



# Three counterintuitive truths about coaching

## Coaching is flourishing ...

There's no doubt that coaching has hit the mainstream.

These days you're hard pressed to find an organization big, medium or small that's not using coaching in some form or other, it's the constant topic of articles in all the business magazines, everyone from consultants to plumbers are adding "... and coach" to their taglines ... even Dilbert is mocking it.

And this is not such a bad thing.

Coaching can be a powerful way to shift behaviour, increase engagement, enhance thinking and generally make a difference to the way people do business and the way businesses can succeed.

## ... but it may not be working

However, it would be a mistake to think that just because coaching is popular it is being done as well as it might.

In fact, a recent UK survey suggested that coaching in organizations was most definitely NOT working as well as it could or should.

The survey found that fewer than one in four (23 percent) thought coaching had significantly affected their job performance, and only 20 percent felt it had significantly contributed to their job satisfaction. More than half of the respondents said coaching had slight, little or no impact on their job performance (60 percent) and satisfaction (54 percent). Ten percent even said coaching had made them less satisfied with their jobs.<sup>1</sup>

So what's getting in the way of coaching have the impact it might within organizations?

## The challenge of scale

It has its roots in the way coaching is introduced into an organization.

Typically, that starts with a few external coaches hired on an ad hoc basis to help fix leaders who aren't working (or more rarely, to support leaders who need to go to 'the next level').

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<sup>1</sup> Blessing White, 2006



When these coaches have some success, eventually someone suggests the organization should get more of this ... it seems to be a good thing.

And here is where we run into the difficulties of scaling up coaching.

There's no doubt external coaching can be very powerful. But it is expensive, costly both in time and money. And even if your organization could afford lots of external coaches, it is often hard to find enough of these top quality professionals. And then, even if you could find them it's near impossible to get them all coaching in a way that is consistent, efficient and strategically aligned.

The obvious solution? Use external coaches sparingly ... and get the organization's leaders and managers to do the coaching themselves

## Managers as coaches

Coaching is certainly a good managerial skill upon which to focus. A Harvard Business Review article by Daniel Goleman of Emotional Intelligence fame posited that of the six different leadership styles<sup>2</sup>, coaching was the least used of all – while pointing out that “although the coaching style may not scream ‘bottom-line results,’ it delivers them.”

However, the leap from theory to practice is proving tricky. While organizations have been sending managers out on coach training courses to get them able to working some coaching magic, many managers and organizations alike are finding it difficult to translate the skills learned in the classroom to the day-to-day working environment.

There are always a range of reasons why such a thing might be so, but in part what's stopping a more successful translation is the adherence to some common assumptions about coaching ... assumptions that in fact hinder rather than help.

Here then are three counterintuitive truths about how to make coaching stick in your organization.

## #1 Don't create a coaching culture

“We're going to create a coaching culture” is a commonly proclaimed goal, with some leader filled with visions of coaching reinventing life and work in that organization.

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<sup>2</sup> Daneil Goleman, 'Leadership That Gets Results', Harvard Business Review March 2000



But coaching is not a silver bullet able to miraculously drive change, improve performance, increase happiness, make money and lift the level of engagement in an organization in and of itself.

Coaching is a powerful tactic that is best used to support and achieve a specific business objective.

The focus on a “coaching culture” runs the danger of confusing the means for the end, and it is a lack of context – why exactly do I need to use coaching? – that can undermine any attempts to get managers coaching.

Commitment and engagement with coaching works best when there are two levels of context.

The first is the business context, and we’ve found that enhancing coaching skills works best when it’s serving a specific business purpose – for instance, building team resilience before a corporate re-branding and re-organization, increasing key customer retention or reducing the churn of front-line sales staff.

The second is a personal context, or more bluntly: how will this help me and my work? Getting managers to see how coaching can be not just another thing to add to the to-do list, but rather a way of actually reducing their own workload while increasing the focus on their own “Great Work” builds the likelihood of it being a tool that’s used.

Context allows managers to see coaching as a support and a solution – and not just the latest HR trend.

## **#2 Keep it short, keep it simple.**

A Box of Crayons survey in 2007 found that the greatest perceived barrier to managers coaching others was not a lack of skill or lack of desire or lack of explicit systemic support.

It was a lack of time.

Managers – and these days nearly everyone is a manager – see themselves as just too busy to coach.

In this, external coaches provide lousy role models for managers who coach. With external coaches spending between 30 minutes and two hours per coaching session, it’s no wonder most managers say: “I just don’t have time for that.”

For coaching to have any chance of sticking, it must fit to the reality of the managers’ working life. And that means that, unless the process is straightforward, flexible and “next day useable” ... and unless they can do that all in ten minutes or less, managers don’t have capacity for coaching.



Knowing that they can (and should) coach in bursts of ten minutes or less is very freeing for managers. They can imagine how coaching can be part of their regular working life, rather than have it become yet another burdensome add-on to their already long list of responsibilities.

### **#3 Strive for adequate**

The first two truths lead to the final counterintuitive truth, which is to abandon the quest to create excellent coaches.

The truth is, for most people's challenges most of the time, being an adequate coach is more than enough.

Adequate means both appropriate to the moment and efficient. Over-coaching wastes time and money, and setting a standard of "adequate" helps normalize coaching.

The power of this insight is that it removes the paralyzing fear many managers feel about not being able to do coaching properly. Believing that they have to master subtle skills of human dynamics, have a PhD in psychology and (ideally) have also reached a state of Zen enlightenment means that for many managers, it's easier and safe to continue doing what they've always done ... which isn't coaching.

### **Practical coaching that sticks**

Coaching is a tactic that organizations should seriously consider in their goal to produce outstanding business results through engaging people on the stuff that really matters.

Challenging some commonly held assumptions about what coaching looks like and feels like in an organization can help open the way to create a practical, adaptable way for managers to build coaching into their leadership repertoire ... and to have it stick.



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Michael Bungay Stanier is the founder and Principal of Box of Crayons ([www.BoxOfCrayons.biz](http://www.BoxOfCrayons.biz)), a company that works with organizations and teams around the world to help them do less Good Work and more Great Work.

Box of Crayons' clients range from AstraZeneca to Xerox and are based in North America, Europe and Australia. They have particular expertise with blue chip organizations in the professional service, pharmaceutical and consumer goods market sectors. Box of Crayons' premier product is the Coaching for Great Work program which gives managers and leaders practical coaching skills that stick. Coaching for Great Work is delivered around the world by a global faculty.

Michael's latest book, Find Your Great Work ([www.FindYourGreatWork.com](http://www.FindYourGreatWork.com)) will be published in March. David Allen, author of Getting Things Done says "If I had to pick a person to have dinner with, when I need to be prodded and challenged and inspired to think about the things I really am committed to think about for myself and what I'm doing, I'd pick Michael Bungay Stanier." It has been endorsed by seven past presidents of the International Coaching Federation.

Michael was the 2006 Canadian Coach of the Year. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University, and holds a Masters of Philosophy from Oxford, and law and arts degrees with highest honors from the Australian National University.