

benefits of having worked with them.

At Loop Customer Management, Wilson decided to use a range of small firms with the aim of matching coaches to individual coachees. Her final selections were based on an assessment of not only the requirements of the individual coachees, but also their personalities. 'There were some board members who were very comfortable with the process and we felt we could be more creative in our choice. With others, we felt we needed coaches who would take a more conservative, traditional approach,' she says.

8 TEST AND ASSESS

Having decided the basis on which you wish to evaluate your key people and agreed what competency framework you are going to work with, you should now be in a position to work with your coach to decide how your executives should be assessed.

Some clients may wish to run a full, rigorous development centre session prior to coaching, either on a one-to-one or group basis. This might involve such techniques as psychometric assessment, ability tests, compe- ▶

9 START AND RUN THE PROGRAMME

Depending on the contract agreed with the coach, you can expect little or no further need for intervention between coach and executive clients. Coach and coachee will usually meet face-to-face on a monthly basis for as long as you have agreed, anything between six and 12 months, or longer. This might be supplemented by telephone coaching either on an agreed or as-needs basis and an exchange of emails. One issue to be clear about is: Who is responsible for chasing the other up for their monthly sessions? What is the policy about cancelled or postponed sessions?

Probably the most important and sometimes most difficult issue to resolve is that of boundaries and confidentiality. There needs to be



Judith Hardy of Addleshaw Goddard

total trust between coach and client, yet the coach has two clients – the individual and the corporate sponsor – and it requires the utmost integrity to handle these both correctly. The corporate client is owed some feedback on how the programme and the relationship is working, so ideally

the coachee themselves should give as much feedback as they can.

This needn't always be formal. HR director Judith Hardy believes that as sponsor of Addleshaw Goddard's programme, she can learn a lot about progress, or the lack of it, by watching. 'I believe the prime source of feedback is observable change in those who have been coached,' she argues. However, Hardy is anxious to stress that there should also be an ongoing dialogue between the company, the coach and the coachee while being careful not to breach any confidentiality.

This is a tricky area. Generally speaking, the coachee should not be obliged to divulge details of conversations, but may wish to give an outline of the agenda and key issues and certainly advise if the

coach's approach isn't working for them. This can be done, but if there are problems, carefully consider whether another coach might be better. If strategically sensitive issues are divulged during a session, the coach must observe complete confidentiality, unless they receive explicit permission from the coachee to feed information back.

The coach, if working with several executives, may feel free to report back trends, such as very aggressive headhunters operating in their territory or huge shifts in morale due to policy change. Scott at Asda believes that it is possible to monitor progress without breaching confidentiality by focusing on the process – is it working? – rather than details of exchanges between the coach and employee.

tency-based interviews, leadership or communication styles assessment and, almost certainly, some form of 360° feedback. You might want a full, integrated report produced, based on this evidence, in which case a coach with a background in occupational psychology would be a particularly good choice. Consistency of approach is critical if your organisation uses several coaches.

However, if you believe that this amount of data and feedback might be overkill and executives will have relatively current and valid feedback from recent assessments, it's still a good idea to commission some up-to-date assessments. You will need at least a 360° feedback (ideally based on your competencies, if you have them) and some basic assessments to give insight into values, interests and attitudes as well as behavioural styles.

Scott at Asda prefers not to use the term 'assessment', arguing that it has connotations of success or failure. However, once coachees have been selected, a 360° feedback exercise is augmented by a number of development tools, including personality tests and career tactics questionnaires. 'These help establish the areas to work on,' he says.

10 ASSESS THE RESULTS

Formally, there needs to be an agreed sign-off. This will give the opportunity to evaluate the benefits of the programme against the agreed criteria. For this, it is useful for a longer programme of say 12 months to re-run initial assess-

The primary source of feedback is observable change in those who have been coached



Clare Fazackerley of HR consultancy MEI

ments, such as 360° feedback, to ascertain just what the progress has been both quantitatively and qualitatively. Another possibility is to establish the outcomes – ideally bottom-line benefit – of any specific projects that were agreed.

There is also a chance to establish some closure in the coach/coachee relationship, although most coaches would agree to continue the relationship on an 'as-needs' basis on some form of retainer. That should provide a safety valve and an informed, listening ear for any future dilemma.

Compare the before with the after. 'The best way is to use the appraisal system,' says Clare Fazackerley of human resources consultancy MEI. When a coachee has been assessed through formal appraisal or feedback before the programme's launch, coming up with a measurable assessment of change will often involve the same exercise at the end. But perhaps more important is the effect that the coaching of a few individuals has on the company as a whole. 'I think it will be fairly easy to assess whether the programme has worked,' says Loop's Wilson. 'As a company we are looking for growth. And there ought to be a correlation between changed behaviour and growth.' ■