

INTERNAL COACHING DISCUSSION FORUM
Discussion Paper 03

Should You Even Build an Internal Coaching Faculty?

Most literature assumes the answer is yes. It is not obvious that it should be.

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The question in this title is rarely asked. Most of the literature on internal coaching assumes that building a coaching faculty is a good idea and moves straight to the practicalities of how. But some organisations have made a deliberate strategic choice not to build one. They have chosen instead to train all managers in a coaching style of leadership, without creating a separate group of designated internal coaches. That is a legitimate position, one that deserves more discussion than it typically receives.

Two delivery models

Organisations that want to embed coaching in their culture have two main approaches available to them, and most end up combining elements of both.

The dedicated coaching faculty

In this model, the organisation selects, trains, and accredits a group of employees to serve as internal coaches. These coaches typically coach alongside their day jobs, offering formal coaching sessions to colleagues in other parts of the organisation. Ireland's Health Service Executive provides one of the most comprehensive examples: a programme with robust governance, standardised processes, ICF-accredited internal training, and coaching accessible to all employees. Over 8,200 employees have received coaching. The programme is credited with improvements in teamwork, stress management, and patient outcomes.

The strength of this model is depth. Trained coaches can offer a quality of engagement that goes beyond what a line manager can provide in a developmental conversation. The challenge is infrastructure: selection, training, supervision, matching, quality assurance, and the ongoing management of a dispersed group of part-time coaches.

The manager-as-coach model

In this model, the organisation does not create a separate coaching function. Instead, it trains managers at every level to use a coaching style in their day-to-day leadership.

Snape's (2012) research, cited in St John-Brooks and Duncan (2026), quotes a company that considered internal coaching and decided against it: "We are building a coaching culture using a coaching style in conversations, rather than going to see someone for a session (during which people would not be working: is that productive during a recession?)". The same company described its aim as a coaching culture "that can benefit everyone rather than limiting the availability of coaching to a targeted few." The objection is not that coaching does not work. It is that a formal coaching session takes two people out of the business for an hour, and that the same skills deployed in ordinary conversation reach further for less.

SGX Group adopted a version of this approach, training approximately 40 senior leaders as internal coaches using the Center for Creative Leadership's curriculum. These leader-coaches initially coached their direct reports, with some later extending cross-functionally. A quarterly community of practice sustained the learning. Employee engagement scores relating to manager support, communication, and career interest rose measurably.

Google's Career Guru programme is another variant. Managers are trained to serve as drop-in career coaches, making one-to-one coaching accessible to any employee globally without a

formal coaching faculty. The programme scaled from 6,000 to 36,000 employees and is cited as a contributor to Google's employer reputation.

The economics

In 2012, the BBC calculated that its internal coaching sessions cost £50 per hour (Macann, 2012, cited in St John-Brooks and Duncan, 2026). That figure took into account two full-time staff managing the programme, the costs of in-house training, CPD, and accreditation, though not opportunity costs. The internal coaching service had delivered 600 programmes of ten hours of coaching. The BBC then took the lowest fee charged on its external coach list, multiplied it by 600 programmes of ten hours, and reported the difference back to the organisation.

Set that against the external market. A snapshot survey in 2021 put average external executive coaching rates in the UK at around £265 per hour (Passmore, 2021). The comparison is not exact, since the BBC figure is from 2012 and central costs attach to external coaching too, in assessment, selection, administration, and invoicing. Adjusted for inflation, Robson (2020) puts the BBC figure at around £70 an hour in 2020 terms. Even on the most cautious reading, internal provision costs a fraction of what the external market charges. That gap puts coaching within reach of people several layers below the executive floor.

Cost, however, is a dangerous primary motive. Hawkins (2012) warns that building an internal coaching community “requires investment, long-term commitment and support, and careful planning. It should not be undertaken lightly.” An organisation that builds a faculty to save money, and underinvests in training, supervision, and quality assurance to protect the saving, will produce cheap coaching that nobody wants.

The ethical dilemmas

Internal coaches encounter ethical dilemmas more often than external coaches do, for a structural reason: they work inside the same system as their clients (St John-Brooks, 2010). The coach shares the client's employer, the client's politics, and often the client's colleagues. Every one of those overlaps is a place where a dilemma can form.

The dilemmas cluster in four areas. Boundaries: between coaching and mentoring, between the coach's role and the line manager's, between the coaching conversation and the coach's day job. Confidentiality: what its limits are, and where the strain falls. Bias: managing prejudice, discrimination, and intersectionality. Power: differentials inside the coaching relationship and outside it.

St John-Brooks and Duncan (2026) set out what these look like in practice. A client asks for coaching to prepare for an interview outside the organisation that they have not mentioned to their line manager. A coach holds information from the day job that bears on a client's performance, which the client has not raised and the coach cannot introduce. A line manager presses the coach for a view on how the client is “getting on”. A client discloses that they are being badly bullied and asks the coach to tell nobody. A conflict between the coach's day job and their coaching role surfaces only after the client has been taken on. HR opens disciplinary proceedings against a client and demands the coach's input. A client is

experiencing intersectionality issues that are holding back their career, in an organisation that does not practise what it preaches on equity and inclusion, and does not want to raise it.

Katharine St John-Brooks describes coaching a client through preparation for a senior promotion board, then being told privately, a month before the board sat, that the client had no chance: the panel chair held a fixed and unofficial view that the post-holder had to be a graduate, and her client was not. She could not reveal what she knew. She continued to coach, unable to be fully authentic in the relationship. That is what an ethical dilemma feels like from the inside. No amount of training resolves it in advance.

Biquet's (2021) survey for EMCC Global, covering 353 coaches across 46 countries, found that nearly three-quarters had encountered between one and four ethical dilemmas in the preceding twelve months. The most common source, cited by 42%, was a clash between the coach's value system and the client's. Asked how they would resolve a dilemma, 72% said they would take it to supervision.

Codes of ethics inform the background but are rarely a coach's first recourse when a dilemma actually arrives. They resolve dilemmas by talking to someone. Most go to supervision. A faculty without funded supervision has therefore withheld the mechanism by which its own dilemmas get handled.

The supply-and-demand trap

Organisations tend to concentrate on the supply side, selecting and training and supporting their coaches, while neglecting the demand side, which is finding them clients. The result is a population of under-employed internal coaches, which St John-Brooks and Duncan (2026) describe as a criminal waste of talent and a drag on any return the organisation hoped to see.

The coaches themselves are unambiguous about the effect. One describes being trained at considerable expense and then left without anyone to coach: "I feel as though I'm deskilling and already need a top-up. I'm losing confidence." Another was trained before the organisation had begun looking for clients at all, and resents the gap: it should have been seamless, "not leaving us twiddling our thumbs". A third watches the scheme go unmarketed and reads the silence accurately, guessing that the centre is protecting the coaches from being swamped: "but it's bad news from where I'm sitting. I'm losing motivation, enthusiasm, connectedness." These coaches were speaking in 2010. St John-Brooks and Duncan reproduce them in 2026 with the observation that little has changed.

Lead coaches are nervous of being swamped, so they under-market the scheme. Take-up is slow. Coaches deskill or lose interest. Meanwhile anyone who does ask for coaching receives it, whether or not they occupy an influential position or bring a business-critical issue, because the coaches want the practice. The organisation ends up with a faculty that is simultaneously under-used and badly targeted.

Client readiness compounds this. Research on coachability (Stokes, 2007; Norman, 2024) suggests that the success of an assignment depends substantially on how ready the client is to be coached, and an organisation that offers coaching to all comers without any assessment of readiness dilutes the impact and wastes the coaches.

How a coaching pool dies

An enthusiastic HR Director sponsored the internal coaching service. She had been coached herself and believed in it, but she commissioned no strategy and provided no real governance. When the lead coach left, she handed responsibility to someone who was not a coach and had other pressing priorities. When she herself left a few years later, nobody was left to defend the budget. It disappeared, taking with it the money for CPD and for training new coaches.

Considerable thought had gone into the supply side. The coaches were well trained and well supervised. Almost none had gone into generating clients, or into targeting the coaching where it might matter most. Demand never materialised. The coaches took fewer and fewer clients, lost confidence, and became reluctant to accept the requests that did arrive.

A new lead coach recognised the marketing problem and assembled an impressive pack: slides, an explanation of coaching, business cards, testimonials. But rather than running a central campaign, the organisation expected the coaches to use the pack to find their own clients. One coach described this as being asked to prostitute themselves. Most declined. Those who complied assembled a random collection of clients with no strategy behind the selection.

The company then invested in a coach management portal, with profiles, videos, a library, and listings for CPD and supervision. Coaches stopped attending the sessions, so the sessions stopped. The internal supervisors drifted away, since most of the coaches were now inactive. When the centre pushed the coaches to use the portal, they pushed back. Eventually there was nothing left.

No single decision killed the scheme. The governance gap let the budget go, the absence of demand left the coaches idle, and idle coaches had no reason to sustain a community. Each failure removed a support the others depended on.

The conversion experience

Robson's (2020) doctoral research asked internal coaches how they came to the role in the first place. Almost a quarter said they had been motivated by a prior encounter with coaching. They described it as a light bulb moment, as life-changing, as powerful. One asked: how did they make me do that?

Robson calls this a conversion experience. It is usually practical and hands-on, sometimes no more than a coaching exercise on a management development course or a one-day taster, and it pre-dates any formal decision to become a coach. Taster sessions and demonstrations are therefore not promotional activity. They are the recruitment mechanism for the faculty, and the source of the wider organisation's appetite for coaching. An organisation that trains coaches without first creating these encounters is recruiting from a population that has no particular reason to want the role.

Deciding

The evidence points to a plain answer. Build a faculty only if the organisation will fund the unglamorous parts: supervision, demand generation, and governance. Those are where dilemmas get resolved, where clients come from, and what keeps the scheme alive past its founder. An organisation unwilling to pay for them should train its managers in a coaching style instead, and that is the better strategic choice, not the consolation prize.

A dedicated faculty therefore makes sense where the infrastructure exists to support it. That means a lead coach, or better a small team rather than a single individual. It means a steering group with senior sponsorship, so that the scheme does not depend on one champion who might leave. It means a coaching strategy tied to business priorities, a pipeline of candidates, the capacity to provide training and supervision and CPD, and a plan for generating demand rather than assuming it. Where those elements are missing, the faculty is likely to fail in the way described above.

Manager-as-coach makes sense where the primary aim is to change how everyday leadership is conducted, rather than to provide formal coaching sessions. It needs less infrastructure, depending instead on senior leaders visibly modelling the behaviour, and on coaching being reflected in how performance is managed and rewarded.

In practice most organisations that succeed combine the two, with a smaller group of trained coaches for formal engagements and broader coaching skills training across the management population. Hawkins (2012) sets out the wider trade-off. Internal coaches bring organisational awareness, contextual empathy, and low cost. External coaches bring fresh perspective, independence, and credibility with senior executives. Most organisations therefore use external coaches at the top of the house and internal coaches for reach across the rest of it, and some use external coaches to train and supervise the internal ones.

None of the three survives on its own merits. Coaching that is not tied to what the business is trying to do, and cannot show what it has been worth, depends entirely on the goodwill of whoever happens to be sponsoring it. That goodwill is not a structure. It leaves when its owner does, which is how most coaching faculties end.

Questions for discussion

1. Does your organisation have a dedicated coaching faculty, a manager-as-coach programme, or some combination? How did that choice get made, and would you make the same choice today?
2. How well does your organisation balance supply and demand for internal coaching? Are your coaches fully utilised, underemployed, or overwhelmed?
3. Biquet found that 72% of coaches take an ethical dilemma to supervision, and that codes of ethics are rarely their first recourse. What supervision do your internal coaches actually have access to, and how quickly?
4. If you do not currently have an internal coaching faculty, what would it take to build one? What would be the first three things you would put in place?
5. How might you create taster experiences of coaching that could serve as both recruitment and cultural change tools?

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About this series

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 <https://tombattye.co.uk/forum/>.

About the author

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