

# EMBEDDING A COACHING CULTURE

**Written in January 2017. Having heard the phrase bandied about a little too often..**

*Firstly, what on earth is a 'coaching culture'?*

There are thousands of pages summarising the work of hundreds of studies on the topic. I am taking a different tack. I want to connect ideas about coaching and culture to broader themes about organisational agility in the face of the all-too-well-known challenges for 21st century businesses.

A coaching culture is one in which people at all levels speak up, are listened to, heard, open to challenge and committed to both their personal development and the business development of their organisation. In a coaching culture you stand a good chance of achieving the ideal conditions of everyone being responsible for everything.

A coaching culture acknowledges and respects hierarchical power. It requires individuals and teams in authority to make decisions, take choices and be accountable for them. But it insists that everyone has the right, indeed the responsibility, to speak, suggest, challenge and generally influence right up to the moment of decision.

Coaching is simply about the very nearly lost art of conversation; making precious time to hear people out, enabling them to make sense of and refine their thoughts by hearing themselves speak, to untangle the mental 'spaghetti' of their messy ideas and beliefs and express their views with clarity.

## Why does it matter?

Organisations of every type and size now need innovation from everywhere in the business. Max Weber called them 'acts of leadership' over 100 years ago - foreseeing that the conditions for commerce and public service would eventually become so incomprehensibly chaotic that 'relying on those at the top' would become a recipe for certain failure. Without the 'ground truth' from those who are closer to the action and sensitised to particular trends and events, top teams will be blindsided and disadvantaged in trying to make good decisions.

We believe organisations must call upon as many of their people as possible to detect opportunities and sense threats then communicate them with confidence until they are heard, understood and believed; even if, ultimately, they do not get agreement and the decision goes the other way.

We also believe that people who are treated in this way at work benefit as much as the business does; they are likely to feel more engaged, find meaning in their work, suffer less frustration and stress and, above all, are better able to develop as adults.

When people's voices are heard, they are at work in a developmental culture and many will develop the taste for this type of personal progress. Robert Kegan calls this "the secret weapon for business success in the future."

Our own work has been based on a deep belief in this type of organisational culture for decades. Long before it became fashionable, we talked about 'upwards leadership' and helped enable our clients to work this way. Our theoretical underpinnings, drawn directly from our proud Special Forces heritage, are all about creating focused, responsive, flexible and courageous teams and individuals that live the value, amongst others, of humility. For without humility there can be no listening and no learning. In the teams and organisations with whom we have had the privilege of working over the years, everyone is expected to contribute to shaping the culture; calling upon their trademark 'personal power' to step forward to improve how the organisation works.

To function at high performance levels and sustain an appetite for development and growth, organisations have to continuously strike the balance between challenge and safety. They must be challenging enough and safe enough places to bring out the best in their people.

So why have a coaching culture? Because it's good for business.