

C⁴ – COORDINATED COACHING FOR CULTURE CHANGE

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Executive Summary

Executive coaching has been growing in popularity for several years now. Once used primarily to keep talented egoists from self-destructing at critical junctures in their careers, it is now often used to support high performers committed to personal learning and growth. In both cases the goal is to address their blind spots, the behaviors that impede information flow, relationship-building, trust, and productivity. Coaching is a uniquely effective tool for creating deep self-awareness, accountability, and change. And when leaders make small changes in the ways they work, the ripple effect can lead to big changes in the culture.

Culture change has been a major issue for organizations large and small for the last couple of decades, as changing external conditions demanded new behaviors in order to succeed. Many if not most change efforts have withered on the vine, or fallen short of their intention to transform the ways that work gets done and external relationships are managed. Remember Quality? Business Process Reengineering?

As the economy continues tumbling headfirst into the digital age, this need for new behaviors will only become more significant. This article proposes that coaching can be used as one of the most powerful – and underutilized – tools for effective culture change, and describes an approach for introducing coaching as a culture change tool into your organization.

The approach is a coordinated coaching for culture change (C⁴) strategy that helps ensure change takes place at multiple leadership levels and reaches across functions and roles to all the individuals in the organization. The process ensures that individuals are in alignment with the mission, values and core commitments of the organization, which gives them greater credibility and effectiveness in the eyes of all stakeholders.

With multiple levels of coaching, as individuals change, the ways they observe and understand their organization begin to change as well. But if the change were at the individual level alone, it could easily evaporate as those individuals left the organization. Changes in culture must be embedded in the very processes and systems that make up the functional life of the organization. Issues such as customer relationships, vendor relationships, reward systems, and hiring practices naturally surface and are attended to. This trust-based change is both organic and self-organized, and even more critical, it is both local and organization-wide. Once embedded in the organization's culture, these skills of self-awareness affect how communications occur, how relationships are reinforced, and how systemic change is reinforced and naturally regenerated. Since C⁴ both leads and reinforces systemic change, it can be effectively leveraged anywhere along the culture change continuum of an organization.



The C⁴ Approach

C⁴ is designed to help organizations develop, instill and reinforce the behaviors that generate cultures of ability -- responsibility, accountability and flexibility. What is culture? Culture is the DNA of an organization, a community, a tribe, a nation – the invisible strands of interlocking bits of behavior, beliefs, preferences and aspirations that create the gestalt of the whole. It is the flavor of the soup in which each individual resides and each decision is made. It determines which possibilities are visible and which are invisible.

Changing an organization's culture requires a shift in organizational perception, a new way in which the organization observes itself, its customers and its environment, both economic and social. Culture change efforts over the last couple of decades have largely followed one of two scenarios, both of which deeply reflect the ways we think about organizations and organizational behavior. What is proposed in this article is both a new metaphor and a new strategy. Instead of the traditional machine and military metaphors that have dominated organizational thinking for the last fifty years, the new metaphor is that of the living organism and its fundamental building blocks. drawn from nature.

In Scenario A, the Battlefield Approach, top management perceives a threat to their survival and sequesters itself in an on-going conversation about changing market (battle) conditions. Convinced that their people need to change their ways in order for the organization to prevail, they hire consultants, plan extensively, develop training programs and roll out to the troops the message about the new ways everyone is expected to behave.

These efforts rarely succeed: in their battlefield mentality, leadership operates on a “need to know” basis and fails to adequately communicate the need for the change. In addition, leadership often fails to understand that they must adopt the new behaviors themselves, thereby completing the misalignment and ensuring the effort’s collapse. For every successful Business Process Reengineering or Quality story, there are dozens like this.

In Scenario B, the Quiet Mutiny, middle managers consciously or unconsciously recognize the need for new behaviors and make it safe within their part of the organization to act in those ways. With sufficient success, other parts of the organization begin to take notice and adopt some of the same approaches. Finally leadership recognizes the pockets of success and begins at least to pay lip service to what has already happened.

While these efforts are more successful than the A scenario, they rarely result in a consistent and thorough introduction of the new values and behaviors – the new culture –throughout the organization. The alignment isn’t complete, so that although there has been sufficient critical mass to move the organization forward, it does not result in an in-depth culture change of the sort required to sustain transformation, and the organization never fully adopts or aligns with the transformational manager’s goals.

There is no question that machine/military metaphors have been useful tools for managing at large hierarchical organizations over the last 50-75 years. In today’s highly Webbed world, with its proliferation of smaller, more dynamic and nimble business competitors, however, business thinkers are observing that such metaphors deeply limit our understanding of what is possible, and indeed, of what is actually happening in even large organizations today. This dilemma becomes clear as the marketplace today becomes increasingly divided between traditional bricks-and-mortar businesses and the new digital economy. The C⁴ approach can be used to help organizations change the ways they perceive themselves internally and how, in turn, they are perceived in the marketplace.



Details of the C⁴ Strategy

The use of coordinated coaching efforts to help initiate and reinforce culture changes is a natural outgrowth of the widespread use of coaching in the last few years. Key elements of several recent successful variations on the C⁴ approach include:

- ◆ an initial issue or “presenting symptom”;
- ◆ the culture audit -- an analysis of current and desired organizational metaphors, cultural attributes and leadership practices;

- ◆ development of broadly shared goals for the kind of culture that will allow the organization to excel in today's economy;
- ◆ identification of what is inconsistent with those goals in the current culture;
- ◆ building awareness through coaching of the behaviors and attributes needed for the desired culture change;
- ◆ coaching to a set of fundamental behaviors – core actions that consistently increase interpersonal effectiveness and reduce communication breakdowns;
- ◆ reinforcement of those behaviors through public leadership accountability; and
- ◆ sufficient time invested in the coaching process to allow absorption at the behavioral level of the needed attributes.

Coaching by its very nature adapts to each leader and organizational culture, yet there are strategic aspects that all these efforts share. First, multiple coaches are deployed. This seeds the same messages throughout the organization simultaneously. Instead of a series of management pronouncements or fads, people experience a gently growing awareness of what needs to be done differently – and how to do it. Multiple leaders experiencing the same “aha” around the same time creates a synergistic effect on the overall change effort, and provides a sense of shared learning and community that helps to reinforce the needed behavior changes.

The coaches meet regularly to coordinate insights and actions to ensure consistency with the desired culture change outcomes. This allows them to track changes at the systems level over time, and amplify or reinforce them as needed. Each program starts with senior managers within the organization, who are coached both privately and publicly (their reports know they are being coached). This models a positive “walk the talk” message between managers and their staffs, eliminating a lot of the traditional “my manager doesn't do it, why should I?” resistance to the learning/change process.

Coaching sessions often include “shadowing” of coachees or sitting in on meetings. This enables coaches to hold coachees to higher levels of accountability, since use of the behaviors being taught is observable. In addition, being so close to the action, a coach can anticipate and often provide “just-in-time” delivery of new skills prior to or even during the meetings in a safe way. The core set of skills the coachees are introduced to include verbal and non-verbal behaviors developed from the concepts of both speech acts and neurolinguistic programming.

Coaching starts with immediate work issues, which means coachees do not experience it as “wasted” time or a distraction from work efforts. Over time, as results of the coaching became obvious, other people in the organization begin asking for coaching or training. In most cases, coachees also begin to share their learning with colleagues and reports.

Examples

Three case histories of current or recent coaching projects will demonstrate the power of a coordinated coaching approach: a large, traditional computer services company, an extremely successful, cutting-edge Silicon Valley organization, and a small, family-owned technical services business.

Profile #1

This division of a computer services company had been acquired ten years earlier, but prided itself on having maintained a far more entrepreneurial spirit than the parent company. With three changes in top leadership in as many years, accountability was beginning to be a serious issue. The division head requested help for himself and his direct reports in building more consistency and responsibility into the way they did business.

The overall span of this coaching project was about a year. Coaching was in three-month increments, beginning with the division president and three of his direct reports. The coaching model in this case was “shadow coaching” – following the coachee through his or her day and observing behavior, as well as one-on-one sessions.

After the first three months ended, a second group of coachees was added, and again after the third. The shadow coaching aspect, however, enabled a much broader span of involvement. Because the coachees were often in meetings together, after sufficient trust was established, it became possible to coach publicly in meetings.

Many of the coachees’ direct reports thus heard the coaching. As a result, when the coachees’ behavior slipped, they got direct feedback from their reports – “You’re not doing what your coach told you.” This dramatically increased levels of accountability (the culture change goal), and allowed the coachees to ask for the same behaviors from their reports as well.

In addition, when the coaches were present, it was observed that levels of communication were much higher. Many subjects deemed undiscussable by employees could be raised if one of the coaches was present. Further, other managers not originally slotted for coaching came forward to request it for themselves: “I don’t know what you’re doing with him, but it’s really making a difference and I think I’d benefit from some of the same.” This self-organizing shift from a “push” system to a “pull” system helped to make the needed behavior changes around accountability desirable and sustainable throughout the organization.

Profile #2

This technical support center of an extremely successful, cutting-edge Silicon Valley organization has had on-going coaching resources for senior staff members for three years. Like many fast-paced business environments, this organization is interrupt-

driven, and the coaching delivery here has played to that characteristic, being delivered in a flexible, on-the-run fashion.

Initial conversations with leadership in the organization indicated a need to shift from a “performance culture” to a “learning culture.” This meant shifting from just measuring how satisfied the customer was to equally measuring how and what was being learned, both to satisfy technical people’s strong learning needs and to keep a positive framework around their continuous (and often exhausting) problem-solving activities. A key part of the strategy for doing this was to get managers to teach or mentor the core behaviors of listening, relationship-building and verbal and non-verbal communication (use of metaphor, noticing behavior, matching behavior, etc.)

Getting commitment from managers to support the mentoring process took time and had to be evolved organically over a period of several months. With coaches on-site regularly, on-going “hallway” coaching support is live and ensures that the commitment is acted upon. In addition, ties to the reward system have been analyzed (with HR representatives paying special attention to shifts in language and team learning), a website has been initiated with “best practices” to be used as a reference by new hires and, in general, the technical support center has reported a new level of awareness for balancing both business process and relationship management.

Profile #3

This small, highly profitable high-tech business is family-owned. Top leadership (two brother-owners and the (unrelated) president) recognized a need to do things differently in order to cope with growth and their increasingly diverse workforce, although they were resistant to major culture change – they just wanted things to work better.

The process started with workshops for mid-level managers and then led into coaching for eight people, managers through executives. Leadership was accustomed to a command and control approach and simultaneously frustrated by having to micromanage. The focus was on their behaviors around making clear requests and getting solid agreements with one another and with their staff. In all cases, day-to-day situations encountered by coachees kept the coaching relevant and tied to current issues.

Over the course of a year, with coaching supplemented by staff training (requested by coached managers), and some reinforcement by shadowing executives at staff meetings, trust and communication levels began to rise. The top executives were able to begin an important dialogue that resulted in a major reorganization, playing to everyone’s strengths and preferences. Their direct reports began to take risks and become more accountable, which was one goal of the coaching for those who reported to senior management.

Close coordination and sharing of information among the coaches enabled a clear picture of organizational strengths and challenges to emerge. This picture informed the changes that ensued and provided key data to the organization while respecting the privacy of the coach/coachee relationship. The final result was both an organization that “works better” and a significant culture change for that organization.



Conclusion

Coordinated coaching programs provide a unique catalytic agent for instituting system-level culture change, one person at a time. While the C⁴ approach does not have the visibility of traditional high-profile change efforts, it can quietly accomplish as much or more in the same or shorter periods of time. This is because of the synergy inherent in combining coach/coachee trust, the “just-in-time” coaching experience, and the information coordination and system overview that results from having multiple coaches involved. In fact, because the C⁴ approach doesn’t have high visibility, at least initially, there is less skepticism or discounting (“Here’s yet another ‘management fad of the month!’”) in organizations.

Such an approach builds high levels of trust within the organization, initially through the coaching process, and eventually through the leadership dialogue the process inevitably begins to generate. Such a trust-based change process is both organic (as opposed to imposed) and self-organized (as opposed to designed). It retains the best of the current culture even as it helps the organization to learn, grow and adapt positively to current business realities.

About the Author:

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