Lost in Translation: Leader as Coach

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A common term of reference you’ll see in organisations these days is the idea of ‘Leader as Coach’. For some leaders and operational managers when they hear the term ‘Leader as Coach’, you can see their eyes immediately glaze over. Speaking with an operational leader recently on the topic of Leader as Coach, he shared “That sounds like another thing that I’m expected to do as my ‘job on the side’!”. For some organisations this viewpoint will seem old fashioned, but in our experience, it’s still a view surprisingly widely held. Leaders can associate ‘coaching’ as being about performance management of difficult team members, long and introspective coaching/therapy sessions, a huge investment of time and something slightly daunting. The message of Leader as Coach has clearly been lost in translation.

What’s the translation of ‘Leader as Coach’ in terms that a leader will relate to?

What Leader as Coach really means, is building the capacity of a leader to create a culture of trust, empowerment and collaboration. The leader and their team have an ongoing practice of developmental feedback on the job and continuous performance acceleration. With honesty and trust at the centre, the leader can create a speak-up culture on all matters – productive and unproductive.
With the leader as a coach, they role model a leadership style that is pull rather than push, where the accountability and responsibility sits with the employee, and it enables more self-managing leaders and learners.

**Why does the world need ‘Leader as Coach’?**

The need for Leader as Coach has never been greater.

The average reporting span for a first-time line manager now is increasing to as much as 10 among US companies\(^1\). Against this kind of backdrop, we need leaders who are effective at all levels, and leaders who do more than manage numbers and processes, but can also be talent champions who attract, inspire, develop and retain great people.

It’s the expectation of the millennial workforce that we show up as coaches. 75% of the workforce will be millennials by 2025, yet today, only 7% of companies believe they’re excellent at developing millennial leaders\(^2\). As Leader as Coach, we can develop the millennial’s natural proclivity to fast learning, conceptual thinking and continuous feedback.

Organisations need collaborative leaders and diverse/inclusive leaders who engage and involve the right people in outcomes across, down and up the organisation.

And we need leaders who can drive performance and feedback culture. Already today 65% of employees say they want more feedback and yet the actual number of leaders who see this as a continuous part of their role and do it well, are very limited\(^3\).

**How do I know if Leader as Coach and a coaching culture will help my business?**

If you hear your leaders in the organisation talk about these challenges, then what they’re really describing is an underlying breakdown in the foundations of a great coaching culture and leadership capability to develop this.

I’m told I need to drive better performance than last year… but really I’m being asked to do more with less.

I’m not sure I understand how to coach others. When I was early in my career, I was just told what to do… is this what you mean by coaching? 

As a technical expert myself, I find it really hard to step back and trust that people will do things as I would like it done.

I’m being told that I need to develop people on the job... but the way I do it now feels like another job in itself.

I need more time off the tools, to think about the team and the business... but I don’t know how to get my team to think and act for themselves when I’m not around.

I find it hard to give feedback. Sometimes I can’t find the ‘right’ way to say it... and so often I don’t say it at all.

I can find it easy to coach some people, but I also come across people where we just don’t click. I struggle to get the best performance from them, and it puts pressure on the team overall. I don’t know how to change my coaching style to fit them.
Where's the evidence that the leader adopting a coaching style of leadership can help?

Thankfully there are many studies that demonstrate the kind of impact we know to be possible when coaching is adopted as a style of leadership. For example, Bersin in 2014 published a longitudinal study and found 21% higher business results where a coaching culture was embedded and 39% stronger individual employee results.

How do I develop a culture of coaching supported by leaders, that translate to their reality?

One of the first principles of coaching is ‘meet them where they are’, and in terms of creating a culture of coaching, the same is true. Understand what the current level of awareness, acceptance and integration of a coaching approach is, and develop a strategic response targeted to this. If you want to leapfrog from one straight to 10, rather than chip away over a long period of time by slowly pacing one through 10, you must prioritise it as a top to bottom culture change; not a learning initiative or activity. Build the culture change around a strategic campaign, and use it as the enabler of business growth and priorities such as; creating a speak-up culture, innovation, customer-centricity and agile.

Engage across the organisation, in purposeful ways. For example, reach ‘the many’ through a digital coaching experience that helps them see a new way of interacting peer-to-peer. Engage them in a low cost and meaningful approach through front line and middle level leader-led conversations on topics like; trust, empowerment, development and feedback. Prepare leaders for their coach role through a train the trainer experience that is both developmental for them as a peer group, but also enables the organisational change. Reach those in large complex roles or with longer tenure, through a one-on-one coach experience focused on their capability building, so they can be shown what great coaching looks like. Go deeper for specialist roles, such as agile coaches and team leaders with a larger reporting line span, through one-on-one coaching and a residential workshop experience – it will exponentially accelerate the impact of their culture change. Build all this around campaigns that support the performance cycle, and link to specific and measurable business impact; to a person, team and organisational outcome.

About BTS

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3. Source Ferbin 2014