

Exploring the Use of Internal Coaches

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Abstract

While current studies on the subject have culminated in mixed results, with one study showing better results for internal coaching (Jones et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2018), and another favoring external coaching (Jones et al., 2018), what is clear is from the literature is that coaching is not a one-size-fits-all approach (Frisch, 2001; Jones et al., 2016; Mukherjee, 2012). Despite a lack of conclusive research, as well as the associated challenges faced by internal coaches, many corporations are proving that internal coaching programs are worth the investment (Bowman, 2016; Gavin, 2018; Machon, 2016). This article will review the expanding use of internal coaches in organizations. In addition, several benefits and challenges associated with this expansion will be identified. Finally, the real-world application of the use of internal coaches is examined to gauge how internal coaching may fit the future of the coaching profession.

Introduction

There are many benefits to utilizing coaching, and results such as improved performance (Jones, Woods, & Guillaume, 2016; Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2014), increased emotional intelligence (Gavin, 2018), improved well-being and work attitudes (Theeboom et al., 2014), as well as stronger coping (Theeboom et al., 2014) and problem solving skills (Gavin, 2018) have led to rapid growth within the coaching profession (Boysen-Rotelli, 2018). As the field of coaching continues to evolve, organizations have another solution they can add to their arsenal of employee development solutions - the use of internal coaches. While the use of internal coaches may not replace the use of external coaches, it can be a viable addition to consider.

This article will, briefly, review the evolution of coaching and evaluate the expanding use of internal coaches in organizations. In addition, several of the benefits and challenges associated with this expansion will be identified. Finally, the real-world application of the use of internal coaches is examined to gauge how internal coaching may fit the future of the coaching profession.

The Internal Coach

Frisch (2001) defines an internal coach as, “a colleague of those coached who is trusted to shape and deliver a program yielding individual professional growth” (p. 242). However, anyone within the organization who is, “formally viewed by organizational coworkers as a coach” (p. 242) can bear the title of coach. This imprecise definition can lead to confusion about the exact role of an internal coach and who performs this function.

While the role of an internal coach can be filled by a manager within the organization who has received formal coaching training, the internal coach should not be confused with managers who are simply employing coaching skills (DiGirolamo, Joel A. & Tkach, 2019). There are distinct differences between the two. Internal coaches operate in a structured coaching environment with guarantees of confidentiality and a defined coaching process (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2019; Mukherjee, 2012), whereas managers using coaching skills are operating outside of these structures (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2019). Managers using coaching skills also face the challenge of having to both direct employee performance and take a more participative approach to employee development (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2019), roles which may be in conflict. Managers who are using coaching skills also have less training than professional coaches (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2019). The following table provides a comparison of the utilization of coaching skills leveraged by professional coaches in a structured environment and leaders within an organization employing coaching skills (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2019).

Table 1
A Comparison of the Use of Coaching Skills by Professional Coaches and by Managers and Leaders

Skill	Professional Coaches	Managers and Leaders Using Coaching Skills
Who sets the agenda?	Client	Organization, manager, employee
Confidentiality	Unless ethics violation or ordered by court of law	Partial or none
Session structure	Structured, private	Unstructured, conversational
Training	Extensive	Minimal
Boundary maintenance	Straightforward	Complicated
Relationship	Equal	Hierarchical
Loyalty	Client	Organization
Ethical code	Coaching body	Organization
Coaching agreement	Written contract	Verbal or none
Goals	Client	Organization, manager, employee

From “In Exploration of Managers and Leaders Using Coaching Skills,” by J.A. DiGirolama and J.T. Tkach, 2019, *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 71(3), p. 200.

For the purposes of this article, an internal coach is defined as, *an individual within an organization who has received formal training in coaching skills, operating within a structured coaching arrangement, without formal authority over the coachee, who facilitates the personal and professional growth of others* (Theeboom et al., 2014).

The Evolution of Coaching

Though modern-day leadership coaching is a relatively young profession (Boysen-Rotelli, 2018), scholars believe that its actual roots can be traced back much further (Brock, 2010; Ciporen, 2015). Ciporen (2015) describes the evolution of coaching from its early roots to its present state in a study on the field of organizational and executive coaching, putting forth the theory that modern-day coaching is rooted in the Socratic method of self-discovery through questioning. From these ancient roots, what would become the coaching profession as it is known today continued to unfold through the twentieth century, from the advent of self-help groups in the 1920s and 1930s (Brock, 2010), the birth of the Humanistic Psychology movement in the 1950s (Brock, 2010), and on to the use of a blended psychological/organizational development approach being applied within the workplace beginning in the 1960s (Boysen-Rotelli, 2018).

Drawing on its roots in psychology and organizational development, coaching continued to evolve over the next two decades. According to Judge and Cowell (1997), executive coaching first emerged in the mid-1980s, and was generally reserved for middle to senior level leaders within an organization. While acknowledging the benefits of executive coaching, Judge and Cowell (1997) also pointed out that the expense restricted widespread benefit to the workforce.

Initially, executive coaches were almost exclusively outside of the organization (Frisch, Michael H., 2001; Judge & Cowell, 1997). This was, in part, due to the qualifications that were believed to be necessary for a coach to have, which included, “counseling skills focused on behavior change, knowledge of organizational functioning, confidentiality, and, to varying degrees, an overarching professional identity” (Frisch, 2001, p. 241). These qualifications helped the coach establish credibility and were not perceived to be readily available internally within organizations. This belief is now changing (Frisch, 2001, 2005).

Frisch (2001) argues that today’s workforce is more adept at interpreting the data that feeds their developmental plans. Additionally, corporations are hiring and training a more skilled workforce which is capable of delivering the same services that were previously only available from external coaches (Frisch, 2001). With a growing number of qualified internal coaches who can meet these requirements (Frisch, Michael, Lee, Metzger, Robinson, & Rosemarin, n.d.), organizations are beginning to rely more on internal organizational coaching to address the developmental needs of their employees (Bowman, 2016; Frisch, 2001; Frisch, Michael H., 2005; Gavin, 2018), and are finding positive effects even with a relatively small number of sessions (Theeboom et al., 2014).

Benefits and Challenges of Internal Coaches

The shift from external to internal coaches has been predicated on a number of factors including availability of resources, cost, and ability to reach a larger percentage of the workforce (Frisch, 2001, 2005; Judge & Cowell, 1997). A major drawback to the use of external coaches is that historically they have been utilized to serve only the highest levels of the organization, which was, in part, due to the high cost of coaching (Judge & Cowell, 1997; Theeboom et al., 2014), as well as the limitations in the number of available coaches (Frisch, 2001). According to Frisch (2001, 2005), internal coaching is more cost effective, allowing you to offer the services to more employees. In addition to saving organizations money, the move toward internal coaching has allowed companies to increase the efficiency and accountability of their coaching programs (Frisch, 2005).

Coaching was once a luxury reserved for only the most senior levels, but that is no longer the case. The lower costs associated with internal coaching programs have allowed coaching to be made available to even more employees (Frisch, 2001). Companies such as Google (Bowman, 2016) and GlaxoSmithKline (Machon, 2016) have embraced the concept of expanding coaching beyond the executive levels, and offer coaching to all their employees, regardless of their position.

Another benefit to utilizing internal coaches is that internal coaches often have a better understanding of the organizational dynamics, potentially making it easier for the coach to relate to a client's issues (Frisch, 2001; Jones et al., 2016; Mukherjee, 2012). It also allows the coach to speak the client's language, often enabling a stronger client-coach relationship (Frisch, 2001). Frisch, Lee, Metzger, Robinson, and Rosemarin (n.d.) caution that while this intimate organizational knowledge can be a benefit, it can also create a potential challenge for the coach. This organizational knowledge can influence the coach's objectivity, creating a negative impact on the coaching relationship (Frisch et al., n.d.).

Establishing an internal coaching program also offers unique benefits to the organization. It can help build a culture of development and learning (Frisch, 2001), encouraging growth in all employees (Gavin, 2018). Incorporating the use of internal coaches helps encourage growth throughout the organization (Machon, 2016), and can help leaders within the organization embrace cultural change (Frisch, 2001).

While there are many benefits associated with the utilization of internal coaches, there are some areas of perceived concern. Internal coaches can face unique challenges with confidentiality (Frisch et al., n.d.; Jones, Woods, & Zhou, 2018). Frisch (2001) acknowledges that while it can be beneficial for an internal coach to be able to observe a client's progress, it can also blur the lines of confidentiality, creating challenges in the coach-client relationship. While these concerns can be mitigated by clearly defining the coaching boundaries and confidentiality agreements (Frisch et al., n.d.), it is worth noting that a study conducted by Jones, Woods, and Zhou (2018), though

limited in scope, indicated that clients were more open with external coaches, likely, in part, due to perceived increased guarantees of confidentiality.

An amplifying factor to the perceived challenges of confidentiality with internal coaches is the fact that many of these coaches wear multiple hats in the workplace (Frisch et al., n.d.). Not only can this create challenges with confidentiality, but it can also make it difficult to maintain relationship boundaries (Frisch et al., n.d.). Frisch et al. (n.d.) acknowledge that there must be an awareness of potential conflicts of interest, and of how these potential conflicts could impact the coaching relationship. There also needs to be an awareness of how a coach's multiple roles within the organization could potentially bias information received during the process, or adversely impact the relationship (Frisch et al., n.d.). For example, a coach, who is also an executive in the Human Resources department, may have knowledge that his client's department is shutting down. While this information would be extremely helpful to his client, the coach can not share this information with him. When this information is made public, the client is likely to feel betrayed and the coach's credibility will be impacted (Frisch et al., n.d.).

Internal coaching programs must also battle the perception that internal programs are not on par with external programs. This perception was validated by a study on external versus internal outplacement counseling provisions (Kilcrease, 2013). To combat these perceptions and for a coaching program to be successful, coaching should be formalized and there should be dedicated support in place (Frisch, 2001; Gavin, 2018). Additionally, coaches should undergo training not only on the coaching process, but also on any assessments they will be administering (Frisch et al., n.d.; Frisch, 2001).

A recent study showed that while client engagement was important, internal coaches spent the majority of their time on, "getting support from superiors and ensuring the program is aligned with organizational goals and strategy" (DiGirolamo, Joel, Rogers, & Heink, 2017, p.5). This is in stark contrast to external coaches who spent the majority of their time on client-focused activities (DiGirolamo et al., 2017). The effectiveness of the coaching programs were not measured by the study, so it is unclear if the differences in focus had an adverse effect, but it is worth noting that in at least some of the key coaching competencies such as listening, emotional intelligence, and goal setting both external and internal coaches reported similar skill levels (DiGirolamo et al., 2017).

Measures of Success

Whether a company is using internal or external coaches, it is hard to argue against the benefits of coaching. Unquestionably an effective developmental tool, coaching can help increase productivity (Anderson, n.d.), employee performance (Jones, Woods, & Guillaume, 2016; (Theeboom et al., 2014)), and employee satisfaction (Anderson, n.d.; Theeboom et al., 2014). Companies also see Returns on Investment (ROI) which range from increased sales and production (Luthans & Peterson, 2003) to reported gains in employee time to complete tasks throughout the day (Bowman, 2016), suggesting more efficient accomplishment of tasks.

Even though there have been studies which have indicated ROI as high as 700% from coaching (Parker-Wilkins, 2006), it can still be difficult for companies to accurately measure the ROI (Theeboom et al., 2014). One of the difficulties in measuring ROI is that organizations value different things (Steinbrenner, Schlosser, Kumata, & Hunt, 2007). Some organizations may be attempting to calculate financial return (Steinbrenner et al., 2007), while others may be measuring improvements in patient care (Steinbrenner et al., 2007) or calculating time savings for their employees (Bowman, 2016).

Additionally, there is no standard measure for what defines success in coaching. According to Frisch (2001), both internal and external coaches are employed to enable improvement in an employee's professional development, and the ability to do this is considered a marker of success. Other measures of success that have been noted in studies on executive and organizational coaching are increased productivity, employee satisfaction, and customer satisfaction (Anderson, n.d.). Additionally, Mukherjee (2012) identified that participants in the study who had received coaching reported improved interpersonal skills, listening skills, and self-confidence, plus increases in other areas such as improved work-life balance and a broader vision of their role within the organization.

In addition to the traditional markers of success that were noted by Frisch (2001), Anderson (n.d.), and Mukherjee (2012), there are several non-traditional measures that have been attributed to coaching, including increased coping skills and client well-being (Theeboom et al., 2014). Gavin (2018) remarked on the increases in emotional intelligence, as well as an increased ability to establish goals as tangible results of coaching. Bowman (2016) noted that Google uniquely measures the ROI for internal coaching by having employees evaluate its value against time, which "Googlers perceive as their most valuable resource" (Bowman, 2016, p.3).

There are other measures of success for internal coaching programs that are often overlooked. Clients are not the only beneficiaries in the internal coach-client relationship, the coach and organization benefit as well (Mukherjee, 2012). Results of a study on internal coaching programs conducted by Mukherjee (2012) indicated that the coaches were also positively impacted at the end of the coaching relationship, and showed improvement in their own leadership development, as well as their interpersonal skills which benefited not only them personally, but also the organization (Mukherjee, 2012). Additionally, the coaches reported improved work-life balance (Mukherjee, 2012).

Internal versus External Debate

Jones, Wood, and Zhou (2018) indicated that when clients worked with external coaches, they had better results. The researchers hypothesized that this was as a result of increased comfort levels in sharing information with external coaches due to increased guarantees of confidentiality (Jones et al., 2018). Jones et al. (2018) also raised the fact that clients were often able to select

their coaches when working with an external coach, which helped them form a stronger coach-client connection, something which does not always occur in internal coaching arrangements.

Conversely, a study conducted by Jones, Woods, and Guillaume (2016) resulted in opposite findings. The study conducted by Jones et al. (2016) indicated that while clients benefited from working with both internal or external coaches, clients demonstrated better results working with internal coaches. Jones et al. (2016) offered several hypotheses for these results which included the culture of the organization being less receptive to external coaching intervention and the coach's knowledge of the organizational culture.

Both studies acknowledge limitations including a relatively small number of participants (Jones et al., 2016), and that steps could be taken to mitigate confidentiality and client-coach matching concerns in internal coaching which could alter the results of the study (Jones et al., 2018). What is clear from the literature is that none of the studies conducted to date have offered a definitive answer on whether the use of internal or external coaches is more effective. There are many variables which come into play in determining which form of coaching to choose (Jones et al., 2016). While the use of internal coaching may not always be the solution, it remains a viable addition to coaching (Frisch, 2001; Mukherjee, 2012).

Real-World Application

Despite some of the unique challenges faced by internal coaches (DiGirolamo et al., 2017; Frisch, 2001; Frisch et al., n.d.; Jones, et al., 2018; Kilcrease, 2013), more and more companies are incorporating the use of internal coaches as part of their employee development programs (Frisch, 2005). A survey report from the Georgia Coach Association on sixteen Atlanta area corporations shows that over two-thirds of those companies use a combination of internal and external coaches, with one of the sixteen firms using only internal coaches (Davidson, Rodendhi, & Berman, 2006). Large companies such as Campbell's Soup, Chick-fil-A, and Whirlpool are investing heavily in internal coaching programs (Gavin, 2018), and the number of internal coaches at Google outnumbered external coaches almost three to one in 2016 (Bowman, 2016).

It is more than simply a move toward utilizing internal coaches, rather many companies are attempting to build a true coaching culture within their organizations (Bowman, 2016; Gavin, 2018; Machon, 2016). There are a few companies such as Google (Bowman, 2016) and GlaxoSmithKline (Machon, 2016) who have truly embraced the coaching culture, and have made coaching part of their day-to-day business. Gavin (2018) found that the most successful leadership development coaching programs had staff that was dedicated to supporting the coaching. Gavin (2018) also found that the coaching needed to be part of the company's overall strategy, tied to its benefits and policies, and integrated with other development activities. Google (Bowman, 2016) and GlaxoSmithKline (Machon, 2016) have both established robust coaching programs which meet these marks.

Google has been recognized as an industry leader in embracing a coaching culture, implementing their internal coaching program, known as Guru, in 2010 (Bowman, 2016). According to Bowman (2016), all employees, or “Googlers” as they are called, have access to coaching, and there is a strong emphasis in growing coaching competencies within their leadership cadre. As part of this program, employees who are interested in coaching others must demonstrate, “capacity and passion for applying coaching skills,” in addition to meeting a number of other stringent criteria that include Human Resources approval, level of seniority, and job performance (Bowman, 2016, p.2). Selected employees can then undergo training and enter the coaching cadre through a phased approach (Bowman, 2016).

Bowman (2016) highlights Google’s integrated approach to bringing coaching into its overall learning culture, incorporating technology and personal interaction into a successful mix. The program has been resoundingly successful, with “Googlers” reporting, “accelerated onboarding, increased self-confidence, and enhanced executive presence” (Bowman, 2016, p.3). Bowman (2016) also noted that Google’s Guru program was one of five finalists for the International Coach Federation’s (ICF) Prism Award in 2016 for outstanding coaching programs.

In a 2016 case study on GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), Machon (2016) outlines the company’s coaching programs. Similar to Google’s program (Bowman, 2016), coaching is available to all employees at GSK (Machon, 2016). Machon (2016) says that GSK has ensured their coaching program is aligned with the ICF core competencies? to ensure consistency in their standards and ethics. According to Machon (2016), GSK has over 1,000 internal coaches, with an additional 16,000 plus of its managers ‘using coaching skills.’ In recognition of their commitment to coaching, GSK won the ICF Prism Award in 2016 for Excellence in Coaching Programs (Machon, 2016).

Conclusion

There are pros and cons associated with all types of coaching. The use of internal coaches can offer many benefits including reduced cost for the organization and wider availability to a larger percentage of the workforce (Frisch, 2001). Additionally, internal coaches often have better insight into organizational dynamics, enabling them to easily relate to the client’s issues (Frisch, 2001; Jones et al., 2016; Mukherjee, 2012). Internal coaches can also face unique challenges caused by filling multiple roles (Frisch et al., n.d.), as well as perceptions about lack of confidentiality (Frisch et al., n.d.; Jones et al., 2018) and bias (Frisch et al., n.d.).

While current studies on the subject have culminated in mixed results, with one study showing better results for internal coaching (Jones et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2018), and another favoring external coaching (Jones et al., 2018), what is clear is from the literature is that coaching is not a one-size-fits-all approach (Frisch, 2001; Jones et al., 2016; Mukherjee, 2012). Despite a lack of conclusive research, as well as the associated challenges faced by internal coaches, many corporations are proving that internal coaching programs are worth the investment (Bowman, 2016; Gavin, 2018; Machon, 2016).

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