



Accentuate the positive

Where and how does coaching fit in your organisation and what does it offer as a professional development tool? Pleasance Hansen takes a look at what can be learned from coaching and applied in the HR world.

Increasingly, organisations are recognising the need to make the most of their people's strengths and talents to be at the top of their field and stay there. Peter Drucker foreshadowed this thinking last century with his premise that good management is about maximising people's strengths and making their weaknesses irrelevant.

In contrast, concentrating on people's deficits, analysing 'gaps' and focusing on problems often produces a negative spiral leading to low morale and even lower productivity and potential litigation, with its energy sapping features. We now know upward

spirals exist too, and indeed can be cultivated, where people are 'in flow', experiencing their 'best self' at work, and being very productive.

Professor Barbara Fredrickson, in her remarkable 2009 book *Positivity*, documents three decades of research into positivity with a number of research studies showing that subjects in induced positive moods saw the bigger picture and took in a much broader array of information than those induced to experience negative emotions. Furthermore, a tipping point was identified where positivity tilts to outweigh negativity at the ratio of three positives to one negative (now known as the Losada/Fredrickson ratio).

This is where coaching comes in, I believe. Now I begin every coaching session with the question: "Tell me about your wins since we last met?" Often with new clients this takes some getting used to, and even a lengthy amount of time to recall them. But what my clients find, over time, is that their recall quickens, their focus on the positive sharpens and they end up feeling rejuvenated, rather than overwhelmed at the end of the session.

The 'book-end' at the close of the session is a request to rate themselves against a resilience scale which I've developed. Incidentally, it provides an internal tracking method too, to see how buoyant they are in the face of obstacles or challenges, and also to 'test' how effective the session has been.

Given that what we measure, we reinforce, I'm finding that this focus builds inner resources and assists people to get closer to their 'best self at work'.

Key points

I'll now share some of the key aspects that have worked very well for me as a management coach over the last 12 years, and draw out how they can be applicable in the everyday life of a busy HR professional.

1st key point: Being 100 percent in their world, while maintaining 100 percent awareness of your own resources and experience.

In coaching, it's vital to get to see how it is from the perspective of the person you're coaching, while staying in touch with your own experiences. It's like having bi-focal attention—staying 'highly

tuned' to how it is in their world, while remaining conscious of your own. This requires a suspension of judgement, which leads onto my second point.

2nd key point: Discarding judgement, and inviting in discernment.

When I was a relatively young HR professional, I thought it was my role to 'judge', and in fact I considered it part of my mandate as an HR manager. What I failed to realise was that I needed to exercise discernment, rather than judgement, to make the best decisions. Judgement is the role of an arbiter in a Court of Law. We as HR professionals are not arbiters—though sometimes we may feel like referees! It took me a while, but what I came to realise was that I needed to practice discernment instead and wisely weigh up the rights and wrongs to make sound, well-informed choices, rather than 'sit in judgement'. That was not my role, it was inappropriate and it set up unnecessarily adversarial relationships.

3rd key point: Understanding doesn't necessarily mean acceptance.

This took some working through too, partly because I'd begun working in organisations as a social change agent. My very first role in the public service was as a sole EEO practitioner in what was then the DSIR. From that position, I moved to what was then the Justice Department (with over 6000 staff) and set up and ran the Equal Employment Opportunities Unit.

This was probably the most challenging role of my life. My team and I were charged with breaking the glass ceiling for women, reducing sexual harassment in prisons (between the officers, not the inmates!), bringing in more culturally aware practices, and ensuring the 300 public buildings owned by the department were accessible to people with disabilities. We had to be resilient and optimistic in the face of overt resistance, strategic in our approach and very determined about what we wanted to achieve.

In this context, showing understanding often felt inauthentic, given what our brief was. Again, it was only over time, that I realised understanding how it is from the other person's perspective, and showing you understand, does not necessarily mean agreement.

4th key point: Helping clients 'reframe' issues or problems into opportunities.

Helping clients shift their perspective to encompass another angle that could be more empowering for them is a major coaching skill. This requires sufficient trust to pose questions like: "Would you consider entertaining another explanation?" or "Have you thought about the possibility of looking at this from another angle?" If the previous three steps have been followed, it becomes a lot easier. It can also involve picking up their language cues and their predominant sensory mode to 'speak into their world' in order to help them broaden and shift their perspective.

I find this is where some of the real 'magic' occurs in coaching, where someone is willing to shift their point of view and reframe an issue from a more empowering perspective. As an example, Roger Schwarz has a term called 'lowering the ladder of inference', or reducing the impact of the inferences that are made about someone



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else's action. For instance, someone could be taking up a lot of time in a meeting explaining their point of view. Instead of thinking, "they're trying to dominate", reframe it to think "is there something they feel others haven't understood yet?"

Often the reward is simply seeing their face change and their demeanour becoming more relaxed again.

5th key point: The 'power' of undivided attention.

This is probably the most important element of all. I remember engaging Peter Cullen, in Wellington, as our employment lawyer, to advise me on a particularly tricky situation. His wise words to me were: "Sometimes all someone needs is to be heard." In this case, a potentially explosive situation was defused, the person felt listened to and we didn't have to advance down the road of a messy personal grievance.

As a management coach, this is a critical element in what I offer—real listening, so my clients feel I 'get it'. In practice, it means I am completely there for them. At that point in time nothing exists except our interaction: no cell phones, or interruptions, or worrying thoughts about the next meeting. They have my complete attention. I find, time and time again, this particular way of being generates different thinking in my clients, almost like it creates an opening for them to access and express their own inner wisdom. Sometimes there's nothing more powerful than simply feeling heard.

The HR world

So, how does all of this apply to the HR world, where unexpected situations occur frequently, time pressures can be intense and the human factor is never fully predictable?

I think there are key attributes or coaching skills which are also highly applicable to the world of the HR professional with similar skills. For instance, coaching as a skill requires a certain type of

mental discipline. There's the initial willingness to suspend judgement and practice discernment. There's the need to be fully present and completely attentive to what's being said, and what's not being said. There's also that critical ability to 'step into their world' and see it from their perspective.

All of these approaches are pertinent to any interaction an HR professional has with staff, colleagues and managers.

Keeping a clear mental space to deal with whatever may come up is another common requirement for coaches and HR professionals. With emails, for instance, I choose when to open them and when not to. Early in the morning seems to work well, and often at a specified time in the afternoon, which can vary. However, before meeting with a coaching client, or going into an important meeting as an HR professional, ensuring no distraction immediately prior to that interaction is very important.

A further example is helping people learn from their experience by gaining insight from a critical incident to break old patterns.

Finally, creating what I call 'upward spirals' where people and organisations can thrive is a common aim for coaches and human resources. This is what organisations need to be successful: highly engaged workforces where people have stimulating jobs that challenge and stretch them to be the best they can be. It's what we can offer, as practitioners in the 'people business'. It's what we have to contribute. It's what we do, as people engaged with other people in organisations.

I can't think of anything more compelling or interesting to be involved in. We help create a better world!

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