

# HR AND COACHING

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

by A. Charlotte Riley



In 2006, near-retirees—individuals between the ages of 45 and 64 years old—comprise almost 40 per cent of the Canadian workforce. With this impending labour shortage, what can HR do to help stem employee turnover and nurture career mentoring, as well as improve employee competencies over the long-term?

Over half of U.S. organizations now invest in coaching as a means of employee development. And, across the pond, the U.K.-based organization CIPD (the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) reports that 88 per cent of European companies invest in coaching. In fact, according to the Harvard Business Review, executive coaching is a billion dollar industry worldwide.

Here in Canada, more and more business owners, executives and human resources departments are turning to coaching as a way of improving team morale and effectiveness, communication and internal coaching. It has become such a part of mainstream business that even Dilbert mocks it.

## Coaching—your company's secret weapon?

Today, coaching is seen as the new competitive edge. In a playing field where an industry's services and products can be relatively the same, it is your employees' communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and efficiency that are the important factors in heightened productivity, and, ultimately, profitability.

However, Michael Bungay Stanier, the 2006 Canadian Coach of the Year (*CoachesCanada.com*), states that despite all the hoopla, HR professionals need to understand that executive and business coaching doesn't always work, or at least as well as it could.

"Many times coaching is limited to the upper echelons, and, unfortunately, it's rarely aligned with business objectives," noted Bungay Stanier. "Secondly, managers tend to be told, 'you're now a coach' and are then expected to somehow add this on top of their already over-committed schedules."

In 2005, The Society for Human Resources Management released a study, *The Employee Development Survey Report*, which stated, "Much of an employee's development is probably determined in an ad hoc fashion at the discretion of an employee's supervisor or at the employee's request to work on specific projects."

To ensure that coaching will be effective, it needs to be systemic. Instead of implementing coaching only when morale is low, productivity has decreased or departmental communication has broken down, it should be integrated in the day-to-day workplace environment, says Bungay Stanier, whose Toronto-based company Box of Crayons has worked with companies such as Nestlé, AstraZeneca, and Xerox.

## Creating a mentoring culture

So, just how can today's savvy human resources professional promote a culture of coaching? The first step is to create an environment where mentoring can flourish. Here are some of the factors that need to exist:

- **Long-term commitment**—The former head of Organizational Effectiveness for Microsoft UK, Denise Mosawi, says, "When thinking about integrating coaching into your organization, it's important to appreciate that a one-off session for a group of employees in itself may not be enough to enhance performance and for employees to feel like they're operating on a different level." **Tip:** Ongoing efforts and continued follow-up improve results. Mosawi, who is the founder of Destineering, a Vancouver-based firm specializing in life coaching retreats, adds that ongoing one-on-one coaching needs to be made available, offering employees the opportunity to select someone who they feel entirely comfortable being open with and build a long-term coaching relationship.
- **A coaching advocate**—To bring people onside who might not be open to the idea of coaching, or who might roll their eyes at "the next HR initiative", there needs to

be a mentoring evangelist: someone who has personal experience with mentoring or coaching and can communicate its benefits in a positive way. This helps sustain coaching programs and increase the value of mentoring. **Tip:** If no coaching advocate exists, Bungay Stanier suggests finding a leader whose group is under pressure, and proposing coaching as a way to help change things, rather than to continue to dig furiously in the wrong hole. Test out what works and what does not, and create a credible story, with metrics, about how coaching was integrated.

- **Accountability**—At its heart, modern coaching techniques is about giving employees what business guru Peter Block calls "the responsibility of their own freedom." Personal and team accountability involves an ownership of goals, roles and action. **Tip:** Creating an organizational partnership between the organization and its managers and employees is not an overnight event; it takes time, patience, and courage. Managers need to be coached to engage employees, set challenges, foster trust by setting a positive tone, and distribute power by shared decision-making and shared credit for successes.
- **Business objectives**—Coaching should not be based purely on "fixing" a problem but should rather be about nurturing company objective-oriented human behaviour. All coaching and mentoring programs must be tied to a company's values and business goals. **Tip:** The company's objectives need to be written down at each level of the organization. HR coaches, or outsourced external coaches, can then define the impact coaching is to have: at senior, mid and frontline levels. This helps to create a unified focus and shared corporate vision. And, coaching can then be tailored to help improve competencies and support growth and change to meet these business objectives.
- **Metrics**—How to measure the return on coaching investment is often a contentious issue as human change is a complex process. Criteria must be in place to prevent effectiveness feedback from being purely subjective without any empirical measures. Mosawi advises capturing a "before and after" of individuals mindsets as well as feedback not only on the person being coached, but also directly from their teams as to how they see that person. The person being coached is then able to hold a mirror and view themselves as others see them. **Tip:** Intangibles, such as a mindset shift, need to be tied to tangible and measurable behavioural changes. In the end, human resources professionals must be able to establish how the participants felt about the coaching, what they learned, how they applied what they learned and what changes in results and productivity were observed. **E**

*A. Charlotte Riley is the owner of A.C. Riley Communications, a Montreal-based firm specializing in online content strategies, marketing, and search engine optimization. As a freelance business and marketing writer, Charlotte's work has been published in magazines across Canada, the United States, and Australia. Charlotte can be reached at info@acriley.com*