INTERNAL COACHING DISCUSSION FORUM

Discussion Paper 01

Why Do Coaching Skills Training Programmes Not Create a Coaching Culture?

Many organisations have invested in coaching skills training. Far fewer believe they have created a coaching culture. This paper explores why.

Tom Battye

EMCC Global Master Practitioner | Accredited Supervisor | EMCC Global Supervision Award Winner

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tombattye.co.uk

Introduction

Organisations across the public and private sectors have invested heavily in coaching over the past two decades. They have trained managers in coaching skills, hired external coaches for senior leaders, and in many cases built internal coaching faculties. Yet remarkably few believe they have created a coaching culture. Earlier surveys cited by Hawkins (2012) found that relatively few organisations believed they were deriving the full benefits of executive coaching. The gap Hawkins identified remains recognisable in many organisations today.

This paper explores why. It draws on the work of Peter Hawkins, whose model of coaching culture development remains one of the most widely cited frameworks in the field, and on the research of Katharine St John-Brooks into the practical realities of internal coaching. It also references Mark Robson's doctoral research into the lived experience of internal coaches. The aim is to explain why certain kinds of investment consistently fall short, and what a more strategic approach might look like.

Two forms of investment

Before going further, it is worth distinguishing two common forms of coaching investment that this paper addresses. The first is manager-as-coach training: programmes that equip leaders and managers to use a coaching style as part of their everyday leadership. The second is the creation of internal coaching capacity: selecting, training, and accrediting employees to coach colleagues outside their own line of command, typically alongside their day job. The two are related but distinct. What they share is a vulnerability to the same underlying problem: both create coaching activity without necessarily creating the organisational conditions in which that activity can take root and become cultural.

What is a coaching culture?

Before asking why coaching cultures fail to emerge, it is worth being precise about what one would look like. Hawkins (2012) offers a definition that has become widely adopted:

> *A coaching culture exists in an organisation when a coaching approach is a key aspect of how the leaders, managers, and staff engage and develop all their people and engage their stakeholders, in ways that create increased individual, team, and organisational performance and shared value for all stakeholders.*

This definition does two things. First, it extends beyond one-to-one coaching sessions. A coaching culture is one where a coaching approach has become embedded in how people relate to each other and to external stakeholders. It encompasses far more than how many coaching sessions take place. Second, it explicitly links coaching to performance and value creation. Coaching, in this definition, serves something larger than individual development.

The five levels of culture

Hawkins builds on Ed Schein's work to propose five levels at which organisational culture operates. Understanding these levels is essential to understanding why coaching skills training, on its own, is insufficient.

The first level, artefacts, comprises the visible and tangible elements of culture: strategy documents, competency frameworks, mission statements, and the physical environment. An organisation at this level might include coaching in its leadership competency framework or reference it in its people strategy.

The second level, behaviours, describes what people actually do. At this level, coaching skills are being used in one-to-one conversations, team meetings, and performance discussions. Training programmes mainly operate at this level. At their best, they expand what people are able to do. But they do not, on their own, determine what people feel permitted, expected, or rewarded for doing.

The third level, mindsets, concerns what people believe. A coaching mindset holds that you get the most from people by engaging them with issues and helping them think through their options. As Hawkins puts it, there is a belief that nobody has all the answers, and that through inquiring together, better responses emerge.

The fourth level, emotional ground, describes the prevailing mood of the organisation: its energy, levels of personal engagement, willingness to treat problems as learning opportunities, and the balance of challenge and support.

The fifth and deepest level, motivational roots, concerns what ultimately drives people. In a coaching culture, this includes a commitment to lifelong learning, a belief in other people's potential, and a conviction that collective exploration produces better results than thinking alone.

Most coaching investment operates at the first two levels: adding coaching to artefacts (strategy documents, competency models) and training people in coaching behaviours (skills programmes, workshops). The deeper three levels, where culture is sustained, remain largely untouched. Artefacts and behaviours matter; they can express or contradict deeper assumptions. They are insufficient, though, when disconnected from belief, emotion, and motivation.

Developmental stages

Peterson (2010), cited in Hawkins, identifies four stages through which organisations typically progress in their use of coaching. In the first stage, ad hoc, coaching is driven by individuals: a particular leader hires a coach, or an HR professional arranges coaching for a specific need. In the second, managed, the organisation begins to coordinate its coaching provision and establish some structure. In the third, proactive, coaching starts to be linked to leadership development and organisational priorities. Only in the fourth stage, strategic, does coaching become fully integrated with the organisation's business strategy and culture change agenda.

In many organisations, coaching sits somewhere between stages one and two: there is activity, but it is not yet strategic. The gap between activity and culture is where the problem lies.

Why training alone is not enough

Coaching skills training is valuable. It equips managers with techniques for asking better questions, listening more attentively, and structuring developmental conversations. But it operates within a set of assumptions that are rarely examined.

The first assumption is that if people know how to coach, they will coach. In practice, the return to the day job is swift and powerful. Managers who complete a two-day coaching skills workshop go back to environments that reward decisiveness, speed, and directive leadership. The skills they have learned compete with the culture they inhabit, and the culture usually wins.

The second assumption is that coaching skills are sufficient for cultural change. They are not. Skills are second-level phenomena in Hawkins' model. Without corresponding shifts in mindset (third level), emotional ground (fourth level), and motivational roots (fifth level), the skills remain a surface overlay. People can coach, but they do not believe in coaching as a way of working. They use it when prompted or observed, and revert to habitual patterns the rest of the time.

The third assumption is that change will cascade naturally. If you train enough managers, the thinking goes, the culture will shift. But cultures are self-reinforcing systems. Without structural changes to how performance is measured, how success is recognised, and how leadership is modelled at the top, the training creates a brief perturbation that the system absorbs and neutralises.

The failure patterns

The same problem appears in a different form when organisations move beyond manager training and create internal coaching pools. Having coaching skills is necessary; the deeper question is whether the organisation has created the legitimacy, time, governance, and recognition that allow internal coaches to keep practising. St John-Brooks' (2014) research with internal coaching practitioners and lead coaches reveals three recurring narratives of failure.

In the first, a coaching scheme is established by a passionate advocate, almost always a coach themselves, who then moves on or is made redundant. Their replacement lacks the seniority, energy, or personal experience of coaching to maintain the profile. The scheme quietly declines.

In the second, a scheme starts with enthusiasm but hits a wall when workload pressures mount. Coaches have less time available, feel their contribution is not valued by the organisation, and lose motivation.

In the third, a scheme has a senior champion who provides cover and credibility, so the lead coach does not feel the need to collect evaluation data. When the champion leaves, the lead coach is left without evidence to demonstrate value to a successor who may have no personal experience of coaching.

What unites these narratives is a common structural weakness: the coaching initiative depends on individuals rather than systems. It sits on one pillar when it needs three.

Coaching in the shadows

Robson's (2020) doctoral research adds a further dimension. He found that internal coaches operated in one of two environments: 'coaching under organisational floodlights' or 'coaching in the shadows.' Those coaching under floodlights worked in organisations where coaching was visibly linked to strategy, where their contribution was acknowledged, and where infrastructure existed to support them. Those coaching in the shadows operated with little organisational visibility or recognition.

Perhaps most striking was Robson's finding of what he describes as a 'tacit agreement' between coaches and their line managers not to discuss coaching. Line managers frequently had neither visibility of nor a stake in their direct report's coaching role. The result was not usually hostility, but something more quietly corrosive: indifference. Coaching was tolerated rather than valued, and its contribution to the organisation went unacknowledged in performance reviews.

Robson also found what he terms a 'conversion experience' among internal coaches: almost a quarter of his survey participants said they were motivated to become coaches by some prior experience of being coached. The language they used was notable: 'light

bulb moment,' 'life-changing,' 'powerful.' This suggests that direct experience of coaching is a significant motivator for recruitment and engagement, and that taster sessions can serve as a catalyst. Yet many organisations invest in training coaches without first creating the conditions for this kind of experiential encounter.

Structural requirements

Hawkins argues that a sustainable coaching culture requires three foundational pillars.

The first is a coaching strategy that is linked to the organisation's mission, business strategy, and people development policies. It must be a living strategy, developed collaboratively and constantly updated.

The second is alignment between the coaching culture and the wider organisational culture change. Coaching cannot succeed as a standalone initiative. It must be in service of the broader direction the organisation is travelling.

The third is a coaching infrastructure comprising three elements: a sponsorship or steering group with visibility and authority; a management group that coordinates and integrates coaching activities; and a community of practice of all those providing coaching. Hawkins is explicit that over-reliance on a single driving force is dangerous. A small, effective management group is far preferable to a single champion, however committed.

When any of these pillars is missing, coaching becomes vulnerable to the sustainability failures that St John-Brooks documents. The passionate advocate who leaves takes the first pillar with them. The workload wall erodes the third. The absent evaluation data undermines the first and second.

Evidence that it can work

The picture is not entirely bleak. Organisations that have attended to the structural requirements have achieved significant results.

The ICF Prism Award case study for GSK (2016) describes how the company established a Coaching Centre of Excellence with the aim of democratising coaching for all career levels, and reports a return on investment of $66 million. Ireland's Health Service Executive, recognised with the ICF International Prism Award in 2018, built a comprehensive internal coaching programme with robust governance, standardised processes, and ICF-accredited internal training. Over 8,200 employees received coaching, two-thirds of staff reported that coaching enhanced teamwork, and patient mortality rates decreased over the same period. The mortality figure should be treated cautiously, as the coaching programme was one of many concurrent initiatives, but it

illustrates the scale of organisational outcomes being discussed in relation to coaching investment.

Hawkins (2012) and St John-Brooks (2014) both document Southern Railway's ILM Level 5 coaching programme, guided by a steering group that evolved over four cohorts, which produced a statistically significant correlation between coaching programme participation and employee engagement scores, and won a National Training Award.

Hawkins (2012) also describes how the DWP aligned its coaching strategy to seven strategic priorities spanning learning, professional capability, performance, leadership, customer service, change, and employee engagement, and how the FCO linked its coaching strategy explicitly to its People Strategy and organisational purpose, focusing coaching investment on priority strategic goals.

What these examples appear to share is coaching strategy as much as coaching activity: deliberate alignment with organisational priorities, supported by governance, evaluation, and senior commitment.

From activity to culture

One senior executive quoted in Hawkins captures the challenge well: 'It is time for coaching to come out of the closet and be part of the bigger change journey.'

This is the central argument of this paper. Coaching skills training is a necessary but insufficient condition for creating a coaching culture. Training operates at the level of behaviours and artefacts. Coaching culture only becomes durable when it reaches mindsets, emotional ground, and motivational roots. To shift culture, organisations need to move from coaching as an activity to coaching as a strategy, with all the structural commitment that implies.

Hawkins also notes a timing challenge that is worth naming: the costs of creating a coaching culture are concentrated at the early stages, while the benefits accrue further down the road. Business outcomes only start to emerge when coaching has progressed through several of the seven steps in his model. Organisations that expect quick returns from initial training investment will be disappointed, and their disappointment will reinforce the very scepticism that coaching needs to overcome.

Questions for discussion

This paper accompanies Session 01 of the Internal Coaching Discussion Forum. The following questions are intended to provoke reflection and discussion among participants.

1. Where would you place your organisation on Hawkins' five levels of culture? Which levels has your coaching investment reached, and which remain untouched?

2. Which of St John-Brooks' three failure narratives most closely resembles your experience? What structural changes would be needed to prevent them?

3. To what extent is coaching in your organisation linked to business strategy, or does it sit as a standalone HR initiative?

4. If you were designing a coaching strategy from scratch, which of Hawkins' three pillars would be hardest to establish in your organisation, and why?

5. How might you create the kind of direct 'taster' experience that Robson's research suggests is such a powerful motivator for engagement with coaching?

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About the author

Tom Battye is an EMCC Global Master Practitioner, Accredited Supervisor, and EMCC Global Supervision Award winner. He has spent 25 years training internal coaches across the public and private sectors. He is the founder of Tom Battye Coaching and the creator of CoachInsights, an AI-powered coaching assessment platform. His programmes include the Certificate in Executive Coaching (EMCC Practitioner, AC accredited) and the Leader as Coach programme (EMCC Foundation, AC accredited).

tombattye.co.uk | tom@tombattye.com

About this series

This paper is part of the Internal Coaching Discussion Forum, a six-session webinar series for L&D, OD, and talent leaders running from May to November 2026. Each session explores a genuine question about what it takes to create a coaching culture, drawing on published research, named case studies, and 25 years of practical experience. Format: 20 minutes of content, 40 minutes of discussion, via Zoom. Details and registration at tombattye.co.uk/forum.