

Creating a Coaching Ready Culture for Internal Coaches in an Asian Context

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Sooner or later, as coaching becomes increasingly a part of your organisation's culture, you will be faced with the question: Are we ready for internal coaches? About forty HR professionals considered this question in Lee Hecht Harrison Coaching Forum last month. Here are some of our take-away thoughts from that dialogue.

In the high "context", collective societies of Asia, group harmony and the preservation of one's status and position in the community is paramount. For this reason, exchanges between people in Asian society and workplaces rely on well established, trusted relationships that promise to preserve status and an individual's 'face'. Unlike the low context, individualistic societies of the west, where learning from mistakes is almost a badge of honour, in the east, coaching, with its premise of learning from open experimentation and evaluation, poses Asians with a dilemma: "How do I enter into an open process of learning with a coach without risking loss of face?" The dilemma is even sharper when confronted with an internal coach they may work with everyday.



'Face' may explain why Asian cultures are more comfortable with a Mentor/Sage definition of coaching than with a facilitative definition of coaching. The mentor/sage role reinforces the cultural paradigms around respect for seniors and receiving wisdom. Though receiving knowledge through mentoring is an important way to pass on organizational intelligence, mentoring makes limited demands on the individual to experiment and learn through experience. Coaching does more to draw out an individual's creative and productive capacity, and build a person's capacity to take the initiative.

How then, do we create a coaching culture, especially for internal coaches, in an Asian cultural context?

Globalization is already doing some of the work by changing the operating values of company cultures. Already, coaching finds a natural home in the more 'global' companies where continuous learning from experimentation and innovation is an expected practice. Nevertheless, for the individual born and raised in an Asian culture, such a cultural heritage lives on deeply. Individuals may find coaching intimidating, diminishing or they may be unable to risk the openness necessary for learning. There is a role, therefore, for the company to play in facilitating a coaching ready culture for internal coaches in an Asian context. Here are some suggestions.

- **Educate about coaching, especially to distinguish coaching from mentoring.** The current confusion resulting from the synonymous use of "coaching" to mean mentoring, training and teaching fails to help people understand and value the differences and to know when to do which. That coaching is a facilitative process where the onus is on the individual to do the work, needs to be understood if internal coaches are to be credible, especially if they are to overcome age and seniority differences.
- **Role model.** Find opportunities to position internal coaching as developmental, not remedial. Nothing is more compelling than an admired senior leader proclaiming his commitment to levelling up his leadership through executive coaching, especially when accompanied by demonstrable, positive leadership changes. This is especially so if the coach is an internal coach.
- **Start with 'easy' coaching forms.** Introduce internal coaching in less threatening forms, such as 'follow-on' coaching linked to soft-skill workshop learning to normalize coaching as a part of the learning and developmental process.
- **Track, reward and celebrate internal coaching results.** 'What gets measured gets results', is especially true for coaching, including internal coaching. Establish benchmarks, set measureable coaching outcomes and then track and share positive results.

- **Practice rigorous confidentiality.** In any context, trust, privacy and confidentiality is essential to creating a coaching environment, but never, is this more so than for internal coaches in an Asian environment. Internal coaches must be impeccable, and be seen to be impeccable.
- **Firewall developmental coaching from performance management coaching.** Internal coaches are most easily assigned to developmental coaching, where the goal of coaching is to build strengths, capacity, leadership, etc. Mandated, remedial or performance coaching, if it is done by external coaches, preserves the role of internal coaches and minimizes seniority/ management/ confidence/ face issues.
- **Superior training for internal coaches.** Be sure internal coaches have received sound training and have developed solid coaching skills before releasing them inside the organization. Nothing harms the credibility of internal coaching faster than unskilled coaching or under resourced initiatives (i.e. too little coaching skill to achieve results)
- **Honour leadership practices that value continuous learning.** Leadership practices that set the stage for coaching include risk tolerance, recognition and reward, support for initiative and innovation (including failures), resilient behaviour modelling and alignment of personal goals with organizational goals



In today's fast moving, competitive environment, the need to get the most out of everyone's talent is a given for success. Coaching is for 'everyone' because it 'ups' everyone's game. Because coaching is a simple and easily learned facilitative skill, and one that does not require subject matter expertise or years of practice to provide basic assistance, creating a force of internal coaches is both viable and cost effective in an Asian context with the proper measures.



Comments from Delegates

"This session provides concrete (yet anonymous) bottom-line implications that can really influence business leaders to buy into the practice."

"I appreciate the session being interactive, which allows you to experience the benefits of coaching."

"This is a useful seminar as our organization is evolving, and we need to build a strong pipeline of successors and future leaders."

"Great session; really different from reading a coaching-related book."

"Very enlightening - shared coaching session was good practice."

We say...

As you might have noticed, Coaching is becoming a buzzword in the industry. More and more organisations are considering, or are already implementing, coaching for its employees.

It is always a challenge that HR practitioners face when balancing the use of external and internal coaches. Cresswell mentioned in the article that it is a thin line between Coaching and Mentoring. Therefore, it is important to educate organisations of the difference.

To find out how Lee Hecht Harrison can assist you with your leadership solutions, please contact us at 6732 3123 or custcare@lhh.com. Visit our website lhh.com.sg!



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