Bottom of Form

**Explore CIPD Middle East**



21 Jan 2016 - **Heba Hashem**

**Is coaching the key to world champion business performance?**

One-on-one guidance has become a popular way to nurture talent in the west, but can it work for companies in the GCC?

A rising star in your organisation is struggling. You’ve promoted them for their talent, hard work and future potential. But their aggressive style of working and vocal criticism of current practices is causing ructions with colleagues. It’s a delicate situation: you want your new talent to thrive and help build the business, but they urgently need to develop their team-working and communication skills and adjust their behaviour. This is a job for a coach. They can offer objectivity and ask searching questions without the individual feeling defensive. And as coaching helps the coachee arrive at the solutions themselves, it can have a long-lasting impact.

Yet coaching is still a relatively new concept in the GCC region, and is often confused with other development practices such as counselling and mentoring. It may also come with a stigma attached: the idea that someone who needs a coach is struggling in some way and needs remedial action. And yet, spurred by its ready adoption among Silicon Valley start-ups, in many enlightened sectors coaching has become a positive and widely accepted tool.

Faced with a shortage of talent and worrying turnover among key employees, firms wanted to signal their commitment to high-potential executives by offering increased development opportunities. And they recognised that a traditional reliance on developing quantitative capabilities instead of people-oriented skills had often led to technically excellent managers who lacked empathy and communicated poorly. Coaching, with its one-on-one nature and focus on the interpersonal, has come to be seen as the answer to both issues.

Coaching is decidedly different from pure performance-based counselling – the business equivalent of a sports coach bellowing at you to buck your ideas up – or mentoring, which tends to involve a more experienced individual assisting with career navigation. Coaching is a creative and collaborative, solution-focused approach to business challenges that nurtures high performance and centres around identifying and building on key skills and talents. In essence, it aims to bring out the best in an individual to help raise overall organisational performance.

Organisations in the GCC may be playing catch-up on other parts of the world, but there is a growing enthusiasm to be found in the region. Nic Woodthorpe-Wright, managing director of Dubai-based WWA Corporate Coaching, says: “Multinationals often have experience in Europe and the US at senior levels with coaching, and they’ve brought that understanding into the region. So they’ve already hit the ground running.”

**Masoud Golshani-Shirazi, former vice president of HR at Aujan Coca-Cola, a partnership between the Coca-Cola Company and Dubai’s Aujan Industries, says: “We have brought in coaches, but not as executive perks. We use them at critical stages: when somebody who has just been promoted or transferred needs the support to make sure they are successful.**

**“To me, coaching is like taking a vitamin. It’s not medicine, and it’s not about solving a problem. It’s about making sure the individual is as successful as they can possibly be. We set clear coaching objectives at Aujan to make sure there are tangible results.”**

The analogy reflects a massive shift in how GCC businesses are viewing coaching. “Traditionally, people and organisations in the region have said: ‘You have a coach, therefore you have a problem that needs to be sorted out,’” says Woodthorpe-Wright. “It was sending a message to the organisation that you weren’t very good. The truth is, the opposite is the case.”

For certain companies – particularly family-run firms in traditional industries – this remains a reflexive instinct when faced with ideas such as coaching. But Woodthorpe-Wright says: “The world today is complex and businesses need to quickly adapt. You need to have a high level of openness and trust, and coaching was set up to serve that.”

Mubadala, the Abu Dhabi state-owned investment fund that employs more than 39,000 people, is one public sector organisation that has rapidly embraced the idea. “Since 2014, we’ve provided our senior executives with access to a network of global professional coaches for their personal and professional development,” says Ahsan Qureshi, senior vice president of human capital. He says initial feedback has been very positive and that, so far, more than 50 senior executives across the group have benefitted.

“In terms of behaviour, you see people more attuned; you see a change in their personalities, and in the way they talk to others and conduct meetings,” he says. “We are planning to continue the programme to achieve long-term demonstrable results.”

Mubadala isn’t alone. DP World, the global port operator, also engages coaches regularly. As Robin Windley, senior vice president of human capital, says: “We have a network of coaches that we tap into whenever we feel it is necessary, whether to enable managers to work out certain issues they have in the business environment, or to help individuals grow and understand themselves better.”

Windley himself uses a coach, who he started seeing shortly after his appointment four years ago: “I figured it would be helpful to be able to share some of my thoughts about what I wanted to do with my role and function, but also to be able to talk to somebody about the challenges I was facing. I found it very beneficial on a couple of levels.”

One question that often arises after a few coaching sessions is how long to continue for. Windley has retained his coach over the four-year period, although the meetings have become much less frequent. “It’s important that you get an opportunity to work through the issues that you discussed. You need to give yourself time to get things done,” he says.

Such intimate, one-to-one discussions may appear to be too intrusive for some conservative Arab cultures. But according to Woodthorpe-Wright, local clients have shown extraordinary openness, focusing on the value they are getting from coaching rather than on who is delivering it.

“I found Arab cultures to be curious and intrigued by the coaching process. GCC nationals make up about 50 per cent of the people we work with, and the number is growing,” he says.

“The Middle East is not completely different from the rest of the world, but there are some subtleties in the culture. A coach with that awareness can provide more effective coaching. As a coach, you’re there to serve the people you’re working with, which means sometimes you have to challenge them. So it’s about understanding culturally what’s a relevant push and what’s an unrealistic or disrespectful push.”

Like any professional relationship, for coaching to be effective there needs to be a high level of trust, which comes by maintaining confidentiality. But before that, the chemistry has to be there. “As an individual, you have to make a connection with the coach. You have to believe that you can trust this individual and feel there is a rapport,” says Windley.

Confidentiality is crucial for the process to work because, according to Woodthorpe-Wright, intensely personal matters might be discussed. That means an organisation won’t know what’s going on inside the coaching relationship, a fact that often surprises HR professionals who bring coaches into businesses. The way to handle this is to create an agreement between the coach, coachee and company about which areas of discussion can be shared and which cannot.

Most organisations attempting coaching for the first time initially hire external expertise and look to build an internal network – comprising both HR professionals and professionally trained employees – when they have assessed its effectiveness. Privacy concerns are often a key reason why external coaches are hired for leaders. In a survey by Henley Business School, three out of four respondents who planned to use coaches in 2014 said they would prefer external coaches for senior management. Internal coaches were most likely going to be used for middle management and managers in transition.

“We have discussed the idea of developing internal coaches, but our view is that using external coaches ensures confidentiality – allowing the coachee to open up. Otherwise it just wouldn’t work,” says Qureshi.

However, Woodthorpe-Wright argues: “It is absolutely worth developing an internal coaching capability. For the concept to work within a company, you have to get as many people as possible engaged in the process.”

And finding an external coach is not without risk. It is worth carefully assessing both qualifications and experience – the International Coach Federation, which has 27,000 members, is a good place to start, and can help match organisations with coaches who have relevant business experience.

Evidence has been steadily building over the last decade that supports the effectiveness of coaching in organisations. The most convincing is provided by controlled studies that contrast a coaching intervention with a controlled group that received no intervention. These studies can be combined into meta-analytic studies that offer great statistical power. “We currently have three meta-analytical studies in coaching that all found significant effects in terms of coaching’s ability to enhance relevant organisational outcomes like performance, wellbeing and leadership,” says Dr Doug MacKie, business psychologist at Brisbane-based CSA Consulting.

One key variable that seems to differentiate those who benefit from a coaching approach is change or developmental readiness – the person being coached must want it in the first place. Developmental readiness is both the motivation and ability to grow and change as a leader, and is a precursor of effective leadership development. One of the factors that underlies this is the mindset of the person being coached towards modifying their leadership ability. Those with a fixed mindset around leadership believe that leaders are born not made, and that it’s very difficult to modify your natural ability.

“Individuals with these mindsets can really struggle in a coaching process. By contrast, coachees with a growth mindset take an incremental approach to their development, believing that leaders are made, not born, and that the acquisition of expertise is a function of application and effort. Individuals with this growth mindset really thrive in a coaching process,” says MacKie.

While opinion may still be divided over the true effectiveness of corporate coaching and who benefits from it the most, it is not a remedial intervention. It’s an individualised form of leadership development that is particularly effective with high-performing senior managers and leaders who have specific rather than generic leadership development needs. Understand that, say the experts, and you’ll be well on your way to making it work for you – and overcoming the fear that still makes some executives break out in a cold sweat at the thought of confronting their own shortcomings.

*Find out how to make coaching come alive in your company with the CIPD Coaching Toolkit:* [*bit.ly/coachingtoolkit*](http://bit.ly/coachingtoolkit)