



# A good leader is a good coach

How to develop a coaching culture in a mid-tier firm, medium-sized company or successful family business.

**BY IAN MITCHELL AND SIAN LUMSDEN**

**U**K academic and executive coach, Peter Hawkins, was speaking to a room full of directors, managers and external coaches in Belfast in early 2015. “What I want to know,” he thundered, “is what executive coaches were doing when the banking crisis went down seven years ago.”

“Making sure they got their fees paid,” came a reply from the back of the room. You’ll always get a wise-ass. But the point was well made and continues to have relevance today.

When the chips are down, what is the point of coaching within an organisation? The Big 4 and many of their multinational clients have put a lot of thought into this question and have been developing increasingly effective coaching structures within their organisations since the beginning of the millennium. In this context, the 2014 Ridler report on the development of internal coaching in the Big 4 accounting firms makes excellent reading, offering up such gems as:

- “Through the influence of internal coaching, client-facing partners and staff learn to help their team members and clients to frame problems, facilitating solutions rather than adopting a traditional instructing style”;
- “Demonstrable financial results from internal coaching have helped the firm to accept that coaching is not about being nice to people or about supporting under-performers, but is a business imperative for high-performing senior individuals, especially at key career transition points”; and
- “The relationship with our external coaches is critical to our success”.

Meanwhile, over at Google. Project Oxygen started with a fundamental question raised by executives: do managers matter? This question spawned a multi-year research project that ultimately led to a comprehensive programme

built around eight key management attributes, first and foremost of which was ‘a good manager is a good coach’.

#### **Coaching competency**

As a result of our own work with directors, partners and senior managers across a range of organisations, we have come to augment this maxim slightly to include ‘a good leader is a good coach’.

organisations – especially mid-tier business organisations – are required to face. In our experience, as well as in the opinions of many of those writing on leadership and management today, to face this challenge adequately requires Partner or C-suite buy-in for, and the allocation of financial investment into, the creation of a modern and meaningful coaching culture – one that develops an environment that supports this sharpened focus.

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This is not to downgrade the importance of management. Rather, because the alignment between the board and its management team is so crucial to organisational success, it is vital to achieve a seamless interface between top leadership and organisational or business management across all levels of functionality. This includes the development of robust levels of coaching competency.

As Thierry Nautin, writing about the aligned organisation in McKinsey’s 2014 publication entitled *The Lean Management Enterprise*, puts it: “Achieving real alignment where strategy, goals, and meaningful purpose reinforce one another, gives an organisation a major advantage because it has a clearer sense of what to do at any given time, and it can trust people to move in the right direction. The result is an organisation that can focus less on deciding what to do – and more on simply doing.”

And it is this increasing focus on “simply doing” in today’s fast-moving economic, political and social environment that creates significant development issues that

#### **Create the conversation**

Kegan and Lahey, in their excellent 2016 book entitled *An Everyone Culture*, introduce examples of business cultures “which promote regular situational workshops where employees present live workplace dilemmas of decision-making to a workshop leader, who in turn poses (coaching) questions and helps expand the range of options for diagnosis and actions”.

That’s about the ‘how’, which we will look at in more depth in the next issue of *Accountancy Ireland*.

First, however, it’s about creating the conversation; about putting it out there that – although it’s a difficult ask for many medium-sized entities to initiate and develop the infrastructure around delivering a coaching style of management – it’s a discussion that needs to be had because a good manager is a good coach, a good leader is a good coach, and “demonstrable financial results from coaching have helped the firm”.



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