

New study sheds light on manager-coaches

By Liz Hall

The importance of coaching in organisations has been underlined in successive CIPD studies. Three-quarters of businesses consistently use coaching, 70 per cent of them having it delivered by line managers. But what do we actually know about coaching and line management?

The CIPD's report, *Coaching at the sharp end*, released at its annual HRD conference on 21-23 April, ventures into virgin territory by examining the impact of coaching on the line managers who deliver it. It asks a number of questions: "How is the coaching burden being undertaken by line management?", "What are their expectations for coaching?", "What skills do they need?" and "How do they view the coaching burden they are increasingly being asked to shoulder?"

The CIPD joined forces with Portsmouth University to carry out the research, which included a survey of more than 500 organisations and four in-depth case studies across the public and private sectors. The study gives compelling new insights into coaching by line managers.

Most line managers deliver coaching using a development and performance approach, note researchers – who used statistical analysis to group behaviours into a set of skills termed "primary coaching" and "mature coaching".

The latter describes those who take coaching further to develop a more participative style of management, using team approaches and generating ideas and insights from individuals. Mature line management coaches also prioritise joint problem-solving and shared decision-making. Such coaching behaviour allows us to see for the first time how coaching for line managers can be delivered effectively.

Personal factors, such as a manager's age, gender, length of experience or level of qualifications do not make a significant difference to whether managers adopt a coaching style of management. However, mature coaching characteristics are more likely to be achieved by those in more senior positions, who are less caught up in the operational and short-term challenges that dominate the life of a first-line manager at the sharp end.

Many line managers, faced with constant change and an increased task load, find

coaching an additional burden. This was crucial to identifying the barriers to using a coaching style.

Managers told the researchers that time constraints, a perceived lack of coaching skills and a lack of self-confidence in dealing with difficult people and issues were prominent. Conversely, the provision of skills training, confidence and appropriate development and support contribute to productive coaching approaches.

Organisational climate and business-wide factors also influence whether a coaching style of management can be achieved. Clarity about coaching roles and expectations, senior management ownership of coaching as a business issue and top management role-modelling of coaching characteristics are all important parts of a coaching culture.

The report highlights the major role HR can play in ensuring line managers sustainably deliver coaching within organisations. It

stresses, first, that coaching should not be treated as an L&D or HR issue but as a business issue. Second, there should also be clarity about coaching roles and expectations. Third, the managers should be trained, supported and resourced.

Effective teamworking and relationships should be fostered to enable a coaching approach. Managers should be encouraged to develop a coaching style as part of their management repertoire, says the report.

John McGurk, CIPD adviser, learning, training and development, who conceived and managed the project with Portsmouth University, said: "This research fills a big gap. We knew that line managers were increasingly delivering coaching. This research will help to inform the coaching practice of both HR and line managers. It will benefit organisations and individuals to deliver effective coaching while ensuring that we can assist and develop the skills of line managers."

A web-based tool to help design and deliver coaching for line managers will be available at the CIPD team coaching forum event on 1 July.

● "Coaching at the sharp end: developing and supporting the line manager as coach", a CIPD practical tool, will be available from May 2009 at www.cipd.co.uk/onlineinfodocuments/toolacts

