

ABB: a global journey

ASEA Brown Boveri (ABB)'s coaching style OD 'mentoring' programme is bringing about a shift in culture and organisational growth. Dr Eunice Aquilina reports

It may be helpful to draw distinctions between coaching and mentoring. In reality, I wonder if the name really matters, particularly if an intervention is succeeding.

Certainly that's the case with the programme I've partnered with ASEA Brown Boveri (ABB)'s L&D team to design and deliver for the past eight years. Although it has the look and feel of a coaching programme, it's actually

an OD intervention aimed at cultivating a leadership culture. It's called the Global Mentoring programme – and it's highly successful.

ABB is a Swedish-Swiss multinational corporation headquartered in Zürich, Switzerland. It pioneers technology for the utilities industry, transport and infrastructure, operating mainly in the power and automation areas. ABB has operations in around 100 countries, with approximately 132,000 staff worldwide. The ABB Global

Mentoring programme was designed to help senior leaders take up the role of mentor or mentee and get to practise in 'real time' the essential skills of a coaching style of leadership.

But there was more to the programme than that. It was about changing the conversation at senior leader level. The power of listening and building leaders' capacity to engage with others differently opens the possibility for fruitful collaboration business-wide.

The programme aim was to develop leaders' ability to co-ordinate effectively, not just between mentor and mentee, but across the business with colleagues as well as customers. It sought to increase leaders' capacity to build trust, navigate moods and emotions, and create mutual accountability. In other words, building leaders' capacity to get things done through a more collaborative approach as opposed to one of command & control.

For in a global environment that is increasingly complex and uncertain, where change is uncontrollable and often disruptive, it's less about leaders achieving an outcome, and more about leaders being able to hold the space for others to learn, change and respond skilfully to challenges as they unfold.

With around 500 leaders having now taken this journey, there are clear signs that this intervention is changing the culture of the senior leadership. When you begin to shift conversations, you begin to shift the culture (Shaw, 2002). Let's reflect on the journey so far.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

I first worked with Sytske Casimir, former global head of learning and development at ABB, whose vision for this intervention went beyond what we might think of as a traditional mentoring programme. Bringing this vision to life began with a conversation, an enquiry into how we might enable leaders to learn how to learn.

How might this new awareness about learning increase their capacity to lead

in a complex and turbulent environment where uncertainty is the norm and direction is determined through emergent processes?

How might we facilitate a shift of conversation between individuals in their every day practice, which accumulates and gathers momentum, spiralling into a collective leadership shift in 'being'?

We needed to create a different dialogue about learning, one that would change the concept of learning

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from a process of acquiring knowledge to cultivating a quality of being. Gary Steel, then head of HR and member of the executive committee and sponsor for this initiative, echoes this. He felt it was important to create a journey that would develop senior leaders' capacity to listen, make sense of and respond more effectively to their changing environment. We realised our aim was to build participants' capacity to "lead to learn" (Kegan & Lahey, 2009).

The mentoring programme became the perfect vehicle. It created the space for senior leaders to learn in 'real time' in and through their leadership practice within a supportive framework.

THE ARCHITECTURE

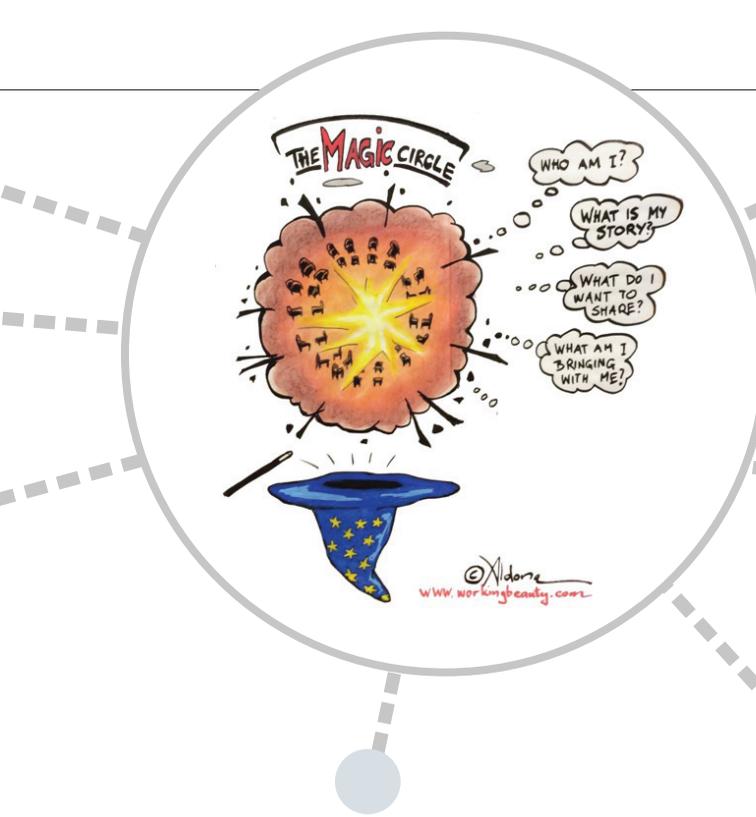
This year-long learning intervention brought together senior leaders from across the organisation, people who would not normally meet or engage in these types of conversations. In this way this Global Mentoring programme sought to create conversations between naturally occurring business silos and

geographical regions which otherwise would not happen. It aimed to build more understanding of and trust in the different parts of the organisation, thereby creating a stronger sense of the wider ABB system.

Participants were drawn from the senior leader community and from across the business. The journey began with an application process. This, in itself, was the beginning of the change as both mentee and mentor were invited to reflect on aspects of themselves inside their leadership they may not have noticed before. The selection process reviewed individual applications against a set of criteria. In matching each mentor and mentee, Casimir and her team took time to examine geography, function and level of development as well as the particular topic the mentee wanted to work on and learn through.

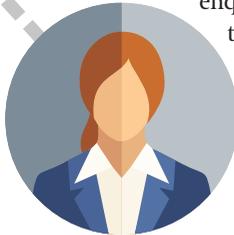
The process didn't adhere to the traditional approach of senior person as mentor and junior as mentee. In some cases the mentee was more senior to the





observe the previously invisible emerging stories. What was being created in the exchange between them?

Throughout the year participants were offered virtual action enquiry groups, one for mentors and another for mentees. Each group met once a month to reflect on their work and to explore what they were learning about themselves, about the conversation and about the wider system. As facilitators, we offered the occasional provocation as a way of continuing the learning inside of the work mentors and mentees did together. These virtual action enquiry groups created space to work in



the here and now, allowing individuals to notice what was being created in and through the conversation and how that deepened their sense of who they were being in their leadership.

At the end of the year-long journey the group came back together to formally close the mentoring relationship. Bringing something to a close skilfully is an important leadership skill, one often ignored or overlooked and one that frequently triggers an unskilful response. The sense of becoming a leadership community rather than having the distinction of being a mentor or a mentee came much more into focus and this gave the participants a felt sense of being in collaboration with others. Moreover, at this close-down event participants had a felt sense of being part of a bigger system, allowing them to realise what this means for leading and learning through change. Kaczowski captured leaders' individual and collective sense-making from the year, reinforcing how their shifts in practice were beginning to amplify and spiral outwards beyond the mentoring dyad.

The design of the programme facilitated learning at three levels:

- *Who I am as leader and how I lead*
- *The business through the issues presented*
- *Learning about learning, spiralling organically into new, different actions*



mentor in organisational terms – but equal in the mentoring relationship. Matching was vital in creating the right conditions for learning.

The learning process kicked off with an event for mentors and mentees. Steel recognised that if this programme was to get traction with senior leaders, it needed to look and feel different. It needed to stand out from previous mentoring initiatives.

This event created a powerful beginning to the mentoring relationship, with both parties establishing an emotional engagement with each other from the outset. We modelled relationship and connection in such a way that participants got a felt experience of the importance of creating a safe space for learning in their work together. This building of trust between participants allowed them to be open with each other and to not be afraid of connection and emotions.

We had no PowerPoint slides and we removed desks and tables from the room. Instead, participants sat in a circle together. I recall one leader arriving saying, “Where will I put my laptop?”

Right from the start, participants could see this was a different approach. We focused on cultivating conversation and listening among participants. For it was through the conversations that

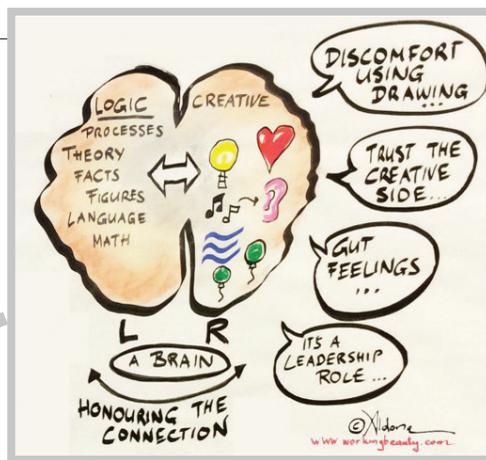
people would begin to wake up to who they are and to their leadership style.

In addition, our graphic facilitator, Aldona Kaczowski, captured the dialogue in the moment, creating a visual image of what was being generated through the conversations (see above and on page 34). She brought the collective conversations to life so participants could make sense of them for themselves. As they experienced the unfolding of the conversation they could begin to see how change happens through conversation and what different action might then be possible.

COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

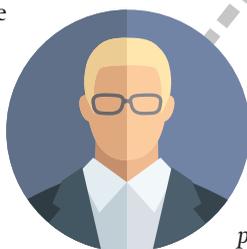
Kaczowski highlighted many of the individual and collective observations, anxieties, those ‘a-ha’ moments of realisation, doubt and vulnerability as well as gratitude and joy. This was the beginning of a community of learners.

To support the learning, mentors and mentees were given a journal so they could practise the skills of reflection, learning to notice what was occurring and how they were showing up inside of that. At six months the mentoring pairs were invited to explore how their conversations were changing, and to



Over the years the programme evolved as we continually invited participants to engage in conversations about strategic initiatives. For example, the ABB values set of Safety & Integrity, Customer Focus & Quality, Innovation & Speed, Ownership & Performance and Collaboration & Trust was integrated into the learning design.

The focus was on supporting both mentors and mentees to engage differently with each other, thereby building their capacity to take new action in their everyday activities. It created a learning space where both parties were emotionally invested in their individual and mutual learning. Finally, it provided a framework for ongoing regular practice through the year (Flores, 2016).



• “I have always tried to have an open approach, but I think that this has now become more pronounced, pro-actively encouraging people to come up with new ideas

and to give them the opportunity to implement these ideas, not fearing failure but adopting an attitude that people who never try anything can also not fail. It takes willingness to try new things and to fail.”

Michael Brandt, group VP, customer loyalty

• “I pay more attention to anxiety and concerns in the team.”

A mentor

• “Having a senior management role in the organisation, I realised what opens the possibility for change is encouraging someone to learn.”

Fulvio Granata, global operation excellence and IS manager, Switzerland

The programme supported participants not only to evolve the conversations between each other, but also between mentor and direct reports, between mentees and their reports, between participants and other people in the organisation. A mentor commented,

• “I encourage my employees to take more ownership of their own learning.”

Another said: “I enable my team members to take more responsibility.”

• **Enver Shulgin, vice president, local division manager, robotics and motion division, Russia, Belarus and Central Asia**, feels that he has “a more balanced approach as a leader between being a guide to having a more enquiry leadership style”.

He also shifted his practice with customers: “When it comes to customers, listening to them is of primary importance. The majority of customers hate it when a vendor does not listen. Sometimes, by listening and picking up a couple of key words from the customer this can move the quotation to an order.”

• **Angela Qu, group vice president, head of global supply chain management, BU EPMV, Switzerland**, believes people are ABB’s most valuable asset. The programme enabled leaders to build real relationships with people and show that they cared.

“As leaders we need to show we care about our employees, so they will care about the organisation and what we want them to do.”

Most, if not all, participants spoke about how much they valued learning about other parts of ABB:

SHIFTS

Through the learning elements in the programme and the experience of moving through a year-long mentoring commitment, participants became more skilful at building relationships and having the conversations that mattered. They learned how to build trust, co-ordinate effectively, offer grounded assessments and hold the other to account. At the close-down event we heard mentors say how they’ve “increased their capability to listen”, “improved trust with employees”, “engaged in daily reflection” and were “better able to find balance between the conflicting demands”. Let’s hear what others think.

WHAT THEY SAY

• “The level of relationship and trust I can now build is what makes the difference in my leadership.

“My focus is now to understand the whole system from a different perspective. What is my reality, and what is the reality of my speaking partner? What do I want to achieve? What is behind the facts? What am I not seeing?”

Stefan Basenach, VP, EPC Solutions for T&D Substations



The programme has, over the past eight years, gained serious traction among the senior leadership community. Leaders are no longer relying on an advocacy approach, but are embracing the power of enquiry

• **John Sinclair, vice president, strategic market development** highlights that “gaining a direct understanding of a different part of ABB in a different country, indeed on a different continent going through very different changes from the ones I experience locally, was a key learning for me”.

The mentees, too, have seen a shift in their leadership:

• **Katie Vuille, group vice president, M&A finance and accounting, Switzerland** has developed “perspective, ability to prioritise and organise”. She feels better practised at noticing when she is overwhelmed and is able to reframe the situation for herself.

• **Arturo Castello, shared accounting services, Mexico**, says, “It has changed the way I handle difficult conversations. In the past I had a strong bias to avoid these conversations but with the help of my mentor I have learnt how to navigate difficult conversations and conflict... I have more engaging conversations now. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’, and so I have developed a different approach with each stakeholder even though the message may well be the same.”

The emergent narratives from mentors and mentees illustrate the state of progress. They also show us how participants are beginning to embody these new skills in a way that has become habitual, integrated into their way of being as they lead and support

others. Or as **Thomas Schmidt, group vice president in group function quality & operational excellence**, said recently, “I recognise that the traditional approach, where people get coaching by their line manager, did not always work or was not always applied. I consider this global mentoring programme an essential ingredient for the development of our leadership.”

CO-CREATING THE FUTURE

The ABB Global Mentoring programme has, over the past eight years, gained serious traction among the senior leadership community. It’s seen as an intervention that creates the space for new and different conversations to unfold. Leaders are no longer relying on an advocacy approach, but are embracing the power of enquiry as a way of being, as the programme creates an increased level of trust between colleagues from the different regions.

The intention of this Global Mentoring programme was always that it would be a vehicle by which leadership culture would begin to shift

as described by Shaw. As ABB continues to realise its strategic intention, ‘Let’s write the future’, Patricia Taparelli, ABB global key account manager L&D, is exploring with leaders who have been on this journey how together they can continue to foster different conversations among a wider leadership population.

“I have seen how the Global Mentoring programme has enabled leaders to self-reflect, self-motivate and develop others. This intervention is aligned to the company’s values and supports our strategy. Now we need to look at new and innovative ways to amplify the shifts in practice we have seen in our senior community so that we continue to cultivate the leadership we need going forward.”

This journey began with Casimir’s vision and her willingness to go beyond ABB’s cultural norms for learning. The result was an innovative and powerful design that focused on the ‘being’ of leadership and less on the ‘doing’. The programme supports participants to become who they really are in their leadership, to care deeply, to create effective relationships and to take skilful action in the midst of an ever-changing and complex environment. 

• **Dr Eunice Aquilina** is the founder of *eaconsult*, a leadership and organisation development consultancy, and is the author of *Embodying Authenticity* (Live It Publishing, 2016).

References and further information

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