

Using coaching to help manage underperformance

Wendy Rose of Helping People with Change, and a Leadership Foundation associate, describes how use coaching deal with under-performance.

Coaching is about change in some aspect or at some level, be it personal, interpersonal and organisational. Most leadership coaching focuses on several issues, which are usually interlinked. In higher education (and in many other sectors) these issues can range from managing organisational change to personal effectiveness or career management.

However, I have been working as a leadership coach for the Leadership Foundation for nearly two years, and the theme that has come up most in my work is helping people to manage the under-performance of others - in all types of roles within universities. . In this respect higher education differs from the commercial sector, so I canvassed opinions from 13 people (working in both academic and professional services), across eight HEIs, as to the reasons why. The clients I spoke to offered a number of answers, some to do with the culture, structure and traditions of the higher education sector, others to do with the ability and experience of those involved.

"It's the elephant in the room," said one professional services director. "I remember covert conversations about how to tackle underperformance 15 years ago and nothing much has really changed. No one talks about it openly, it's a tacit acknowledgement that some people don't pull their weight but there isn't a strategy to deal with it."

Structure and culture

The structure of some institutions, with 'revolving' deans in time-limited leadership positions, means that there is a reluctance to confront the behaviour of colleagues who might recently have been peers and are likely to be again relatively soon. The culture of academic liberalism and non-intervention also militates against academics seeming to 'interfere' in the work of others. One client also suggested that academics don't see their universities as a place of employment, but as somewhere provided for them to pursue their own work. In other words some viewed the institution as a rather unfortunate necessity that was tolerated as a means of doing research, rather than seeing production as a contractual exchange.

Judging performance

The timeline for research and publishing means that an academic may have been underproductive for many years before the full extent comes to light. However, pure research may have very little to show for many years, and there is a need to be autonomous.

So how should performance be judged? One senior manager in a registrar's department commented that in higher education everything is contestable; the whole environment is one of critiquing. Within that culture, he said, it is difficult to get a consensus on how to judge

performance. Another client suggested that there tends to be no history of professional measurement, so the idea of being scrutinised and judged is completely alien.

"We've never seen it done, let alone done well, so we have no idea what 'good' looks like. For friends in the commercial sector it's just part of everyday life – performance goals are transparent, goals are tightly set and in agreement, and frequently reviewed, so monitoring and feedback is expected and frequently given. No one can veer very far off course without it being picked up. But here things drift for years."

Lack of support

Several clients pointed to a history of strong union involvement in attempts to tackle poor performance as a factor which significantly hindered action being taken. Those who tackle underperformance need a strong constitution, emotional resilience, and supportive colleagues. However the latter was not always forthcoming.

A pro-vice-chancellor commented: *"Senior management will begin by saying something has to be done and it appears that we're all in it together, but once the union get involved and there is the threat of an industrial tribunal or grievance being taken out, the support seems to melt away and the manager in question is left isolated."*

HR was also seen to be unreliable in some cases, to lack the capability and to be unsupportive in helping leaders plan, approach and monitor individual instances of below-par behaviour.

Lack of skills

Clients admitted that they just didn't have the skills to deal with underachievers. Having never been well managed themselves they had no good role models, and they simply felt out of their depth and ill-equipped to have the difficult conversations that go with the territory of managing performance. This is borne out by recent research across all sectors in which only 10% of managers said they were conducting these potentially tough conversations effectively.

How can coaching help?

There is a sense that being a senior leader can be very isolating in this area, so how can coaching help when managing under-performance in higher education institutions?

Good coaching will always look at a situation from a number of angles. Among these are the personal (the personality, skills and experience of the person being coached), the interpersonal (the relationship between them and the person whose performance they wish to influence), and the systemic (the culture, context and environment of the whole team, department and university).

Using this framework, the coach will select the most appropriate interventions and tools for their client. **Working at the personal level**, this might include:

- ⇒ Honing delegation skills: We all tend to use this term very loosely and assume we all know what we mean. Yet the exact nature of a delegated area of responsibility, the what, how, when, who and why, so very rarely gets spelled out.
- ⇒ Building confidence in having honest, direct and unambiguous conversations: By outlining the importance of preparation, clear communication and practical actions, managers can be better equipped to carry out what are often referred to as fierce, tough or courageous conversations.
- ⇒ Models for giving structured feedback: Helping leaders to give constructive feedback is an important part of coaching. Coaches use specific models that focus on the behaviour rather than the person, encourage the delivery of constructive feedback, and advocate the use of descriptive rather than evaluative praise.
- ⇒ Real-play: Practising different styles and approaches for specific real-life situations means the coach can give feedback about how the coachee comes across.

At the interpersonal level, coaches will help their clients look at what is happening in the space between themselves and the other person. What do they each bring to the party? How might the situation look to the other person?

- ⇒ Conducting an assessment of the other person's situation: Is what they're being expected to do within the remit of their job? Do they have the capability (training, skills experience) and resources to carry it out?
- ⇒ Meta-mirror: This exercise facilitates an imaginary dialogue and encourages clients to take alternative perspectives.
- ⇒ Visualisation: Helping clients to see a successful outcome in their mind's eye can help them mentally prepare for anxiety-provoking meetings.
- ⇒ Appreciative Inquiry: Using Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al, 2003) can break a pattern of negativity (being fixated on the mistakes), and encourages people to notice and comment on what's going well in a situation.
- ⇒ Psychological models: There are many models from psychology which can be adapted for use in executive coaching, to give an insight into the psychodynamics of problematic encounters.

At the **systemic level** the vision becomes more strategic, and might involve coaching the client to:

- ⇒ Involve HR to find out the institution's policy and strategy on underperformance, and existing performance management procedures.

- ⇒ Use spider diagrams to identify all stakeholders including other senior managers, unions, staff representatives and governors. This enables a client to assess the current state of relationships, and see where they need to be forged or strengthened to engender collective responsibility for confronting underperformance.
- ⇒ Develop skills for influencing upwards using effective communication, understanding issues of power and politics, and exploring different conflict-management and negotiation styles, to engage long-term support from other senior leaders.
- ⇒ Conduct a force field analysis to assess the pros and cons of embarking on such a process, identify drivers and mitigating circumstances, and estimate the financial and other costs to the institution of not acting.
- ⇒ Use collections of objects to constellate or map out the situation. This technique from art and play therapy helps the coachee to stand back from the system and spot new ways forward.

References

Performance Coaching International research carried out by Performance Coaching International in partnership with feedback specialist Shine with 7500 Managers over all sectors through Interview, questionnaires, observations, workshops and coaching 1-2-1s. The original research concluded in December 2008 and showed 10% of managers had Courageous Conversations in a way that worked, 20% used an inappropriate or aggressive style and 70% were either unable or unwilling to have the conversations.

Cooperrider, D. L., Whitney, D. and J. M. Stavros (2003). *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook*. Bedford Heights, Lakeshore Publishers.