Conceptualizing coaching as an approach to management and organizational development

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Abstract

Purpose – Recent debates within the literature and amongst practitioners of coaching have been focussed on defining the scope and practice of coaching as a form of organizational intervention that can facilitate organizational and individual change. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the debate about what coaching is by reviewing an emerging comparative conceptual framework of coaching as a form of practice for management and organizational development.

Design/methodology/approach – The framework was developed through an exploratory study involving a focus group of practitioners in coaching and management. The overall approach to this study blends a conceptual consideration of the practice of coaching with the results gained from a focus group. The study uses cognitive mapping, thematic grouping and content analysis to seek to define the key characteristics of coaching in comparison to other forms of management practice.

Findings – A framework of “meta-categories” of management practice are identified and the role and processes of coaching is compared in relation to these. Results from the study suggest that coaching adopts a holistic approach to management and organizational development and that certain key characteristics can be identified that differentiate it from other forms of management and organizational development. Results also open the way for research into forms of coaching required to facilitate and support whole systems change.

Originality/value – The framework could be of use to managers in assessing whether a coaching-based approach to promoting and managing change is appropriate and what processes it involves.

Keywords Coaching, Organizational change, Organizational development, Comparative conceptual framework for coaching, Characteristics of coaching

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

There has been for some time a growing interest and debate about the role and purpose of coaching in organizational contexts. There is an acknowledgement within much of the current literature that coaching is still in early stages of development (Clegg et al., 2003, 2005; Anderson et al., 2009; Evered and Selman, 1989; Ives, 2008). Within this paper we aim to explore the role of coaching in business and corporate contexts and contrast this with other forms of management practice that are in common use. From the study we develop an emerging comparative framework that seeks to place coaching in relation to other forms of management practice. The framework aims to identify what differentiates coaching as an approach from other forms of established management and organizational development practice commonly used when working with a transformational change agenda.

The motivation for the paper arose out of one of the authors recently gaining accredited status as a coach, an earlier conference paper given by the authors
reviewing the role of coaching (Bond and Seneque, 2011) and a desire to explore how the methods and approaches adopted by coaching, can be used by front-line managers to facilitate individual and organizational development. For the purposes of this investigation the following objectives were set:

(1) What are the main approaches to management practice that are being used to facilitate transformational change in organizational contexts?

(2) What are the key characteristics of the main approaches to management practice that are being used?

(3) What are the key characteristics in approach that differentiate coaching from other forms of management practice?

Although coaching in organizational contexts is still in its infancy there is already a considerable variety of approaches and terminology surrounding this area of activity. Writers in this area have identified several approaches to coaching; these range from executive coaching, business coaching to life coaching with many variations and permutations in-between. Hamlin et al. (2008), building on earlier studies conducted by Grant (2001) and Joo (2005), identified 37 different definitions of coaching in published studies that they reviewed. Whilst such a rich complexity is natural within an evolving approach to management practice; if managers involved in transformational change are to be convinced of the value of coaching, then some form of further elaboration and explanation of its potential and how its approach differs from more established forms of management practice is necessary. Organizations and managers will want reassurance and evidence that coaching can offer a process to enhance sustainability and competetiveness in challenging times for business and management and that it is not just the latest management mantra or leadership ideology to occupy management writers and displaced corporate human resource professionals. Jackson (2005, p. 45) illustrates this dilemma further when he states: “In order to speak meaningfully about coaching effectiveness, we must first define more accurately what it is. A clearer understanding of meaning would create a better foundation for theoretical and evaluative research, thereby contributing to clarity in the marketplace”.

This paper cannot claim to provide direct quantifiable evidence of the potential effects that management interventions based on a coaching approach could have, however, it does aim to assist in the debate about what coaching is, based on a review of current practice, and seeks to differentiate it from other forms of management practice. In developing this comparative conceptual framework, based on current practice and literature, it is hoped that it will make a useful contribution to conceptualizing coaching as a form of management practice and a useful tool for managers in assessing what approach to management might be most suitable to their organizational and personal needs if their desire is to facilitate sustained change.

2. Defining coaching as a form of organizational intervention

Although coaching is a relatively new entrant to the range of management practices for developing organizational effectiveness, and as an approach to leadership and management, there is already emerging a diverse range of definitions in the literature relating to coaching. In seeking to consider coaching in relation to other more established forms and processes of management intervention it is useful to briefly review the existing literature on definitions of coaching in organizational contexts.
Early definitions of coaching in the management literature place a key emphasis on the contribution that it can make to improve individual and organizational performance (Fourines, 1987; Evered and Selman, 1989; Orth et al., 1987; Popper and Lipshitz, 1992). More recent definitions tend to define coaching as a process and draw a stronger link with learning and development and assisting individuals or teams to reach their full potential (Grant, 2006; Peterson, 1996; Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001; ICF, 2007). Despite this there is still no universally agreed definition of coaching in business contexts, or indeed a clear consensus on how it should be labelled. There are even those who question whether coaching has its own unique identity and body of empirically tested knowledge, as distinct from organizational development and human resource development (Hamlin et al., 2008). They argue that these are “fields of practice” rather than “professions” and that coaching could be conceptualized as a core component within these already established fields of practice.

Whatever the claims and counter-claims, as coaching increases in popularity and is gaining more attention in the management literature there are attempts to define coaching as an approach to personal and organizational intervention that can be sub-divided into a variety of different types. Hamlin et al. (2008) contend that the definitions can be categorized into four main variants, these being: coaching; executive coaching, business coaching and life coaching. This has some similarity with the UK-based Association for Coaching, who identify five main approaches to coaching: personal/life coaching, executive coaching, corporate/business coaching, speciality/niche coaching and group coaching (AC, 2010). There is also a distinction made between approaches to coaching that are oriented to personal development and more “therapeutic” in orientation from those which are solution focused (Ives, 2008). Summerfield (2006) focuses more on the process than client group and classifies approaches to coaching as either being acquisitional (acquiring a new ability) or transformational (provoking personal change). This view of coaching as facilitating growth rather than directing it (i.e. conducting the process rather than directing outcomes) is key to the goal-oriented coaching that is the focus of this paper (and what distinguishes coaching from traditional approaches to training). Such goal-oriented coaching is focused on the achievement of clear, stated goals, rather than the problem analysis characteristic of more therapeutic forms (Grant and Cavanagh, 2004). Coaching is intended to stimulate future development and a change in actions.

Ives (2008) uses a range of useful dichotomous dimensions to classify approaches to coaching in organizational contexts. These include viewing coaching as directive or non-directive, personal-developmental or goal-focused and therapeutic or performance-driven. Within this paper we are largely concerned with approaches to coaching that have been broadly classified as business or corporate coaching. Our rationale for this is that since business is largely concerned with performance, sustainability and competitiveness there needs to be a strong alignment between coaching and business (or organizational) needs. This also accords with the authors’ experience of providing strategic leadership coaching to support whole organization engagement with a new strategic direction (Seneque, 2002).

A useful distinction made by Lawton-Smith and Cox (2007) is between coaching techniques (which are used across a range of management practices) and the coaching process (which is the more holistic process fundamental to people-centred development). Grant and Cavanagh (2004) argue that professional coaching is distinguished by the nature and quality of: its process and intention, its focus, the quality of the coach/coachee relationship, and the issues with which it deals.
Our intention in this paper is not to comment on attempts to define coaching as an emerging “discipline” or as a “profession”, but rather to look at ways in which organizations can engage with the best of what coaching has to offer, alongside other appropriate interventions.

3. Methodology

This paper uses insights gained from a focus group on coaching, reviews of existing literature in the management field, conversations with practising managers who use a coaching-based approach and personal reflections from the authors based on their own experiences to develop an emerging comparative conceptual framework for coaching. Overall the research approach used was one of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Such an approach, which values the collection of data from a variety of sources and the generation of theory from this data, fitted well with the main objectives and motivation for this study. The goal of generating concepts that explain people’s actions is also consistent with grounded theory and supported our goal to conceptualize coaching in comparison to other forms of practice associated with management and organizational development, based in the experience of practicing coaches and managers.

The research methods that were used to underpin this investigation are cognitive mapping (Ackermann and Eden, 1998; Ackermann et al., 2002), to map the overall territory of the field of management practice from a practitioner perspective, literature review to ground the forms of management practice within current debates and discourses, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Aronson, 1994) to further refine and group the management practices identified into a number of “meta” categories, and content analysis (Flick, 2009) of critical incidents which were used to develop the core characteristics of each of the “meta” approaches to management practice identified and to develop an emerging conceptual framework for a comparative analysis of coaching.

In order to investigate and conceptualize coaching and other forms of management practice with which it is contrasted we undertook a cognitive mapping exercise with a focus group of ten professional coaches and managers. This exercise took place at a one-day focus group held in Sydney, Australia in December 2008. The focus group comprised of ten members and the two researchers who also contributed to the discussions based on their own perceptions of management and coaching. The participants were largely drawn from accredited coaches in Australia and the UK and middle managers who had an interest in exploring coaching as a form of management practice. Participants in the focus group had experience of working in the private, public and not for profit sectors and three were operating as freelance accredited coaches. All participants had direct experience of coaching either as a trained and accredited practitioner or having been involved in a coaching relationship as a client. The members of the focus group were selected from personal contacts that the researchers had through organizations that they had been involved with. In this respect the selection of participants was through purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) and it is recognized that there was a high level of homogeneity amongst the sample. The members of the focus group contributed significantly to the cognitive and thematic mapping aspects of this research which led to the development of the “meta-categories” of management practice, which are presented later in this paper.

Ackermann et al. (2002, p. 2) note that “creating a map of the perceptions of the client or group may act as a precursor to other forms of analysis with great effect”. The first task that we undertook with the group was to identify a range of management
practices or approaches that were perceived by participants as being current and in popular use in organizational contexts in which they had experience. Initially a map of 12 perceived distinct and contrasting approaches to management practices was generated and agreed upon and is represented in Table I. These distinct categories were generated from discussion amongst focus group members and articulating examples of where participants had seen or used such an approach to management. We then used a process of group clustering and thematic analysis using key words from descriptions and discussion of these interventions to further refine the categories of management practice that had been considered. This resulted in a decision, for the purposes of this study, to group the range of management practices identified into five generic or “meta” approaches to management practice that reflected the core approaches to management that had been identified. All members of the focus group agreed that the clustering of these approaches into these “meta categories” was appropriate in the context of this investigation.

Once the “meta” categories had been identified and agreed we used a process of content analysis on the critical incidents that participants in the focus group had shared to define the essence or key characteristics associated with these “meta” categories. This further work on defining the key characteristics of these “meta” categories was undertaken by the two researchers involved in this investigation. The content analysis was undertaken independently by the two researchers using our own interpretative frameworks to draw up lists of the key characteristics described in the critical incidents, discussed with one another and refined into an agreed set of key characteristics. The results of this analysis was fed back to original members of the focus group to further validate our interpretation of their perceptions and led to the final list of characteristics presented and discussed in this paper.

The results of the analysis of the data gathered from the focus group and the content analysis undertaken by the researchers was then compared with discourses and debates within the current management literature on coaching and other forms of management practice. Working with this literature has highlighted the evolving nature of coaching in organizational contexts and the often wide and diverse debates about what coaching is. Our review of the literature has surfaced many papers that review coaching and seek to explore its development from a variety of traditions, many rooted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original approaches to management practice identified through cognitive mapping</th>
<th>Distilled approaches to management practice generated through thematic analysis resulting in “meta categories”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager as control agent</td>
<td>General management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager as resource distributor</td>
<td>Facilitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager as strategist</td>
<td>Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager as project manager</td>
<td>Consultancy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager as developer</td>
<td>Coaching</td>
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<td>Manager as facilitator</td>
<td>Coaching</td>
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<td>Manager as trainer</td>
<td>Coaching</td>
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<td>Manager as mentor</td>
<td>Coaching</td>
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<td>Manager as guide</td>
<td>Coaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager as counsellor</td>
<td>Coaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager as consultant</td>
<td>Coaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager as coach</td>
<td>Coaching</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Table I.* Conception of forms management practice and development of “meta” categories
in personal development, occupational psychology, human resource management and
goal- or performance-based management systems. What we found to be less widely
reviewed in the literature was a conceptualization of coaching in relation to a variety of
other forms of management practice. The exceptions to this are an argument for
coaching as a component within OD and HRD – also forms of management practice
(Hamlin et al., 2008), and a framework developed by Lawton-Smith and Cox (2007) for
understanding the activities and strategies used when developing others, whether
through training or coaching. In general this literature, while diverse in nature,
supported the defining characteristics that were identified through the use of content
analysis of the “meta” categories.

4. Results and analysis
In this section of the paper we present and discuss our findings from this exploratory
research into coaching practice and develop an emerging comparative conceptual
framework for understanding and defining coaching in relation to other forms of
management practice.

Table I summarizes the results of the cognitive and thematic mapping exercises that
were undertaken with the focus group. This identifies the original 12 approaches to
management that the group perceived to be most commonly in use in situations of
transformational change and the five “meta-categories” that were agreed as a result of
the thematic analysis.

4.1 Reviewing the “meta” categories of management intervention
Having determined the five “meta” categories of management practice the remainder of
this paper will concentrate on elaborating further the results of the content analysis
that was conducted into these. It is hoped that as a result of this analysis readers will
gain a better understanding of the forms of management practice that we review and
be able to place coaching in a comparative context with other more established forms
of management approaches used in contexts of transformational change.

The framework presented in Table II summarizes the results of the content analysis
used to define the key characteristics of the “meta” approaches to management
practice. These key characteristics have been developed through content analysis of
the data gathered from the focus group, reference to key researchers and writers in the
relevant fields, through reflection on our own practice and experience in the application
of these approaches; and through further consultation and discussion with
practitioners in organizations. We do not claim that this framework is exhaustive or
all-inclusive; however, we believe that the framework assists by locating coaching
within a broader framework of common organizational management practices.

Having identified the key characteristics that underpin or form the core of the
“meta” approaches identified the remainder of this paper aims to review these key
attributes and thus establish a comparative framework in which the key attributes of
coaching as an approach to management practice can be considered. In doing this we
will first briefly review and discuss the findings from the content analysis conducted
and then proceed to a more detailed discussion of what might differentiate coaching as
a form of management and organizational development practice.

4.2 Managing
Whilst the concept of management has been with us for some time, there can be no
doubt that in both theory and practice it is a significantly discussed model of
## Table II.
Characteristics of "meta" approaches to management intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Managing</th>
<th>Consulting</th>
<th>Mentoring</th>
<th>Facilitating</th>
<th>Coaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Controlling and directing: resources, people, processes and risks</td>
<td>Advising (expertise): individual, group and organizational Diagnosis</td>
<td>Developing individual potential</td>
<td>Encouraging and empowering individuals and groups</td>
<td>Goal orientation: individual and team based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining and drawing boundaries: roles, responsibilities etc.</td>
<td>Bringing in outside perspectives/other views</td>
<td>Developing competence and capacity</td>
<td>Challenging/guiding process</td>
<td>Strong emphasis on self reflection and goal setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing strategic thinking with operational action</td>
<td>Supporting, developing, promoting and effecting change</td>
<td>Promoting personal growth/development</td>
<td>Developing frameworks for social interaction</td>
<td>Building capacity to work relationally, socially and organizationally (holistic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and monitoring action</td>
<td>Normally long-term relationship with organisation</td>
<td>Transfer of domain specific knowledge: exercising expertise giving</td>
<td>Promoting reflection</td>
<td>Focus on situation/context the “Here and Now”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on unequal power dynamics</td>
<td>Normally short-term focused intervention</td>
<td>Normally medium/long term</td>
<td>Medium term with focus on process</td>
<td>Time-bounded: contracted relationship for fixed time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Based on power dynamics where the consultant is seen to have technical or process expertise</td>
<td>Unequal power relationships</td>
<td>Ultimate power generally remains with the individual or group</td>
<td>Issues of power and influence are addressed and negotiated as part of the relational process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
organizational leadership. Within the constraints of this paper we could not review the hundreds of ideologies, approaches and conceptual frameworks that have been developed to explain and promulgate notions of management practice. We have instead defined the essential characteristics of management practice as drawn from discussion with practitioners in the focus groups, discussion with managers and coaches operating in a variety of organizational contexts, reflections based on our own experiences and linked this to classical literature in the field where appropriate.

Our review of notions of management with members of the focus group supported a view that managerial practice in most organizations was still closely aligned with notions of control and power over physical and human resources. Participants identified their experiences of management with a wide variety approaches already covered extensively in the management literature. These ranged from processes of management practice rooted in scientific and administrative models (Taylor, 1911; Weber, 1921/1968; Fayol, 1949) human relations based approaches (Mayo, 1949; Drucker, 1954, 1973; Argyris, 1976; Argyris and Schön, 1974) to ideologies and practices based on transformational models (Bass and Avolio, 1994). In discussing these diverse practices further, what appeared common to all of them as a form of management practice was the hierarchical status accorded to management and the centrality of power relations inherent in these contrasting models of management practice.

Results from the content analysis indicated that management as defined in this “meta” category was deemed to be largely about processes that sought to leverage the maximum output possible from the human capital employed. Even in exploring notions of empowerment, emotionally intelligent managers and more recent ideologies of management practice, a perception that all these approaches were essentially about manipulating human behaviour to maximize organizational returns was dominant in the discussions. The language of current management practice used in describing this type of approach such as “human capital”, “lean organizations”, “outsourcing” and “downsizing” largely depersonalizes organizations and often views employees or staff as expendable human resources.

We acknowledge that within the management and particularly leadership literature there have been numerous studies that seek to identify management styles or approaches and a large number of frameworks of management styles have been developed and used by managers (Tannenbaum and Schmidt, 1973; Blake and Mouton, 1964; Likert, 1967; Reddin, 1970; Hersey and Blanchard, 1969; Adair, 1973). However many of these existing frameworks are abstract and general and offer the manager a range of styles within the paradigm of classical management. What we seek to achieve with our emerging conceptual framework is a comparative analysis based on current practice in contemporary organizational contexts.

These more classical models of management practice and styles are based in hierarchies of power and a discourse of largely resource and structurally based notions of organization are clearly, whilst widely applied, a fundamentally differentiated approach from a model of management practice that uses coaching as its approach to effect organizational change and enhance individual or group performance.

4.3 Consulting
The second “meta” approach to management practice that was explored was the notion of the manager as consultant and how this differed from an approach to management practice based on a model of coaching. There is no doubt that consultancy, whether internal or external in nature, plays a key role in helping to shape large areas of
organizational life. Consulting interventions can take a range of forms, from being directive and task focused to non-directive and process oriented (Lippitt and Lippitt, 1978). At its extreme, advocates such as Schein (1987), Block (1983) and Cockman et al. (1996, 1999) have developed models of consulting that are based largely around working with organizational processes and systems. Once again, in seeking to define some of the key characteristics of consulting, we have sought to recognize this diversity in theory and practice relating to modes of consultancy and their operation.

When organizations encounter blocks or obstacles to individual, group or organizational effectiveness, they often bring in outside consultants (or employ internal consultants) who bring not only an outside perspective and other views, but also bring expertise in those areas where there is a perceived lack of expertise in the organization (for instance, project management, risk management, strategy, organizational design, etc.). Typically, the consulting process would involve some form of organizational diagnosis in order to design an appropriate “intervention” to effect the desired change and would provide the necessary support to achieve the desired organizational outcomes/results. The process is essentially solution oriented/driven.

Content analysis conducted as a result of the focus group deliberations and further discussions with practising managers distinguished consulting from coaching in a number of respects. First, it was perceived that most managerial interventions from a consultancy-based perspective were generally external to the individual, team or organizational context in which the intervention is occurring. Second the relationship was seen as very focused, often with problems or issues already defined by stakeholders external to those now subjected to the consultancy intervention. It was often the case that managers at a strategic level sourced external or internal consultants to “fix” what they perceived to be failings at an operational level. Most consultants were also hired because of technical expertise and a perceived ability to effect organizational change in the short term.

Analysis of the focus group discussions indicated that processes of management based on a consultancy approach are usually more associated with project management and working on organizational wide and systems based approaches. The results of the content analysis suggests that consulting normally has a defined outcome specified in advance whereas goals associated with coaching are generally developed in a more collaborative manner between the coach and coachee(s). Clegg et al. (2003) also compare and contrast the process of coaching against traditional (expert) consulting, which they claim is focused on providing advice and developing solutions rather than helping clients solve their own problems. However, Hamlin et al. (2008) argue that when business consultants operate in a collaborative mode, using facilitative methods to bring about behavioural and strategic change, there is no difference between these participatory approaches and coaching.

4.4 Facilitating
The next “meta” category that we consider is facilitation. Facilitation has been used widely in a variety of professional and organizational contexts. Some may argue that good management involves and requires the deployment of skills of facilitation but this may not be universally accepted. There is clearly a body of literature and extensive case study material about the utilization of facilitation approaches within organizational contexts (MacNeil, 2003, 2004; Heron, 1993). Facilitation as an approach to management has been widely advocated and used in contexts of human
resource development and among professional groups, particularly those involved in the delivery of health and social care.

Discussions in the focus group led to a consensus that facilitation cannot replace conventional approaches to management and has been criticized by some as woolly and lacking substance where it has tried to do so. Its greatest strength was seen to be in working with socially constructed teams to achieve a desired outcome. In this respect our investigation supported a view that facilitation seeks to ensure effective social process through developing and designing frameworks for social interaction. These frameworks are engineered in such a way as to allow full participation in and contribution to decision making. While the intention of facilitation is to empower all those participating, one of its goals is also to challenge current ways of doing things and guide processes in order to explore alternatives.

In exploring facilitation as one of the “meta” categories, participants felt that this type of management intervention was the closest to coaching in an organizational context. This is supported by writers such as Mink et al. (1993), Redshaw (2000) and Beattie (2002) who have conceptualized coaching as “facilitation of learning”. This is also supported by research undertaken by Ellinger and Bolstrum (2002) who claims that the two terms are synonymous. Participants in the focus group, however, saw facilitation as a skill that coaches might use but not as an approach that was synonymous with coaching.

The key differences in characteristics that the content analysis identified were related to issues concerning task and process focus. It was widely perceived that facilitation was non-directive, whereas coaching could be directive or non-directive and that coaching had a greater goal orientation than approaches to management intervention based on a facilitative model. Issues related to power in respect of facilitating and coaching were also widely debated with the focus group concluding that from a perspective of facilitating ultimate power generally remains with the individual or group, whereas from a coaching perspective issues of power and influence are addressed and negotiated as part of the relational process.

4.5 Mentoring
The concept of mentoring has grown in popularity in recent years as an effective approach to management and professional development. Applications of mentoring have become increasingly popular in large public sector organizations as a means of employee induction, management development and on occasions executive development. Mentoring systems may be internal or draw on external expertise, as often occurs in schemes for senior executives. Mentoring has been used widely in the UK, USA, Australia and elsewhere with distinct groups such as women, black employees or youth to try and break down traditional obstacles to development and progression for these groups.

Discussions in the focus group identified that mentoring is concerned with explicitly developing the competence and capability in an individual in the context of a one-on-one relationship, where the mentor has a depth of expertise and experience in particular areas. The personal growth and development of the person being mentored is pursued in the context of an ongoing relationship with a more skilled and experienced person. Whilst the terms mentoring and coaching are often used interchangeably within much of the management literature key writers in the field such as Grant (2001) assert that coaching is different to, and separate from, other forms of professional learning facilitation and performance enhancement such as mentoring.
and training. The outcomes from our content analysis support the views expressed by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) that also seeks to differentiate mentoring from coaching (CIPD, 2010). There is a high level of congruence between our findings of key characteristics and those reported by the CIPD.

Focus group participants identified that by its very nature mentoring has a different perspective on power relations from coaching. A mentor is often seen as an expert with both technical and process knowledge unlike a coach who if successful will see their coachees develop more skill and knowledge than themselves. Mentoring was also perceived as having a clear focus on the development of an individual, albeit often in an organizational context, whereas coaching was seen as an activity that works with individuals, groups and organizations at a more systemic level. Results of the content analysis indicated that mentoring was also perceived to be more general and abstracted from the “here and now” context that coaching often operates within as it often has a professional development focus on building a career in a particular sector.

4.6 Coaching
Having briefly reviewed the other “meta” approaches to management practice that were identified in this investigation we now move on to consider some of the key characteristics associated with the practice of coaching. As the main focus of this research was to explore coaching in relation to other forms of management a considerable amount of time was spent in the focus group exploring individual and collective notions of what coaching is, how it operates in current practice and some of the main characteristics associated with its approach.

Members of the focus group defined coaching as “a holistic process intended to build the capacity of people in organisations to work relationally, socially and organizationally”. Coaching was perceived to be a form of management practice that can be both individual and team focused, and while it is a goal-oriented and time-bounded activity, there is also a strong emphasis on self-reflection as part of developing individuals and teams. Participants articulated very strongly a view that the context for coaching is the “here and now” situation that the individual or team is faced with and needs to make sense of in order to make decisions and act effectively in it. Coaching was described as an intervention that is intended to assess and improve individual and team performance, thus enhancing organizational efficiency and effectiveness. There was agreement that for coaching to significantly impact organizational effectiveness (i.e. to improve operations and make best use of human resources; Bass and Avolio, 1994), coaching interventions need to be more systemically conceived, as we explore further.

While coaching has emerged relatively recently as a significant part of organization-wide interventions (including leadership development, strategic and culture change initiatives), organizational psychologists and management consultants have been involved in what is now termed executive coaching for a much longer period. The more recent phenomenon is part of broader attempts to promote organizational learning and change (prompted by the work of Senge, 1990); more holistic approaches to organizational intervention that are targeted at individual transformation and growth as part of organization-wide initiatives; an increased commitment to leadership development and wide-scale organizational change programmes to enhance performance and facilitate sustained change.

Results from the content analysis indicated that coaching supports individuals and teams in realizing and achieving their objectives and can be seen as a holistic
intervention into organizational practices. Analysis of the critical incidents suggested that a collaborative relationship is at the core of the coaching contract; one which promotes self-directed learning and supports sustained behavioural change on the part of the person being coached. The coach does not provide answers or solutions to issues raised by the coachee, but assumes rather that the person being coached has the necessary insights, and it is the goal of the coaching process to surface these tacit understandings to a level of conscious awareness in order for the coachee to direct his/her own learning.

Coaching was often suggested to be a means of integrating individual, team and organizational learning and change and, through the process, enhancing performance in a dynamic way. There was agreement that in order to effectively integrate individual, team and organizational learning and change, coaching interventions need to be conceived systemically from the beginning, and not focus primarily on impacting individual effectiveness. This also applies at the level of team coaching as systemically conceived and practised. Developing the individual/team’s capacity to identify and find solutions to their own problem situations in the context of the strategic intent and goals of the broader “system” is therefore at the heart of the coaching process, which aims to promote sustainable learning processes.

5. Conclusion

Within this paper we have sought to situate coaching within a comparative conceptual framework of practices that are and can be used by managers for organizational interventions when seeking to work in contexts that promote management and organizational development. We have thus reviewed the notion of coaching through developing a framework that seeks to differentiate its essential characteristics from other forms of management practice common in organizations. In adopting this approach we fully acknowledge the limitations of defining complex approaches to management, which can be viewed as reductionism. It does, however, we contend assist to place the concept of coaching alongside other forms of management practice. In doing this we can develop a comparative view of coaching and note where its key characteristics, as defined from practice, converge with and diverge from more established and familiar modes of management practice in organizations.

As a result of having conducted an exploratory study into coaching as a form of management practice, and placing this in a comparative framework developed through this investigation, the authors draw the conclusion that coaching can be seen as an effective approach to managing a diverse and rapidly changing workforce. In placing coaching within this broader framework we propose that coaching is one of a range of approaches that organizations and managers can consider when seeking to improve organizational effectiveness and efficiency using a system-wide perspective.

The results of the study suggest that coaching, when used as part of an organization wide strategy, can offer a framework for human resource development that is grounded in the “here and now” and assist with balancing individual, team and organizational development needs. The outcome of this small-scale investigation supports the assertions of Cavanagh (2006) and others in seeing coaching as a systemic activity that seeks to foreground complexity, pluralist perspectives, unpredictability and contextual factors and the search for achieving a balance between stability and instability as one of the major contributions that it can make to management intervention.

The findings from the focus group and conversations with managers who have used coaching-based approaches, support recent research conducted by Hamlin et al. (2008),
who suggest that effective managers and managerial leaders embed effective coaching at the core of their management practice. It also supports earlier research by Evered and Selman (1989, p. 16) that contended that good coaching was at the heart of management.

In terms of further avenues to explore, our study supports a view that coaching seeks to build competence and capacity and to some degree shares some of the characteristics adopted by practitioners of facilitation, mentoring and process consultancy-based approaches. Its key-defining feature, however, is that it concentrates on both content and process, the complex interplay between these forms of knowledge and is based on developing sustainable and challenging personal relationships in the context of a collective endeavour. Thus we believe that it offers a sustainable approach to building leadership in complex organizational contexts if it forms part of a strategic, system-wide intervention, as outlined in Section 4.6. Whole systems interventions (of the kind characterized by Schäffer, 2007, 2010a, b) are supported by forms of coaching intended to facilitate and sustain whole systems change. This study opens the way for further research on the role of coaching (and the nature of the coaching required) to support such systemic interventions. This is particularly relevant to the large-scale, cross-sectoral systemic change initiatives that are being undertaken using various social technologies for complex social change (op cit).

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Further reading


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