

CASE STUDY 17: DEVELOPING COACHES AND COACHING STAFF

**VERONICA BARNES, HEAD OF LEARNING AND
ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, THE OPEN UNIVERSITY**

The Open University (OU) has embraced coaching over the last decade or so, primarily for senior managers taking up a new role or those joining the University. External executive coaches have been contracted for this type of coaching. This exposure to coaching, coupled with the development of its practice has seen it used more widely as a development tool in the University. Consequently, coaching is now integral to the management style being encouraged within the University. It is used to support management development programmes, and is provided for individual staff, whatever their role, where there is an identified need.

Coaching is now recognised as an academically acceptable form of staff development and an efficient and effective development tool. Coaching has become an essential part of the Learning and Organisational Development Department's (Learning & OD) offering. External executive coaches, sourced by the Head of Learning & OD, continue to be engaged to help senior managers as necessary, typically for a time limited period. Additionally, all managers across the University are encouraged to use a coaching style with their staff. Bite size development sessions are provided to highlight the opportunities for short, sharp coaching interventions. These offer a safe space to practise the listening and questioning skills that are vital to any coaching intervention.

Coaching really started to permeate the OU when in 2009 the Learning & OD Department implemented an innovative management development programme for middle managers. Learning on this programme was reinforced by one-to-one coaching. The objective of this coaching was to support participants in translating their learning from the modules into their specific work context. The University, however, did not have the trained coaches necessary to take on this task. It was therefore decided that it would be more cost effective to develop coaches from amongst its own internal staff rather than to contract external coaches.

After an extensive tendering process an external training organisation was selected as the most suitable provider to develop the internal coaches as they demonstrated the strong academic underpinnings that are valued within the OU's academic culture. The training organisation offered a fully blended experience. The programme considered what coaching is in general terms and also in the context of this programme. It considered core skills, directive and non-directive approaches, coaching models, ethical issues and most importantly provided opportunities for practice. The one-to-one supervision provided was highly valued by the organisation and the participants.

Applications to join the programme were invited from across the University. A robust selection process was devised, using current best practice guidelines, to ensure that only the 'right' participants were selected as coaches. This consisted of three stages:

1. An initial application form, requiring applicants to set out three substantial reasons for wanting to take the programme and together with the approval of line managers.
2. An online self-assessment of an applicant's core coaching competence, together with an online questionnaire on current coaching practice or experience.
3. A selection interview.

It was important to ensure that trainee coaches had some understanding of coaching and were already committed to gaining the benefits of using a coaching style. They needed to be fully prepared to undertake the 50 hours study required by this programme. Critically, they also needed to demonstrate evidence of a 'coaching attitude'. The successful participants were required to coach two delegates over the duration of their management development programme (five coaching sessions each). They were also expected and encouraged to use coaching conversations within their own teams. They might also use this with colleagues, which could help to cascade a coaching approach in day to day interactions, thereby supporting a coaching culture. Feedback from coachees and coaches alike was very positive. To date five coaching programmes have been delivered, providing the University with 50 internal coaches. The internal coaches are now coaching staff right across the University. Managers may recommend whoever they feel might benefit from coaching. Sometimes members of staff self-identify their need for coaching. After discussions to ensure that coaching is indeed the appropriate intervention, applicants are matched with a suitable coach. Six coaching sessions are usually offered. Sometimes this includes a three-way conversation to include the manager. This aims to ensure that the objectives and outcomes of the coaching are jointly understood.

On-going support for the internal coaches has now been developed. This includes:

1. Where feasible the University supports further coaching development through qualifications, short courses, conferences or seminars.
2. In 2011 the 'Open University's Coaches' Network' was launched. This provides CPD support for the coaches as well as providing a networking forum. The Network is designed to bring together those coaches who have taken the Coaching Programme and other qualified coaches from across the University. It offers quarterly events to include speakers and/or some CPD activities. It also provides an opportunity to meet fellow coaches.

3. Coaching supervision is 'the formal process of professional support which ensures continuing development of the coach and effectiveness of his/her coaching practice' (Bachkirova, Stevens and Willis, 2005). One-to-one and group supervision is now offered to all 'active' internal coaches. Our bespoke definition of supervision is 'A formal process of professional support in a trusting and supportive relationship. It ensures continuing development, sharing of experience and effectiveness of the coaches' practice within the ethos and culture of the OU' (Barnes, 2013).
4. Refresher coaching sessions, primarily for coaches who have taken a break from active coaching. These are very cost effective and also reassuring for the coaches who leave inspired and eager to coach.

Coaching development at the Open University has not only provided a sound and professional foundation for the development of coaches but has also enabled individual staff across the university to experience the empowering characteristics of coaching. The coaches and coachees provide evidence of the difference coaching makes which is having a cascade effect across the University. More individuals either want to develop as coaches or feel that being coached would support them. By nurturing the coaches through the ways discussed above the university can maximise its investment, improve performance and increase contribution of staff which all adds value to the success of the Open University.

REFERENCES

- Bachkirova, T., Stevens, P. and Willis, P. (2005) *Coaching Supervision*. Oxford: Oxford Brookes Coaching & Mentoring Society.
- Barnes, V. (2013) 'Case Study: Nurturing Internal Coaches at the Open University', *The OCM Coach Mentor Journal*, 13: 26–8.