Coaching in the NHS - Fife

Background

NHS Fife employs approximately 9,000 staff and was created in 2003 following a reorganisation of health services in Scotland. The health organisation encourages its managers to benefit from coaching and has an emergent coaching strategy, which supports the development of coaching skills among its managers. NHS Fife currently favours an approach of ‘accretion’, where coaching spreads slowly and informally through the organisation. This organic approach might be likened to a ‘contagion’, which could potentially transform the management style of the organisation.

External coaching

NHS Fife uses external coaching primarily for its senior and middle managers, with the focus being to improve performance and enhance people’s personal development. The senior management team have external coaching, and other senior managers have received external coaching through participating in a high-profile leadership programme, ‘Delivering the Future’, run by the Scottish Government. This programme also uses action learning sets led by an external executive coach as an additional learning method. Other senior managers have heard about the opportunities for external coaching through ‘the grapevine’ and have organised these with their own managers.

The managers interviewed for this research had experienced coaching as learner-centred, giving them a freedom to set their own learning agenda and ownership of their own development, while still focusing on organisational needs. In one case, a manager who has benefited from coaching had gone on to commission coaching for her own team and had become aware of using coaching techniques as part of her own practice. NHS Fife has used an external coaching organisation, selected by the senior team because of their positive personal experiences of the company and its reputation (that is, in the Scottish Government’s leadership programme). One senior manager acknowledged that ‘the strength is in the intimate relationship between coach and coachee’.

Internal coaching

This is done by staff in the organisational development (OD) department for all levels of staff and by managers who have completed internal and external coaching courses and those who would have developed this style naturally.

Coaching and change

Senior managers interviewed tend to view external coaching as a powerful experience that helps support personal and professional learning. For them, coaching helps bring about significant change and clear measurable outcomes. External coaching is also perceived by some as a positive endorsement of the individual’s value to the organisation, leading to a stronger sense of loyalty to NHS Fife. Senior managers also found that their experience of being coached helped them to use similar coaching methods and techniques in coaching their own teams.

Executive coaching was also perceived by one manager as having the power to liberate a ‘new energy’
within the organisation. The challenge for NHS Fife and the individuals being coached is how best to maximise the potential unleashed.

The managers interviewed valued coaching and saw it as an integral part of their role. One senior manager understood the coaching culture to be a ‘subset of a wider cultural change’ and should not be developed separately or elevated above other important learning and development initiatives that help create a learning organisation.

**Coaching strategy**

Coaching capacity is being developed in managers for several reasons:
- for individuals and focused on their individual development to deliver in their jobs
- developing coaching skills in managers so that they can develop others to better deliver in their jobs
- to assist in the direction of creating a learning culture.

**Towards a more formal strategy?**

NHS Fife continues to develop its approaches to external coaching, coaching skill development for managers and coaching as an implicit component of organisational development. The current consensus seems to be that the organisation should continue to adopt an ‘organic and emergent’ approach to growth.

Part of this thinking stems from the awareness by some of those interviewed that a more formal, rigid strategy might be premature, given the organisation’s journey away from a classic training model towards one that is learning-centred. If coaching were to become a formal offering, the fear is that several problems could arise, such as:
- Coaching would overshadow other learning and development approaches: ‘The dangers are that the approach can become the approach instead of one approach. Coaching will be seen to fail to deliver because it is not appropriate for all and the concept will become tarnished.’
- Coaching would become a negative experience: ‘Formal coaching would be viewed with suspicion. People would fear that it was remedial and that if they were offered coaching, they were failing in some way.’
- Instead of being demand-led, coaching is imposed: ‘I believe the lived experience is important, rather than formally saying “everyone is going to be coached”.’
- Limit the scope of coaching: ‘Historically, training is seen as more directive and focused on task accomplishment. These “instructional approaches” would lead to a limited view of coaching.’

Within NHS Fife some of those interviewed felt that there was much more to be done to realise the greater potential of coaching, both as a learning and development approach and an OD tool. Although there are some strong arguments for a more systematic approach to external coaching, the health organisation believes that a more emergent, organic approach is more congruent with its culture and learning and development strategy.

Ultimately, the organisation knows that the question of coaching strategy comes down to ‘belief’, as one senior manager explains: ‘We could spend a lot of time justifying our approach or doing evaluation rather than developing our coaching capacity. To a large extent it’s a matter of faith. You have to believe in your approach because it fits what you do.’