Coaching for Seafarers

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Introduction

We hear and read much about the human element. The focus of this article – personal coaching - comes as close to the human element as it's possible to get and shows how coaching is a powerful tool for improving personal performance. There was a time perhaps when to have a coach inferred a negative, almost remedial, intervention for staff who had fallen below expected performance. It was kept quiet. This view is now looking increasingly historic and instead coaching is becoming to be seen as an indispensable tool to get the best out of already high-performing staff. Corroboration of this is plain when the sports sector is examined – it is unthinkable for a professional team or individual to be without a coach and, in many cases, several – for different aspects of performance.

> *'If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind'*
>
> *(K Gibran, 1991).*

Executive coaching has already become widespread in some sectors, (for example, health, education, transport and large corporations) but its application within the operational maritime field appears sporadic and restricted as yet to shore personnel. This is about to change. This article[1] sets out the author's perspective on this emergent field and invites debate and further comment.

So, what actually *is* coaching? Does it work? And what should interested parties be looking for in a coach? Since there are no internationally recognised standards or practices, terms and expressions have definitions at polar opposites. The two words most often interchanged are 'coach' and 'mentor' and, for the purposes of this article, the following definitions will be used.

***Coaching* facilitates the solution of problems through the efforts, skills and knowledge of the coachee. Coaching is the process of 'equipping people with the tools, knowledge and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective'. Although there needs to be caution against the wholesale use of sports analogies in a business setting, there are some parallels. Some describe coaching as 'unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them'. Using this definition the coach does not need close knowledge of the coachee's area of work, though sometimes this may prove useful.**

On the other hand a *mentor* is one who shares both political (meaning intra-organisational) and professional knowledge with the mentee. In other words, the mentor is able to help, guide and assist the mentee in navigating the workplace both operationally and strategically. This is the sort of

[1] taken from a paper originally delivered in Athens in September 2007

support that is probably expected by cadets or trainees when they first go to sea. [See Seaways xxx 2007].

What should I look for in a coach?

To quote the International Coach Federation (ICF), coaches should 'provide an ongoing partnership designed to help clients produce fulfilling results in their personal and private lives'. This definition is open to challenge since many coaches and coachees draw boundaries around areas to be addressed. It is common to stay focussed on work issues. Furthermore it is a measure of the coach's skill that he/she should be able to recognise when the relationship is moving beyond coaching and into areas where additional help may be required (see Fig. 1). ICF also maintain that '…coaches are trained to listen, to observe and to customize their approach to individual client needs. They seek to elicit solutions and strategies from the client; they believe the client is naturally creative and resourceful. The coach's job is to provide support to enhance the skills, resources, and creativity that the client already has'. This definition describes well what is at the heart of a coaching relationship.

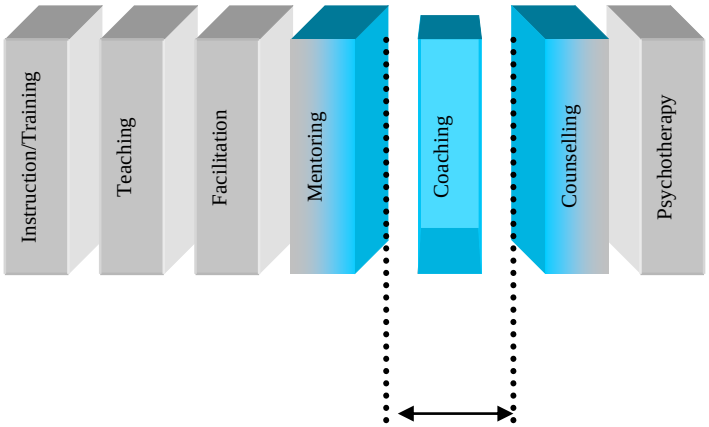

Figure 1: Range of Interventions

There is a range of possible 'interventions' ranging from didactic training and instruction at one end of a scale, to psychotherapy at the other. These scalar extremes are not coaching territory simply because it's most unlikely the coach is qualified to operate there. Instead the coach occupies that narrow band as shown in Fig. 1 and part of his/her skill is to recognize when the boundaries are being reached and, crucially, what then to do about it.

As with many emerging disciplines (although this has been around in various guises for more then twenty years) there is a risk that some may adopt the mantle of 'coach' with insufficient background knowledge, learning and skill. The lack of regulation and international standard means that anyone

can set themselves up as a coach. It's a case of *caveat emptor* – let the buyer beware - when it comes to selecting a coach. By the same token, those who are setting out as coaches should recognise that this is not something to undertake lightly. Poor coaching may be worse than no coaching.

Coaching Styles

Figure 2 aims to show the dynamics within a coaching paradigm. At the centre of everything is the client, or coachee. Other factors include the degree to which the coach themselves understands their own position and how well they know themselves. Plainly, the theoretical position – the style – of the coach will influence the event and, lastly, coaching takes place against a commercial backcloth and this has to be factored in. The whole model allows a 'space' where learning can be encouraged and fostered.

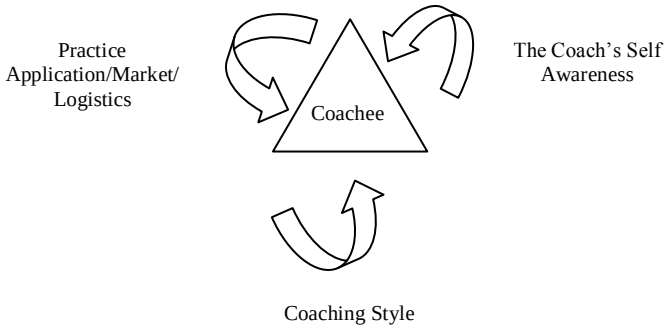

Figure 2. Protecting the 'space'

There are several approaches or 'styles' in coaching. Coaches are usually happiest with their own individual style and it's therefore crucial that coaches and coachees are compatible with the style intended. Three of the more common approaches are introduced below.

- person-centred
- cognitive-behavioural (or solutions-focused) coaching and
- psychodynamic

Person Centred

This approach to coaching has its roots in person-centred psychotherapy developed by Carl Rogers in the last century. Person centred coaches would start 'from the assumption that both they and their clients are trustworthy'.

Rogers believed in the supremacy of the individual and projected an almost evangelistic zeal in support of this position: '…evaluation by others is not a guide for me. The judgements of others…can never be a guide for me…only one person can know whether what I am doing is honest, thorough, open, and sound, or false and defensive and unsound, and I am that person…I cannot relinquish [the weighing of evidence] to anyone else.'

Given the potential of these almost ethereal heights of human performance it is probably not surprising that coaching appropriated the theory in an attempt to improve business performance!

Rogers maintained that expertise in others is irrelevant and that the 'only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning'. You could mount an effective challenge to this Rogerian philosophy. I think we'd be keen to know our canal pilot didn't learn his trade at the Rogers' Navigation School through self-discovery! Flippancy aside, this counter argument is probably a harsh position. Rogers was in fact preparing the ground for action-centred and experiential learning which have become important touchstones now.

A practising Rogerian coach, Greg Mulhauser, explains some of the techniques he espouses under three main headings of empathy, acceptance and authenticity. Empathy – the idea that the coach can get inside the skin of the coachee and experience things as the coachee experiences them – is, of course, not limited to person-centred coaching.

Acceptance refers to the ability of the coach to unconditionally accept the 'inherent value of a human being, without conditions'. That is not to say that a coach has to accept unconditionally the behaviours of a client.

Authenticity, Mulhauser argues, means 'sharing appropriate reactions and responses with [the client] rather than hiding those reactions behind a professional façade'.

Cognitive Behavioural Coaching (Solutions Focussed)

Cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC) has its roots in Pavlov and the positivist school of psychology. It was developed mainly by American psychologists who were concerned that cognitive psychology per se was inherently immeasurable and therefore unscientific.

B F Skinner was arguably the most well-known and most controversial behaviourist. He coined the term 'operant conditioning' and argued that a person's behaviour could be controlled by judicious use of stimulants and reinforcers. Others built on the theory by adding a social dimension. He

observed that a person doesn't have to experience reinforcement to learn. For example: we are quite happy to accept our parents' advice that to walk off the top of the cliff is dangerous.

CBC is systematic and prescribed. CBC coaches may use a range of models to work step-by-step through clearly defined issues. As an example, Wasik developed a 7-step model; see Table 1.

Table 1. CBC Coaching Model: Wasik (1984)

Steps	Questions/Actions
1. Problem identification	What is the concern?
2. Goal selection	What do I want?
3. Generation of alternatives	What can I do?
4. Consideration of consequences	What might happen?
5. Decision making	What is my decision?
6. Implementation	Now do it!
7. Evaluation	Did it work?

Another performance management model, John Whitmore's GROW Model (Goal, Reality, Options, Will), is also used extensively by coaches with this style.

Psychodynamic

As we have seen, particularly in person-centred coaching, 'feelings' are crucial in coaching. They are positively central to the process when the coach is employing a psycho-dynamic approach. The validity of feelings as measures of management performance is sometimes challenging to defend. The reason for this may be that feelings are quintessentially subjective, inherently fickle and famously difficult to measure or quantify. In their research of coaching in Australian businesses Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger found that many coaches 'described their work in relation to emotions – most commonly in terms of emotional intelligence'.

A psychodynamic approach to coaching starts with a blank sheet. It is this sense of 'not knowing' that differentiates it from other schools of coaching. Some ways to describe it would be:

- "…not seeking premature disclosure
- allowing for the unconscious…
- acknowledging that not all results are immediate or obvious
- being curious about the process – looking awry"

An important psychodynamic concept is that of the Third Position. It refers to a shift from the two-person relationship and linear approach (coach/client) encountered in goal-centred strategies to a more complicated dynamic in which a third position is opened up - the oedipal triangle. In Freudian terms it moves the relationship from the maternalistic paradigm to one where a paternal influence now enters the dynamic. Thus a third partner materialises and enables observation of the relationship from without.

Does coaching work…?

Proving there is benefit to individuals is (relatively) straightforward and can be gleaned from direct questioning and observation of behaviours. There is extensive literature to substantiate this claim.

Evidence of benefit to organisations and a return on investment is the holy grail of the coaching profession. Logically if the separate parts of an organisation show improvement, then the synergy should move the organisation as well. Research from Australia says…

'In summary, business coaching is emerging as a potentially valuable form of organisational intervention, yet one that is only in its infancy in terms either of having a clear conception of what it is trying to sell as a product, or in terms of being able to define what the parameters of best practice and identity are for the industry'

Practicalities and Ground Rules

Many coachees will be engaging in this process for the first time. Understandably there may be ignorance of the expected process and, perhaps more importantly, how the adopted or inherent style of the coach may affect this. There are some basic ground rules that all coaches should follow. In general the following core competencies form a basis for any relationship.

The 'ground rules' in any coaching intervention include consideration of ethical and professional standards. The coach should use the initial session to build a relationship. This will involve a degree of intimacy and trust which is much more powerful than may be found in a normal facilitator role. It is also crucial that a 'contract' between coach and coachee is negotiated. This should include a commitment to confidentiality. A coach's remit and focus of work is far removed from that of clinician or confessor. Furthermore the coach, though aspiring to the highest ethical standards, is not bound by Hippocratic or any other oath. Thus it should be explicitly declared that the coach will take whatever steps are necessary if they learn of illegality or other impropriety through their coaching interventions. Both coach and coachee must feel comfortable about walking away from the relationship if that is in the best interest of the coachee. Recognising that this may be appropriate action is an essential awareness on the part of the coach.

Communication

Crucially important to the success of any coaching event is effective communication. Above all the coach must be skilled in active listening. His/her questioning should be measured, appropriate and affective. They should be directed towards reaching objectives, the facilitation of learning, creation of awareness, action planning and progression. Interruption is unusual, though sometimes practised, particularly in co-active coaching [not addressed in this article], and coaches may sometimes use it with positive effect. Effective coaches will have rehearsed 'closing out' strategies which can be adapted and tailored to the event. If the coach (or coachee) perceives an insuperable problem with the dynamic and seeks a premature ending of the relationship, the coach must have an effective exit strategy planned.

While some of the points above can be discussed prior to commencing a coaching programme, many of them may not surface until the process is well underway. Under the circumstances, it is as well for coachees to try and find out as much about their coach as possible before committing to a long programme. Word of mouth, though subjective, is sometimes relied on.

Even then, the problem remains that coaching is a very personal experience and the coaching style that suits one person is not necessarily the same for everyone.

What do others say?

The (UK's) Chartered Management Institute (CMI) has indicated that Coaching as a learning and development tool is growing. While 41% of small organisations undertook coaching activities in 1996 this had increased to 74% by 2000. The 2002 Coaching at Work survey carried out by the Chartered Management Institute supported by [the UK's] Lloyds TSB showed that 80% of organisations now have Coaching Programmes in place. Despite this impressive figure, there is little evidence to show that the maritime sector is enjoying the same exposure.

One study showed that the main reasons for using coaching are:

- supporting structural change
- staff motivation
- demand from managers
- retention of staff

These qualitative measures are backed up by a range of quantitative findings which would indicate overwhelming positive impact.

A 2000 issue of The Industrial Society's "Managing Best Practice" series focussed on Coaching. The report highlighted the 'human element' improved by coaching. These included:

- improvements in individuals' performance/targets/goals
- increased openness to personal learning and development
- helps identify solutions to specific work-related issues
- greater ownership and responsibility
- developing self-awareness

- improves specific skills or behaviour
- greater clarity in roles and objectives
- corrects behaviour/performance difficulties

Should we use coaching at sea?

The [UK's] Maritime and Coastguard Agency say:

"There is well-established research both in the maritime and other hazardous industries that confirms the huge impact of leadership on the safety of operations. Whilst the International Safety Management (ISM) code has been a major step forward in improving safety standards, its effectiveness depends heavily on how leaders approach its implementation, and this in turn depends heavily on the skills and qualities of leaders – both at sea, at the ship-shore interface, and on-shore. Virtually all maritime leaders want to do their best for safety, this is not in doubt. But sometimes real life makes things difficult – time pressures, economic constraints and everyday circumstances sometimes seem to conspire against good safety leadership. [Leading for Safety] is based not just on theory but also on real life, including consultation with over 65 seafarers and shore managers about everyday safety leadership challenges. You will see that some of it is common sense, but nearly everyone can benefit from a reminder…what really counts is how leaders behave in everyday situations. Your crews will draw inferences about your safety leadership based on what they see you do and what they hear you say, far more than what you might declare in a speech or a written communication."

The MCA publication drives home the crucial importance of developing so-called 'soft skills' in support of a positive safety culture. It argues that an awareness and use of these skills is linked inextricably with the striving towards Safer Lives, Safer Ships and Cleaner Seas.

So it is in this vein that coaching is contextualised. These underpinning concepts, so well espoused by the MCA, of empathy, understanding, respect, communication and listening, inter alia, are congruent – indeed intrinsic - with the delivery expected by a competent and confident coach.

Masters, Chief Engineers and other officers, particularly those newly promoted, may find themselves in a lonely position. They handle unusually demanding situations and may face operational and strategic problems for the first time in their careers which give rise to complex and uncomfortable feelings. These are not usually the thoughts they can offload to a Company Superintendent. A coach is ideally placed in these situations and can provide the sort of support which their colleagues ashore, in equally challenging situations, are beginning to take for granted.

At the same time there may be officers in senior positions who tend towards over-confidence and whose leadership style, zeal and enthusiasm brings with it a different set of challenges upon which to reflect critically.

These behavioural 'blind spots' lead to poor decision-making with serious consequences for staff relationships, crew morale and, ultimately, safety at sea.

Over confident, under confident and all points between - those in stressful and critical positions at sea may well find a coaching intervention appropriate and effective in addressing these issues.

Practicalities

Coaching is normally offered as a programme of sessions at a frequency to be mutually agreed but, typically, one per month for six months. In offering this to seafarers there are of course, the logistical challenges to overcome. It would be possible to build a coaching programme around a person's leave pattern with intermediate sessions being conducted by telephone.

In executive development it is seldom that coachees can take time out for face-to-face sessions. When this happens telephone coaching is used and it proves highly effective. It is used routinely and successfully as a mainstream intervention in multi-national companies to support executives in far-off places.

In a ground-breaking initiative, a significant LNG/LPG tanker fleet is about to embark on a pilot coaching programme for some of its senior officers. The coaching will run alongside a face-to-face management development programme. This initiative is undoubtedly paving the way for future activity in the field.

Can it work on board?

Some companies may seek to develop their Masters and Chief Engineers to be the coaches of junior officers on board. At first glance this may seem an effective policy but there are a couple of factors to discuss.

Firstly, there is the personal development of the senior officers – not everyone is suited to be a coach and people really must want to do this in order to be effective.

Secondly, the hierarchical power dynamic which operates on most ships (for the very best of reasons) may not lend itself to the true spirit of coaching.

For example, there may be a case where, say, a junior officer is being bullied by his or her senior officer. The senior officer may also be the junior's coach. It is plain that the likelihood of meaningful dialogue and a positive relationship between the two is slight.

That is not to say, of course, that coaching skills cannot be introduced, practised and utilised in other one-to-one engagements such as annual appraisal meetings. The power
relationship may never be lost between, say, Master and Officer, but at least some of the techniques discussed above may make the interaction more effective.

Conclusion

Coaching is having a sweeping effect across many sectors of industry. Some argue that we are in the midst of a 'revolution in thinking'. The opportunities to develop own behaviours and working practices in ways that would hitherto have been unthinkable are with us and are being exploited positively to great effect. It is a disservice to seafarers if they remain excluded.

Coaching is already seen by many organisations to be a cost-effective and sustainable method of synergising the power and intellect of their executives and senior operatives. Managers at sea face the same and potentially worse problems as their counterparts ashore. Time is getting shorter, the job more complex and bureaucracy threatens to swamp us all.

Coaching would never claim to have the answers – they lie within the minds of seafarers and others – but it does offer senior personnel a thinking partner and a sounding board which could support sound decision-making and improved performance.