

People



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Dynamics

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By Michele Alexander



“The higher you go in an organisation, the lonelier it becomes,” says Hylton Bannon, Divisional General Manager of Toyota Tsusho Africa who heads up eight divisions in countries across the continent. “Every top executive also has developmental needs. You can become “stuck”. What coaching does is give you an opportunity to talk to someone who can help you become unstuck.”

When he took over leadership of the division, he knew that the company needed to do something different. “Strategic plans often fail at

implementation level. It’s all about human beings. How they interact. You can be efficient in terms of processes but people need to be fulfilled.” He found using an executive coach as a sounding board enormously valuable. “As a top executive, one of the challenges you face is people putting demands on your time. You can have 30 conversations in one day that vary across a variety of fields. I learnt how to compartmentalise. You need to be able to switch and give each person your complete and undivided attention. Coaching helped me achieve that.”

Over the past few years mentoring and coaching have become familiar buzz words in industry. The skills shortages, staff retention, diversity in organisations are all challenging issues and South African business is struggling to find solutions. Coaching and mentoring are seen as one possible solution. Its practitioners argue that unlike traditional forms of training, which rely on the formal transfer of skills and knowledge, mentoring and coaching focus on the individual's unique skills, capabilities and learning styles. They are carried out "on the job" and focus on real business issues. They provide one-on-one contact and make management and employees feel valued and connected. This enhances morale, motivation and reduces turnover. The directors of the Centre for Coaching affiliated to the UCT Graduate School of Business, Craig O'Flaherty and Janine Everson, say that many blue chips are seeing the value of making coaching and mentoring accessible not only to the elite but across the board in the whole organisation.

But what exactly is the difference between a coach and a mentor? Everson says that coaching is a one-on-one relationship with someone who is in your corner. The coach doesn't fix the problem or give direct advice but can give you a new perspective on how to look at the problem, help you see outside your box. O'Flaherty gives the example of a manager who felt his burnout problem was related to his work. "I asked him what if this problem was related to a lack of commitment to what he did. The dialogue then completely changed to the issue of commitment and not stress."

The role of a mentor is slightly different. "The mentor is someone who offers direct advice and guidance because the mentee values her or his experience, wisdom and life stories, and many companies are seeing the value of both approaches," says Everson.

One such organisation is Kimberly-Clark of South Africa. William Steenkamp, Customer Management Director has undergone coaching himself. The company has rolled out an internal mentoring programme because it believes this is a way of addressing the need for skills. Steenkamp says, "Because of the skills shortage in South Africa we often find individuals are promoted quickly to fill gaps in an organisation. While they may have the technical skill, they often lack experience and the softer, interpersonal and leadership skills. When our staff are faced with difficult decisions or situations, their interaction with mentors or coaches has led to better decision making."

Internationally accredited coach, Cindy Bell of DIRECTIONS explains why coaching or mentoring can reduce staff turnover, "I believe that the talent in an organisation is within each individual. Developing and recognising individual value not only addresses skills gaps but also encourages a feeling of belonging and appreciation, which will lead to talent retention"

Barry Pogrund, Partner at MGI Bass Gordon (Chartered Accountants) undertook coaching and says he is open to things that will allow him to grow. One of the key changes for him was learning to pay attention to what he was feeling and expressing it instead of bottling everything up. "I am learning to speak out in a non-confrontational way about what needs to be aired. Coaching has had an impact on the way I deal with my partners, staff and clients."

One of the keys to coaching is helping individuals "self-observe", that is, showing them ways to understand themselves, their behaviour and that of others says O'Flaherty. "We give them exercises that help them think of ways to change and do things differently. The end goal is to make them self-sufficient, not dependent on a coach."

Pogrund says, "It is up to the people who are being coached how much they get out of it. The match must be a happy and safe one. Confidentiality between a coach and a coachee is vital as you are placing your soul in the palm of that coach, so there must be trust and respect." Bell believes that if you don't have the trust of a client, the process will break down. "One must be very honest upfront and agree about what will be shared at an organisational level. If you create a space where they feel really safe then the real gems happen in terms of their own realisations."

Coaching and mentoring is a relatively new concept, but has now moved from being a fad into an industry. The problem with this fast growth is that there has been a proliferation of people practising in an industry where no minimum standards have been set.

Dale Williams, National President of COMENSA (Coaches and Mentors of SA) says that the field of coaching is still being defined worldwide. However, his organisation is working both locally with the Coach Trainers Association of SA and internationally with the Global Convention of Coaching to come up with minimum standards of competency that will be in line with SETA requirements. They have also set up a forum with companies to find out what has worked for them and share best practices. "Ultimately we want coaches to be accepted as professionals. If they are members of COMENSA, we have an education and complaints process if members breach our ethics code. This provides business members of COMENSA with recourse," says Williams.

Coaching is still perceived by many as an expensive training option and difficult to measure in terms of impact. But Bannon believes there is no doubt about the benefit to the company. "The return on investment can be seen in the increase in performance

in a business. We look at how employee satisfaction has improved as well as increasing customer satisfaction and this equals better business."

He is rolling out coaching to the executives of all his divisions in Africa and has already introduced it at second tier level of senior management in South Africa. "As a global company we are dealing with such cultural diversity but the philosophy of coaching bypasses cultural differences."

Steenkamp believes that internal coaching and mentoring programmes are a relatively cheap form of training as in most cases it is using management time. The development of staff should be a key function of management.

So can mentoring and coaching help the leadership skills crisis in South Africa? According to those who have directly experienced it, there is no doubt these methods can make a contribution. Pogrund says, "A lot of issues in our country are communication issues. Our youth don't have enough education at school and tertiary levels in professional communication and life skills. Coaching can help with the lack of these skills."

Bannon says, "It will be of great value for the new South Africa. It addresses how we talk and communicate to each other. It increases a competence that can be used in any field."

The Centre for Coaching believes competitive advantage is gained not so much through organisational and technical solutions, but through human interaction. "That's where coaching plays such a magnificent role because you are working with how people engage with other people," says O'Flaherty. 