

Coaching at Work

“pp48-49 Internal coaching”

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INTO FOCUS

Self-management is arguably even more important for internal coaches, says **Sara Hope**, in the third in our series of columns on internal coaching/mentoring

What sponsors desire most is value for money from their internal coaching. My research in the internal coaching space, plus my own experience, suggests that how internal coaches manage their boundaries and themselves in the moment, has one of the biggest impacts on the quality of the coaching relationship.

There can be little doubt about the importance of self-management for a coach. It is perhaps even more important for an internal coach. How can they maintain focus and get present if

their previous meeting was challenging? How do they monitor their feelings and keep them under control so that they remain emotionally steady and focused on their client? How can they ensure they do not collude with their clients or sponsors?

When someone is part of the same system in which they coach, these areas are critical for a successful coaching relationship.

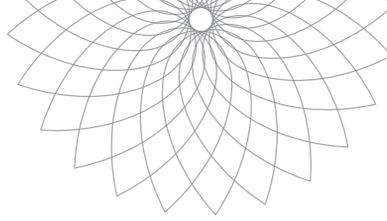
Giving it all

Whitworth et al (1998) describes self-management as “fundamental. The client is counting on you to give 100 per cent of what you are able to”.

It is natural for a coach to have opinions and feelings, but their job is to monitor them and keep them under control. Bluckert (2005) states that psychologically minded individuals have the capability to both stand back from their own experiences to notice more of their internal processes, and to suspend judgment about the other person’s experience.

The debate continues about how much self-awareness and self-management can be developed through training, and how much is through experience.

Chapman (2005) reflects on how coaches at different stages of



their development can tap into and harness their own intrapersonal awareness. She believes that a coach's wisdom can only come through experience and having acknowledged and acted on their 'sixth sense'. So what does this mean for internal coaches?

My interest in this space took me on an exploration of how a population of internal coaches manage themselves, and in particular, how they manage their state, values, beliefs and energy in the moment when they coach in the same organisation in which they are employed. I also wanted to explore whether the number of years of coaching experience has an impact on the degree of self-awareness and self-management.

If experience is key, how do sponsors and those commissioning internal coaches support them in gaining it when the role may form a small part of their job?

Research themes

Three themes emerged.

● Individually tailored strategies

Each participant maintained focus in a way that personally suited them, while the methods they used to be 'at their best' varied too.

Some described physical actions they took before a coaching session such as mindful breathing and drinking water. Others used mental checks to help them, while a couple said they had cancelled sessions because they felt they did not have the emotional capacity they required.

● Self-reflection

This was a common method of self-management, particularly at the end of a coaching session. Keeping a learning log was often cited as another way to capture insights and stretch their reflective muscle.



“When someone is part of the same system in which they coach, self-management is critical for success”

● Experience

The results suggested the extent of coaching experience may indeed have an impact on ability to self-manage. Participants with more than five years' experience as a coach used the words 'intuition' and 'instinct' in responses.

When deciding how to manage a coaching discussion, they based their decision on what they thought the client needed in that moment. This supports Chapman's (2005) research, demonstrating that to excel, coaches need to harness their own fears and tap into their intuition.

It is not clear whether this is a consequence of experience or the fact that those particular internal coaches have a higher degree of emotional intelligence. However, I wonder whether a coach's wisdom comes only through experience and through acknowledging and acting on their sixth sense.

Showing up

Exploring this left me reflecting on a number of key points. Working with a supervisor with whom you have the space and time to explore who you are as an internal coach, is tremendously valuable. How do I 'show up' as an internal coach when I walk into the room? How do I want my clients to experience me? What is my signature presence?

I also believe it is important for sponsors of internal coaches to reflect on their role. How do they ensure their development interventions for their internal coaches have enough focus on the

notion of self-management? In what way are the interventions tailored around the particular nuances of being an internal rather than an external coach?

Finally, the notion of experience and intuition, and its impact, plays an important part in the practice of an internal coach. The *Ridler Report 2013* states that the majority of internal coaches coach as part of their wider role, as opposed to being full-time. This raises the question of how internal coaches are supported in organisations so that they can gain experience.

In a sense, the 'easy' part is developing skills; the 'tougher', and arguably more significant, part is what happens back in the workplace. To gain maximum value for all parties (the organisation, sponsors, clients, and internal coaches themselves), it is critical for internal coaches to gain experience.

Aristotle said, "For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them."

The practicalities of making this work may be complex, but in the absence of having sufficient coaching experience, the fundamental skill of self-management as an internal coach will be diminished. ■

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