

"The Topic is Discredited for Us!"

Why Coaching Suffers from a Lack of Acceptance (not only) in the German Industry

By Harald Korsten, first published in Rauen Coaching Newsletter Jg 12,06

Scene 1: Meeting with Clients

The planning meeting at a large automobile supplier about modular training, working title "Coaching Behaviour for Management Personnel", is coming to an end. "By the way," says the Division Director, "please avoid the term 'coaching' with us! The topic is discredited. We must also call the seminar something else." The new Personnel Director nods approvingly. Yes, she knows that this also applies to other areas of the company. Good, he also knows that, says the external management trainer (me). He suggests "development competence" or "managing through encouragement". Why is the term then discredited?

The Personnel Director, who has been on-board for about one year, removes the pencil from her hand. "Well, why then? Mainly owing to the proliferation of the term." As before, the term is used in a colloquial manner. In addition, the external consultants, experts and trainers have made a substantial contribution in this regard because everyone has followed the trend and none have avoided also using the term "coach". She knows what she is talking about because she is a trained coach herself. Her predecessor considered coaches to be a type of supervising experts.

He himself does not know what coaching actually is, says the Division Director. "But we can indeed discuss this in more depth later—at a meeting with both my colleagues." "Stop by my office again later," says the Personnel Director to the trainer. "I still have a small analysis about the key word 'passé' for you."

Scene 2: Meeting with the Three Division Directors

"What haven't we all already experienced and endured, right, colleagues: Lean management, Business Process Re-engineering, Kanban, Six Sigma, 360° Feedback, Kaizen and so forth. Currently, we once again have a new panacea: Scrum. You indeed know that everything is a fad! They slosh around the big pond and disappear again. It is no different with coaching!" Both Division Director colleagues nod with hesitation and one comments: "But coaching has been around for almost 20 years anyways."

Now there will be a small speech again, thinks the external trainer. "Coaching will not disappear," he begins, "because no management method or work technique is meant when using this term, but rather a fundamental approach to encouragement and development. Based on the principle of help to self-help. Coaching behaviour is even the basic behaviour of a real manager. In Germany, the term came into being around 1992—above all through the publications of Sir John Whitmore. Naturally, management personnel's coaching behaviour already existed before 1992 and was restated as being genuine interest, a cooperative management style, encouraging behaviour or simply as being true management."

"Yes, such a management culture would be worth striving for," says one Director. However, he would rarely find such a culture among the external coaches at the company. They certainly would not have a good reputation at all. He also could not remember that even one had said point-blank about coaching: What? Why? When? Whether that is secret knowledge? "Perhaps some do not even know that themselves", says one colleague, "they are not coaches at all, but rather only call themselves this because it is in."

Scene 3: In the Seminar "Leading through Encouragement"

"What is a coach?" By posing this question, the management trainer (me) is starting a query looking for acclamation. Consultant, expert, mentor, role model, analyst, helper are the first terms which he writes on the flip chart. "How do coaches help then?", he enquires hopefully. By knowing how something functions correctly, by providing valuable tips and asking for them to be correspondingly rehearsed, answer the participants: Just like in football.

"Who among you has already been coached?" 11 of the 12 participants respond in the affirmative. "What experiences have you had with your coaches?" Well, they are just like everybody else and oftentimes really have no practical experience. They are just like experts and corporate consultants. Some had merely been present, had no clue what was going on and always only asked questions. The trainer sighs to himself and starts his input: "A coach is not a consultant at all, but rather..."

Scene 4: Statement from a Trainer Colleague

"Until a few months ago, it was not clear to me that coaching behaviour is naturally also a core management competence. During my training to become a coach which was offered by a professional association-certified service provider, this topic was addressed only to a certain extent. We were also very insufficiently prepared for dealing with the requirements of a free economy."

Scene 5: In a Podium Discussion

Should management personnel be allowed to coach? Of course they must even do that, says the management trainer. Of course not, says the "professional coach". Only the coach with many years of training with a "quasi-therapeutic background" may and can do this. Whether Mr. Trainer is then a trained coach? "Yes". "So-so. Now listen closely". The coach opens up the German "Coaching Magazin" 4/2011, page 43, and quotes with pleasure: "One is not doing something good for the management personnel if one overextends them by assigning them the role of the coach. Some perhaps feel flattered because the competence associated with the role invites one to make projections. But one should not allow the ambulance driver to play the physician."

Associated competences? That would be great! mumbles the trainer. "The topic is not the role of the coach, but rather coaching behaviour for management personnel", interjects the moderator. Oh, yeah, says the "coach", and no, nonetheless, one may not make a distinction between coaching behaviour and coaching. Yes, it would then follow that management personnel should engage in no coaching behaviour. Yes, naturally he is serious about it!

Scene 6: Conversation during the Break at a Symposium

"I coach, too, so that makes us colleagues!" says the psychotherapeutic healing practitioner and Gestalt therapist. "I even have clients from the free economy. A coaching training for me? I really do not need it with my background. Coaching is ultimately only a collection of best practices such as Neuro-Linguistic Programming. Incidentally, I am also an NLP practitioner!"

Conclusion 1: Coaching is Damaged if ...

- Coaches do not wish to (or cannot) differentiate between coaching behaviour and coaching: Trying to prohibit leaders to use coaching behaviour reveals an obsession with hysterically making delimitations and is ridiculous. Supportive management personnel object to such presumptions. Actually, they are natural allies of real coaches: Who—if not they—knows precisely when and why a professional coach is supposed to come on-board.
- Coaches at companies do not make transparent what they do and how they do it. And if consultants, instructors, project managers, experts, trainers and mediators naturally also call themselves "coaches" and also sell themselves as such without any certification or supervision.
- The confusion about terms continues to run rampant. Even on Wikipedia, coaching is referred to as "consulting" without even being challenged which is then immediately followed by a chapter entitled "Differentiating Between Coaching and Psychotherapy" with the recommendation to simply think of "consulting", "training" or "coaching" instead of "psychotherapy" and to replace "patient" with "client". That has a pathologising effect on not just university graduates in engineering.
- Coaching trainers largely downplay the conditions, requirements and needs in the industry. Or act as if the elements and the systematics of coaching were only then discovered around 1990. Without professional experience in the business world, their recent graduates are condemned to failure.

Conclusion 2: The Analysis from the Personnel Director

Coaching – why was the term and also the topic truly discredited at our company? Gradually, the Personnel Director (from Scene 1) obtains a profile of each of the 58 external coaches at the company and thus identifies four basic types:

- *The Consultants.* After some open-ended questions (if any at all), they quickly fall once again into the old role of experts who provide suggestions, assessments and advice. They tend to unscrupulously equate on-the-job training with coaching.
- *The Therapists.* Trained coaches without experience in the free economy who unsettle themselves and others with deterring vocabulary ("diagnostic context", "active complexes", etc.). They tend to do suggestive research for presumed personality deficits.
- *The Jacks-of-all-Trades.* Mentors, experts, trainers, coaches, supervisors, moderators—above all something without any delimitations and probably also without any reflection. The profound tendency to be opportunistic is prominent—to be willing to do anything to keep the job.
- *The Real Coaches.* Encouraging, supportive, effective, empathetic, systematic, and goal- and results-oriented. Unfortunately, at a mere 20 per cent, clearly in the minority.

The key point for her is: Each "coach" was presented as someone who has mastered a particular methodology and from whom one could thus expect to attain a certain level of success. These expectations have oftentimes not been fulfilled. Coaching has gradually devolved into a synonym for snake-oil salesmen whom even the "real ones" cannot rescue.

How did she end the proliferation? On the one hand, through internal workshops with management personnel on the topic of "Opportunities and Limits of Coaching". On the other hand, by introducing concrete requirements analysis. Upon this basis, external coaches and trainers are now selected only according to clear criteria. The selection process relies primarily on the auditing of each candidate by an external authority. – Her percentage of "real" coaches and coaching-oriented management trainers after seven months: 100 per cent.

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