

Competency Based Coaching¹

Introduction

In the world of cut-throat competition today the reality for business organizations is two-fold. First is to get outcome driven and second is to keep the workforce prepared who lead to those outcomes. This task however is not that simple as it appears. Firstly, in this VUCA world where traditional employment relationships are changing and new ones are emerging leading to creation of new kinds of jobs and employment relationships, there is a need to reskill and upskill the workforce in a different manner than as it used to happen. Secondly, with technological tsunami occurring globally and making all possible information available instantly, the battle for all kinds of organizations have an equal playing field where differentiator is going to be how role related competencies are identified, mapped with role incumbents and developed proactively. Thirdly, increasing roles and responsibilities placed on the manager and the uncertain world and work relationships may not exactly allow managers to perform to their potential and as a result get disengaged.

All three challenges call for one common requirement which is competency building of the workforce.

This need for competency development amongst the workforce has led to new kind of awareness regarding coaching as a development tool which facilitates competency building related to leadership roles, performance management, succession planning and inculcation of effective behaviours in other critical roles. Coaching also responds to the challenge to keep high performers work to their strengths and enables creation of an environment where high performers find work and working a joy and something which they look forward to.

When an employee joins in management cadre he is hired to manage a particular function or activity. Then, later managers are supposed to act as leaders and in addition to managing they are supposed to provide vision and mission and direction and right environment where his team may reach its full potential by creating right synergy. Leaders are also supposed to have a say in talent acquisition, development, engagement and retention. How can all this be possible? Answer is leader is to act as a coach. What would a coach do in today's competitive scenario? When he has a team of people with complimentary skills, he has to ensure that team players develop their skills, feel motivated and satisfied and also needs to facilitate

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creation of an environment where team members feel they are empowered and are able to utilize their competencies. This would lead to a consequence where such team members stay in the organization and contribute for a long term.

Such efforts require developmental programmes for leaders to act as effective coaches for their team members.

Understanding Coaching

Coaching is one of the fastest growing profession in the world today. However, its roots can be traced to time of Aristotle, Socrates, Gestalt theory and ontology while at the most basic level coaching may be considered as a conversation. Coaching is the process of using wisdom to help individuals experience and work through the changes required of them. A coach, by definition, helps individuals grow and improve their performance by providing suggestions and encouragement. Coaching is different from managing or leading and may be considered as a process that enhances competencies of individuals and teams. These competencies may vary from management and leadership skills to performance and even those required to live life effectively. Coaching may be considered as directive, but it's not about giving direction – that's for the client/coachee to explore for themselves. As coach one's role is to assist, challenge, give clarity, and encourage possibilities and opportunities. This helps the client/coachee build the confidence, motivation and independence to learn to self-coach and take responsibility for their continued long-term development. The approaches one takes as a coach — inspiring, correcting, exploring — are based on coach's assessment of context and individual's potential.

Starr (2017) defines coaching as “Coaching is a less directive style of conversation that encourages people to think and decide for themselves. An effective coach uses heightened levels of key skills such as listening, questioning, reflection and feedback. When managers coach people effectively, they create a positive impact on their performance, engagement and on their ongoing development.”

Holliday (2001) differentiated between coaching, mentoring and counselling. Role of a coach is to help client build his competencies and as a consequence keep him satisfied and motivated, and, most importantly in this competitive environment retain such talent. Mentor, by definition, is an individual with advanced experience and knowledge who is committed to giving support and career/job advice to a less experienced person. Counseling is a supportive process to define and correct personal problems or competencies that affect performance. The counsellor rectifies behaviours and provides direction and discipline as needed.

Coaching helps to find answers on “*what’s in it for me*” for the workforce. What’s in it for him is simple: excellence, doing his best, reaching his potential. Coaching means that people can achieve their goals and take their jobs and careers where they want. But, one vital point is that coaching is not an ability one may be born with.

Coaching is high-level leadership; it’s communicating the what, the why and then helping with the how — whether behavioural or attitudinal. Coaches push people and encourage them to push themselves to the highest possible performance. Human Resource professionals may find coaching an excellent tool to develop people.

Jones and Gorell (2009) provided insights into need for effective goal setting in coaching conversations and different types of coaching. They asserted that, “Goal setting is the driving force in a coaching session and can make the difference between the mediocre and the outstanding. Most clients will find that they start to think much more clearly about potential solutions when they have absolute clarity on where they want to get to.....At a simple level there are two types of coaching: remedial and generative. Remedial coaching seeks to help resolve a problem that the client is having. Generative coaching is more focused on increased performance and potential. A coaching relationship can cover both aspects: once the client has resolved their problem and starts to experience progress, they can then focus on how to be even better.”

Adkins (2010) discussed 10 abilities of agile coach specially when coaching teams:

- They are effectively able to “read a room”, i.e. read the emotion in the air and know whether everything is moving in right direction.
- They care about people more than products.
- They cultivate curiosity. They know what they are ignorant about and as such they don’t know what people are thinking or feeling, and they don’t know why things are as they are in present shape. So they don’t hesitate asking.
- They believe in basic goodness of people; they know the hard cases exist. But they believe that even the most difficult people are good from inside, perhaps just a little behind on the road to being a full human being.
- They know that plans may fail, so they act in the moment with the team, rather than holding on to any one idea as to how situation may work best.
- They have a thirst for learning.

- They believe that in group capabilities as well; they have a firm belief that any group of people can do good things in the world; they believe excellence exists and is worth pursuing.
- They do not have high tolerance for institutional reasons that hold people back from excellence, the ones that “just are because they have always been.”
- They believe that disequilibrium is essential. They believe that chaos, destruction and moving away from what existed are simply building blocks for something better.
- They risk themselves being wrong. When they are wrong, they own up to it, learn from it and move on.

Areas in Coaching

Following are some areas on which one wants clarity and direction and, thus, coach may help client in exploring any or each one of these:

- Personal or life Coaching
- Career Coaching
- Performance Coaching
- Leadership Coaching
- Team Coaching
- Succession Coaching

Personal Coaching

Personal or life coach may help person gain awareness and clarity regarding their personal goals or priorities in life, and in process facilitate better self-management through improved thought & emotion management and empower him to take necessary actions to change quality of their lives and ensure success and fulfilment in life. It may involve clarifying vision of life, one’s values & goals both long term and short term and setting and follow up of action plans towards achieving the goals.

Career Coaching

Career coaching which is becoming increasingly popular may involve what an individual expects from his career, the options available with him and decisions required to meet those career expectations and to take actions needed to accomplish those career goals with the help of coach.

Performance Coaching

Performance coaching may be considered as a process by which through appropriate interventions involving effective questioning, active listening and working on action plans coach helps client in performance improvement.

Leadership Coaching

Leadership coaching is effective for those people who have been identified with potential to occupy leadership roles or positions in near future. Goal of such coaching is to explore leadership competencies required for the future role and how to develop those for the particular individual. Such leadership competencies may include development of vision, strategic planning process, relationship management, dealing with team, conflict management, facilitating cultural change within unit/department/ organization to name a few.

Team Coaching

Team coach works with team players as well as team leader to identify team vision, team mission, strategies and competencies required to succeed in team task/project/assignment. Team players may be coached individually/collectively/individually as well as collectively as to how to play their roles effectively and achieve team goals. Here, ultimate task of coach is to develop synergy and promote team effectiveness by realization of team work and collaborative competencies that team may be equipped which individual team members may never realize.

Succession Coaching

Succession planning and thereafter coaching for succession may guide organizations in locating potential leaders for senior management roles and then preparing such individuals for getting equipped with competencies required to be displayed in that role. This may work better when these roles need to be filled internally and would require chalking out of development plan for such high potential individuals before initiating coaching conversations.

Understanding Competency

Competency is described as a set of knowledge, skills and abilities that directly influence an employee's job performance.

Competency has its roots in latin word 'competentia' which denotes 'authorized to judge' as well as 'has right to speak' (Caupin *et al.*, 2006). It became widely known in management

field through work of Boyatzis in 1982. Boyatzis (1982, 2008) defined competency as, “*an underlying characteristic of the person that leads to or causes effective or superior performance...A competency is defined as a capability or ability. It is a set of related but different sets of behavior organized around an underlying construct, which we call the “intent”. The behaviors are alternate manifestations of the intent, as appropriate in various situations or times.*”

Spencer & Spencer (1993) defined a competency as “*an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation*”. Underlying characteristic means the competency is a fairly deep and enduring part of a person’s personality and can predict behaviour in a wide variety of situations and job tasks. Causally-related means that a competency causes or predicts behaviour and performance. Criterion-referenced means that the competency actually predicts who does something well or poorly, as measured on a specific criterion or standard. Characteristics of a person can be seen as an iceberg split up into two parts: one is visible and includes knowledge and skills, and the other is hidden and comprises self-concept, trait or motive. According to Spencer & Spencer “behaviour without intent does not define a competency.”

Dubois (1993) proposed that competencies are those characteristics—knowledge, skills, mindsets, thought patterns, and when such characteristics are used either singularly or in various combinations, leads to successful performance.

Parry (1998) asserted that competencies may be understood as a cluster of related knowledge, attitude and skills that influenced a considerable part of one’s jobs, correlated with performance on the job and may be *improved through training and development*.

Competency Based Coaching

The main focus in such process is for the client/coachee on maintaining and, where possible, making even greater use of his competencies. Typical questions for coach may be:

- How are you currently using your competencies?
- How useful is it in this situation?
- What scope do you have to use it more?
- What specifically can you do to use it more?

Competency based performance coaching

It is a known fact that high performing individuals have achieved success due to their competencies. Competency based coaching may lead to enhanced executive effectiveness by following certain principles and processes. Such competencies may be organization specific, role specific or task specific. Again, these competencies need to be identified and developed through coaching interventions.

Competencies may not be based on one-size-fits-all approach but need to be context specific and the expertise of coach lies in understanding and assessing that context and working with client to help him develop those competencies relevant to that particular context. Here, the role of coach is to connect well with client and help him explore such critical competencies needed to excel in his role and the path he (client) needs to take to build those competencies.

Coach needs to collect all relevant information required to assess critical competencies and then needs to work on the existing competency gaps both quantitative and qualitative and wherever he discovers the client lacking such competencies he needs to work with client draw an action plan to build on those lacking abilities. Such information may be available from executive's continuing projects.

In such situations, what the effective coaches may do in their conversations:

1. **Establishment of clear expectations from clients that are in alignment with the organization's vision, mission and goals:** The best coaches may have collaborative dialogues with executives/leaders to clarify competency requirements and then may help them define a path ahead.
2. **Coaches may develop focused and future-oriented coaching conversations:** Competency based coaching may be oriented towards future as past performance may provide relevant insights into gaps and way forward for future. Conversations may be focused, forward looking, positive and future-flavoured. Feedback may even be very specific and may give learnings on competency gaps based on examples of past projects or assignments. Such conversations need to be frequent to allow proper inculcation of right set of competencies.
3. **Coach needs to provide development oriented goals in front of clients:** Coaches may hold clients accountable for their own development strategies and provide them with insights as to what behaviours they need to work upon or change.

Case study 1

Executive M (name changed) was working as Vice President (Operations) with an enterprise in India. During one coaching session, he mentioned that he (M) wants to be an effective leader.

Later, he reflected on competencies of an effective leader and mentioned in conversation that leaders need to be visionary, need to have competencies related to influencing, communicating and connecting well with team members. In one coaching session, M reflected that he felt that competencies related to influencing, communicating and connecting well together were related to relationship management which was a sensitive issue specially in Indian context and he added that one needed to be diplomatic many times and also needed to manage employee feedback in effective way such that relationships were not strained. M added that other competencies leaders need to build were related to analytical ability and risk-taking.

Later, during conversations M confessed that he felt that as he was not able to put things in a diplomatic way and rather communicated feedback in a more straight forward way and as such he was not able to manage relationships well and needed to relate to team members in a better way.

Coaching conversation helped him to work on his competencies of self-awareness where he chalked out plans to communicate well, connect with team members well and influence them for better outcomes.

Case study 2

Executive P(name changed) was a senior middle level executive with a medium sized corporation Y (name changed) in India, having 17 years of professional experience. His professional growth was limited and he came to coaching to get assistance on required leadership competencies to move to next level in his career and to allow him to facilitate making decisions regarding his career issues. During the discovery phase, questioning tools were used to clarify issues on which the executive would like to focus during next 6 months at coaching session. He was in self-doubt about his competencies of being too kind and generous as hindrance to being a good leader and moving to next higher level in his career.

During the awareness phase, the coaching process was focused on visioning, gap analysis and reframing of perspectives in which P was deeply engaged as part of coaching conversations. Executive P was encouraged to reflect on his existing competencies and his consequences

against future vision he was formulating. Executive reflected that he was 'too simple a person' and he was rejected from being selected to top management position when he applied to another organization Z ('too simple a person' was the exact feedback he received from organization Z where he applied for top management position). In initial coaching conversations he (P) was in self-doubt about his competencies of being too kind and generous but during the phase of awareness he rediscovered that competencies of a good leader never meant exclusion of goodness and kind-heartedness.

During the action phase, P decided to focus on competencies that researchers indicate leaders should have and that he was not going to change his traits/values that he 'naturally' possessed that enabled him to inculcate competencies related to trust and credibility in him. In general, main focus on subsequent discussion remained focused on to do list, specially how to improve on leadership competencies as well as some further exploration of competencies he was not aware of or that he might develop to work as effective leader and take his career to next level.

Future of coaching

Coaching as a profession is likely to grow in our country in near future. Last few years have seen change of perception as to how organizations have viewed coaching. Earlier coaching was seen more as a remedial option to correct or shape behaviour at workplace. But that only worked as an interim measure only. Unless and until an individual sees self-management as well as relationship management as an essential step to growth in his present or future role coaching may provide limited results only. As this was happening earlier, coaching efforts were not proving very fruitful in India.

As time progressed and organizations began to change the way they used to learn, as traditional jobs started vanishing and new employment relationships started emerging coaching started to emerge as a tool to shape careers of people by carving out career paths and helping in succession planning for organizations as well.

Coaching is even proving as a good option for developing leaders, as organizations have realized leadership development needs support of external coaches to understand their behaviour patterns & competencies. Such emerging leaders in organizations are opting for coaching. Further, in today's context, even young professionals are realizing that emotional intelligence competencies may not only be relevant to succeed in leadership roles but may be critical to succeed in life. Result has been that coaching has also been emerging to cater to professionals at personal level and life and career coaches have been on demand as well. From being considered as a cost, coaching has transformed itself into an effective

development tool and as a long term investment for development of an individual and a means of ensuring successful personal and professional life.

The organizations who want to opt for coaching are also transforming at a fast pace. Where earlier, coaching was more opted for by MNCs as executives in senior roles were coached for relevant competencies, now even Indian organizations have started to opt for coaching to ensure leadership development at all levels and growth of their high performers.

Even start ups in India are opting for coaching to ensure role-competency alignment as well as fast paced development of managers in critical roles. It has also worked in start-ups for effective team building as well.

Family business is another market where coaches are going to be required in large numbers. Managing family businesses and maintaining family businesses with a professional flavour where coaches can play an effective role is what is increasing in demand. This may extend to building newer breed of leaders in such businesses, facilitate succession planning in a more organized way with a coach.

Goldsmith (2013) says anyone in life can function as a coach. Only criteria for picking a coach should be that it should not be a chore for coach to get in touch with client and coach should be interested in client's life and needs to have best interests at heart.

However, authors feel that relevant development and certification programmes for coaches, to function as 'effective coaches,' may go a long way in developing coaching competencies.

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