

Improving intermediate skills through workplace coaching: A case study within the UK rail industry

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Abstract

This phenomenological case study, set within the UK Rail Industry used Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland and Scholes, 1991) to answer the central research question “Can workplace coaching improve individual performance among staff and raise levels of customer satisfaction?” The case study examined the individual and business impact resulting from the introduction of a workplace-coaching model on a population of on-train customer service employees. The case study results proved the research theory that through workplace coaching, the level of employee competence would improve, as measured through the assessment against National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at Level 2, and that this increase in competence would be demonstrated consistently whilst at work. Furthermore, that the resulting service consistency would improve the level of customer service satisfaction amongst the travelling public. Given the possibility of drawing generalisations from this case study, the results make a strong argument for using workplace coaching as a method of raising intermediate skills levels and show that coaching can significantly improve individual and organisational performance when placed within an NVQ framework.

Introduction

Ashton and Felstead (1995) highlighted that however crucial training is, we are far from demonstrating the fact that training represents a key determinant of an organisation’s financial performance. The purpose of this research was to describe how the workplace coaching undertaken among a population of customer service staff improved both their individual competence and increased the level of customer satisfaction. The research helps make the case for coaching for non-management grade employees within a business and as a means to develop intermediate skills capabilities that benefit the individual, the organisation and the UK general public. It could also help inform other research on the adoption of coaching as a leadership style.

The central question for the research was, “Can workplace coaching improve individual performance among staff and raise levels of customer satisfaction?” The hypothesis was that through workplace coaching, against defined standards, the level of employee competence would improve, as measured through the assessment against NVQ, Level 2, and that this increase in competence would be demonstrated consistently whilst at work, as measured by Mystery Shopper surveys (see Fig. 1). Furthermore, it is argued that the

resulting service consistency would improve the level of customer service satisfaction amongst the travelling public.

To explore the theory I looked at a case study within a UK intercity Train Operating Company (the TOC), where a team of 13 regionally-based workplace Coaches were responsible for increasing the customer service skills of a population of approximately 350 customer hosts (the population). The whole coaching programme was scheduled to run over a 52-week period. The case study was concerned with the effect of the coaching between 1st September 2002 and 31st May 2003 (9 months). I chose to conduct the research as a case study, using Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) (Checkland and Scholes, 1991) as a means to interpret and analyse the real world phenomenon and its impact on the population and my theory. SSM was also used to identify flexible research systems and ensure that all parts of theory were tested using both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis.

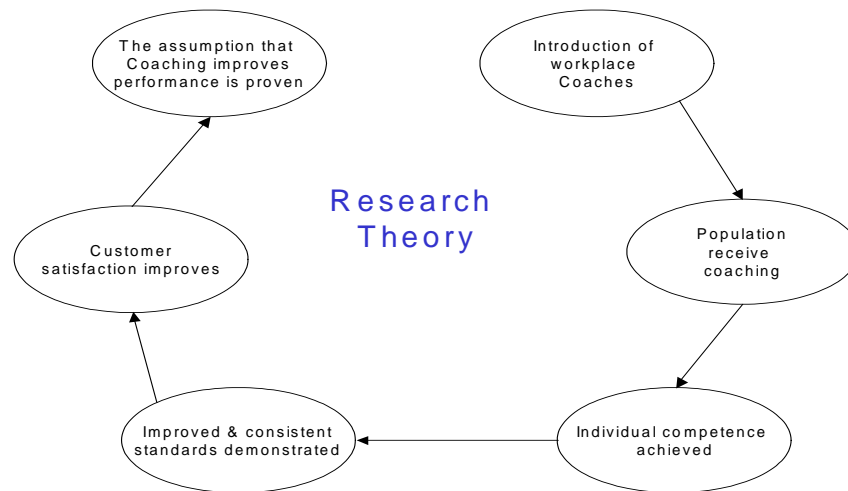


Figure 1: Research Theory

The National Context

Since the privatisation of the UK rail network in 1996, the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA), on behalf of central government, has awarded short-term franchises to a variety of private companies.

Since this date, many events have influenced these franchises and their ability to deliver the promises privatisation sought to deliver. Railtrack was called into receivership in 2002, following the catastrophic aftermath of the Hatfield rail disaster in October 2000. At this time a new simplified rail franchise map was drawn up. The competition for these new franchises will be very strong, despite the incumbent TOC advantage.

The emphasis of the SRA is one of integrated and reliable customer focused services. This wish is against a backdrop of failing infrastructure and the knowledge that track performance, and therefore train-running performance, is unlikely to improve significantly, and will probably get worse, over the next few years, as Network Rail (Railtrack's successor) upgrades the national rail infrastructure.

Although the context in which the research was set was dynamic and complex I believe that the ability to generalise findings between one population and another within this and other customer service organisations is considerably high and as such adds to the body of knowledge and inform further research. The results of the research are particularly interesting, as they help establish the business benefit of workplace coaching. To date there has been very little academic research in the area of coaching at work, although 70% of organisations purport to use coaching as a method of organisational learning (Industrial Society, 1999).

Company Context

The TOC previously invested heavily in customer care training but delivered little tangible benefit. By common consensus, it was felt that the reason was the failure to define, reinforce and monitor the delivery of front line standards.

In 2002 a new commercial strategy was designed by the TOC. The people element of this strategy formed a major component with a key business driver to gain and maintain customer service consistency. The learning and development model was based on Deming's (1981) theory of continuous improvement, the principles of which can also be seen within Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984). The TOC's interpretation of Deming's theory (1981) is explained in Figures 2 and 3.

Element of Deming's Continuous Improvement Cycle	Manifestation in TOC's learning and development model
PLAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Defined customer service specifications issued to each member of the population
DO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Off job learning on wider customer service skills/safety knowledge
CHECK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment of customer service tasks and behaviours with an NVQ framework
ACT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance management through key performance indicators, such as commissioned Customer Monitor and Mystery Shopper research and individual performance appraisals with line managers

Figure 2: Manifestation of Deming's theory in learning and development model for maintaining service consistency (1) (Adapted from Deming, (1981))



Figure 3: Manifestation of Deming's theory in learning and development model for maintaining service consistency (2),(Adapted from Deming, 1981)

Coaching within the TOC

There was a team of 13 regionally based Coach/Assessors within the TOC. They were originally employed as Service Quality Managers as part of another service improvement initiative, whereby they were required to ensure standards were delivered on-board trains. Their role was to achieve standards through 'command and control compliance', reporting poor performers to management. Although this achieved the desired result whilst managers were on-board the train, left unsupervised, staff returned to their 'old ways'.

As part of the People Strategy these service quality roles were placed into a learning framework where coaching was the vehicle for delivering consistent standards. The existing team role was redefined and renamed 'Coach/Assessors'. They were transferred to the human resources and training teams where they attended a series of development interventions provided by an external consultancy that gave them coaching and assessing skills to NVQ standards.

Although the participation in gaining an NVQ was voluntary for the population, the delivery of consistent service standards was not. Therefore, within this context the coaching relationship was enforced, albeit using NVQs as a guided learning framework to encourage changed behaviour.

The model of workplace coaching

The model of coaching used within the TOC was the A.C.E.R (Assess, Challenge, Encourage, Review) model (Figure 4):

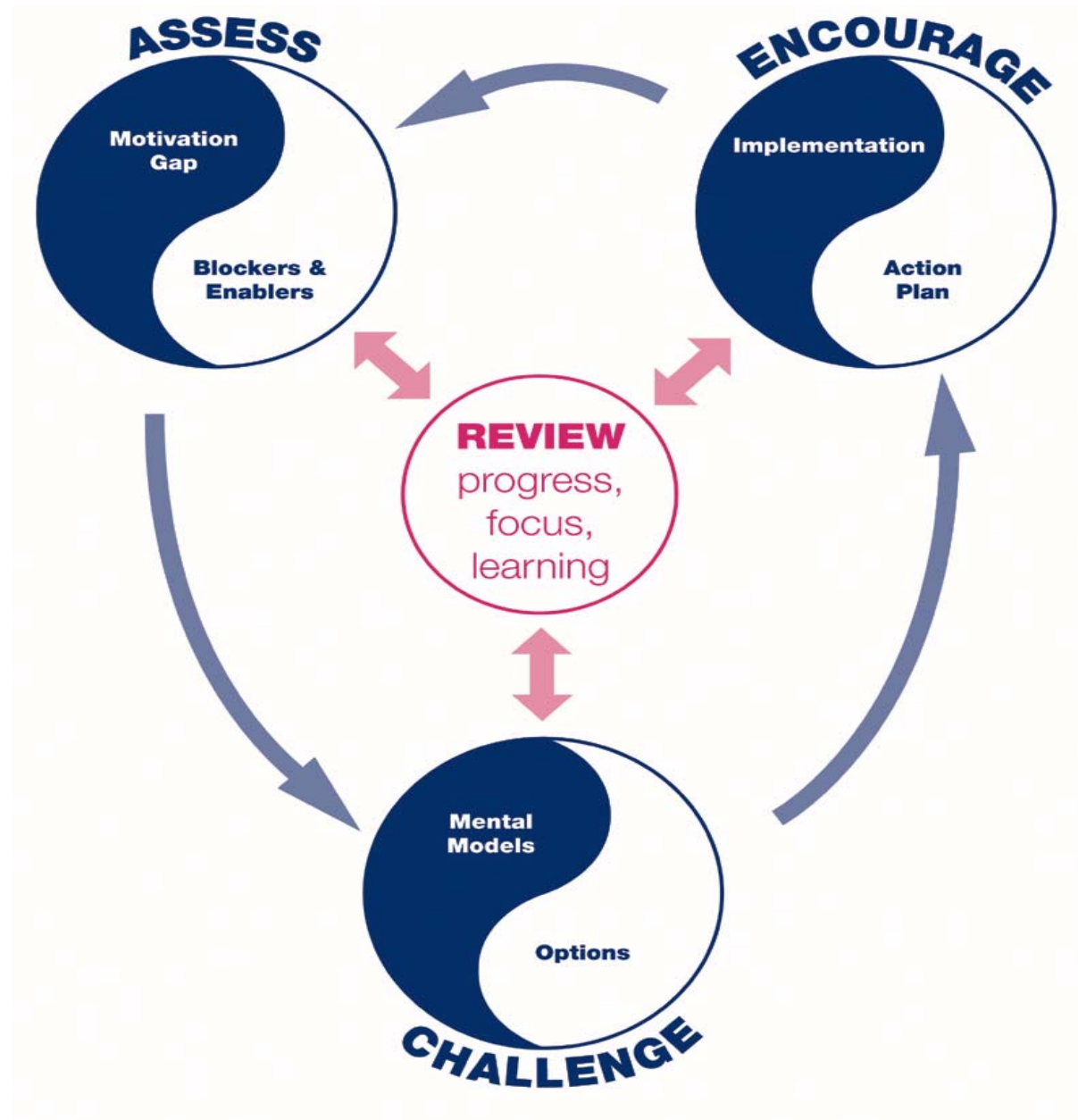


Figure 4: A.C.E.R diagram

Within the TOC coaching was defined as: “*The release of individual and team potential by using on-the-job opportunities for facilitating learning and development*”, whereby:

Potential

People are a source of tremendous untapped potential. Self-development needs to be encouraged to meet ever-stringent market demands.

On-the-job

Work is a learning activity. Coaching embraces continuous learning in the day-to-day work situation.

Facilitating

Not telling or prescribing but developing people to develop themselves. The Coach is a resource to the individual and the team.

Learning and Development

Learning is at the heart of coaching. Learning is about extending our capacity to create our futures.

During the coaching programme the Coach/Assessors were introduced to Egan's (2002) 'Skilled Helper' model for effective coaching relationships. This theoretical model was used because it is an "opportunity-development" model, and also "provides an excellent foundation for any 'brand' of helping" (2002 p.25).

Despite this development there remained one fundamental factor that needed to be acknowledged, that of individual 'coach characteristics'. Some of the original 'command and control' team were now Coach/Assessors. The characteristics of the former are not necessarily appropriate for the latter. Within their training programmes the characteristics of a 'good coach' were identified and discussed (Figure 5).

<i>Integrated</i>	<i>Reliable</i>
<i>Genuine</i>	<i>Discreet</i>
<i>Warm</i>	<i>Sensitive</i>
<i>Courteous</i>	<i>Enthusiastic</i>
<i>Firm when necessary</i>	<i>Sense of humour</i>
<i>Values me for myself</i>	<i>A good listener</i>
<i>Knows the relevant literature</i>	<i>Good practical experience</i>
<i>Helps me to focus</i>	<i>Really tries to understand me</i>
<i>Honest and straightforward</i>	<i>Asks probing questions</i>
<i>Trustworthy</i>	<i>Not sexist, racist, or ageist</i>
<i>Open to different views/experience</i>	<i>Positive about my potential knowledge of people</i>
<i>Challenges me to do my best</i>	

Figure 5: Characteristics of a good coach

Nonetheless, it should be noted that for the population who were to receive coaching and the remaining Quality Managers they might recall that maintaining consistent standards was about compliance rather than development. This may have affected the early coaching relationships.

Methodology

The case study employed SSM through four key activities (Figure 6) and used them within the context of other theories and models associated with methodological development.

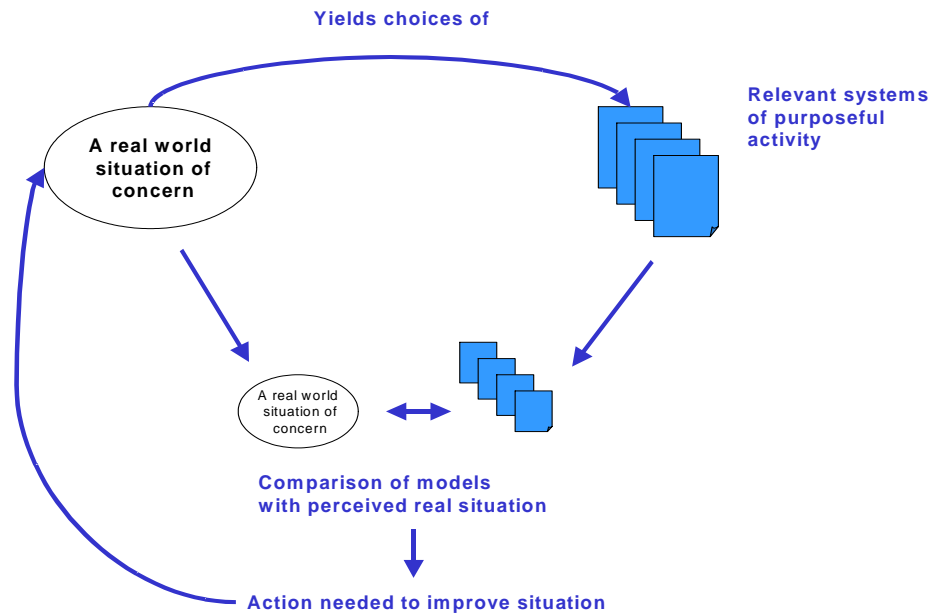


Figure 6: The basic shape of SSM (Checkland and Scholes, 1991, p.7)

Rich Picture Analyses

Checkland and Scholes (1991) argue that the real world situation can be analysed through the development of a Rich Picture. This enables the pictorial articulation of the complexity of human affairs and the multiple, interacting relationships. They say pictures can be taken in as a whole and help encourage holistic thinking. This method is also referred to as a 'conceptual framework' which can identify enabling and disabling mechanisms operating within a particular situation and the context relevant to that situation (Robson, 2002).

A Rich Picture of the interrelatedness of the research population, the Coach/Assessors and the wider intra and inter organisational relationships was therefore developed, together with an identification of the cultural and political context in which the systems of research are designed.

The overall research design can be illustrated in two different ways (Figures 7 and 8).

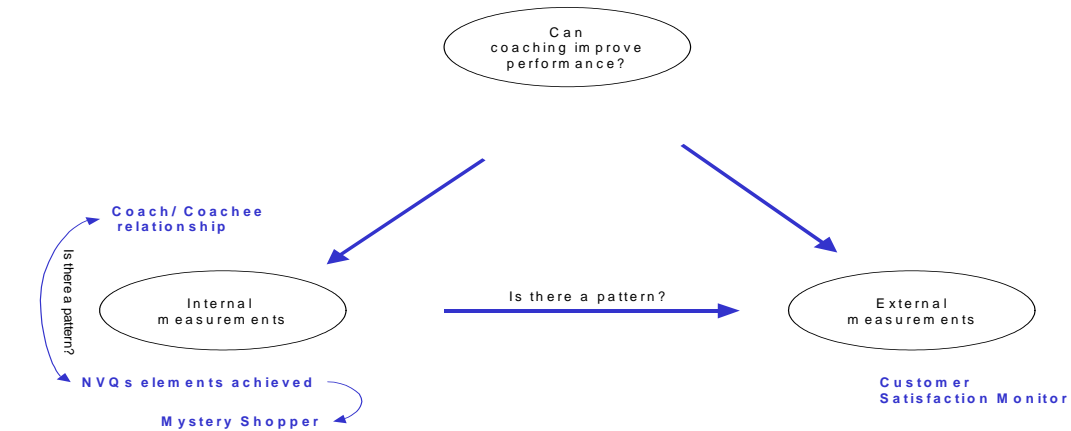


Figure 7: Research design

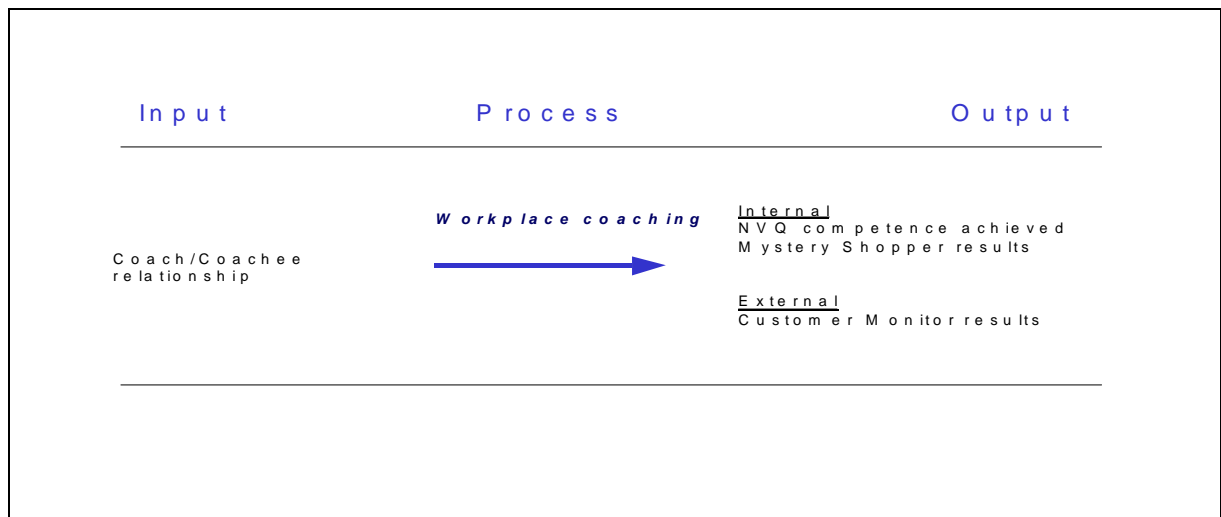


Figure 8: Identifying input and output data sources

Data was collected at three points during the case study. The results were analysed in relation to the environmental conditions prevailing in the preceding three-month periods to ensure confounding and extraneous variables were taken into account during the analysis.

The periods from which data were collected and analysed are shown in Figure 9.

Series	Data collected	Analysed in relation to events during the preceding three months
Baseline	December 2002	Sept – Nov 2002
1 st series	March 2003	Dec - Feb 2003
2 nd series	June 2003	Mar – May 2003

Figure 9: Data collection timetable

Research systems

Four research systems were designed as relevant purposeful systems of activity, each mapping onto the original research design.:-

1. Coach/Coachee relationship

This data was collected through a series of individual semi-structured interviews, (King, 1994; Kram, 1988; Powney and Watts, 1987), held with 15 randomly selected individuals from the population of Customer Hosts at each data collection point.

I acknowledged that because I was both the researcher and a senior manager within the company my personal bias and very presence would influence the individual responses. I therefore used a junior field researcher from my team to limit these effects. I also ensured that no interviews were undertaken when a Coach or line manager was present, nor did I give any advance warning to the Coaches that the interviews were going to happen.

The system for testing the coaching relationship is shown in Figure 10.

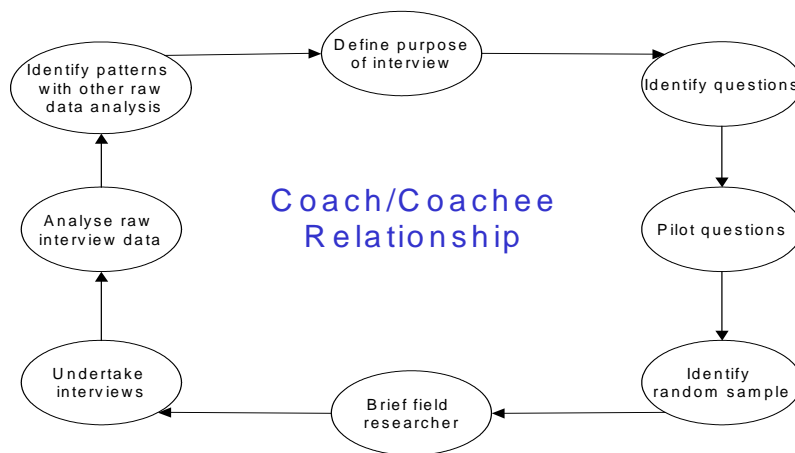


Figure 10: Relevant system to test coaching input

The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each. The resulting qualitative and quantitative data has been weighted heavily in the overall analysis as I placed greater reliance on the conclusions as they were observed first-hand by a trusted informant and were collected when the respondents were alone and not in groups (Robson, 2002, p.484).

2. Assessing employee competence

The population was assessed against published company specifications, issued to all of them as part of their normal job role. These standards were directly linked to the NVQ in Railway Operations – (Passenger Services), Level 2. The NVQ assessment criteria dictated that the candidate must demonstrate the required behaviour against a range of performance criteria. Progress towards increased population competence was achieved by the reporting of the numbers within the population being assessed as competent against each of the elements. Figure 11 shows the research system used to best enable validity and reliability of this data.

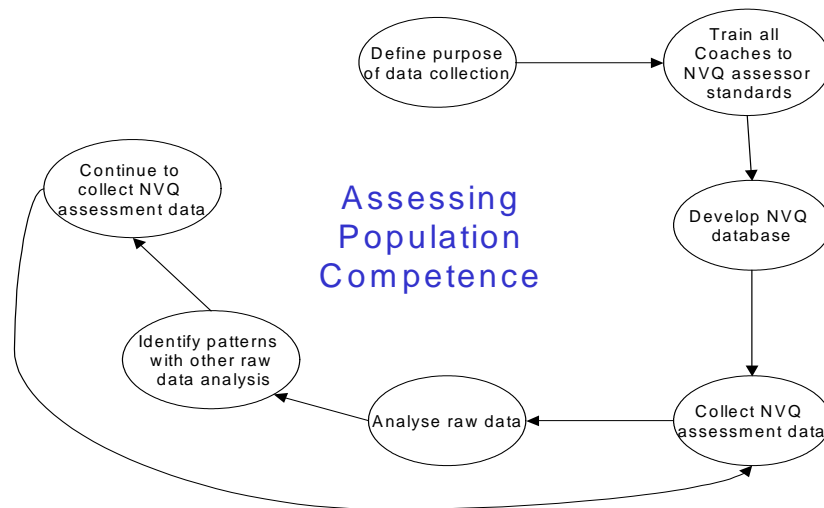


Figure 11: Relevant system to test employee competence

3. Mystery Shopper

Consistent customer service constitutes the repetition of tasks to standard and the demonstration of appropriate customer care behaviours as laid down in company documentation. The TOC employed an independent research company to undertake valid and reliable mystery shopper research to evaluate whether individuals were performing to company standards. Figure 12 shows the research system of enquiry using this data source that tested the application of consistent standards (Checkland and Scholes, 1991).



Figure 12: Relevant system to test the application of consistent customer service standards

4. Customer Monitor

Part of the research theory argued that the delivery of consistent customer service standards within the population group would have a positive impact on the level of customer satisfaction. A professional market research company undertakes customer research as part of the TOC's regulatory requirements. As such its content is determined by the outputs required by the statutory body. I have access to this data in the normal course of my job role. The results of this survey are provided to the SRA and are used as part of the franchise commitment regulations. However, I am concerned with the reliability and validity due to the nature of the many confounding variables that will have an impact on the perceived levels of satisfaction among customers.

Figure 13 shows the research system of enquiry using this data source to test the effect of coaching on improved customer satisfaction levels (Checkland and Scholes, 1991).

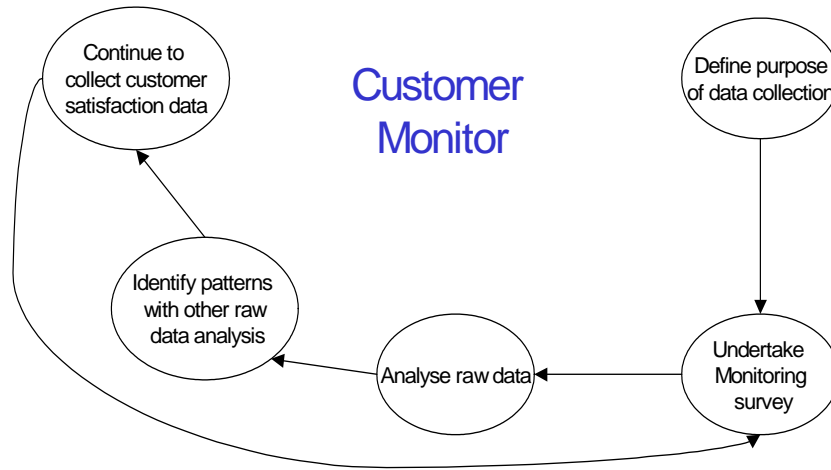


Figure 13: Relevant system to test the effect of coaching on improved customer satisfaction levels

Results

Following the data series collection and analysis the results showed that there had been an increase in employee competence levels and an improvement in the Mystery Shopper and Customer Monitor results over the length of the case study. Nonetheless, it was not sufficient to take these at face value. Throughout the research the dynamic nature of the phenomenon meant that all variables could have had an impact and these were considered in the context of the results. I argue that seven significant events had a direct negative impact on the ability of the population to perform to standard (Figure 14). These principally were around poor train service performance and staff shortages.

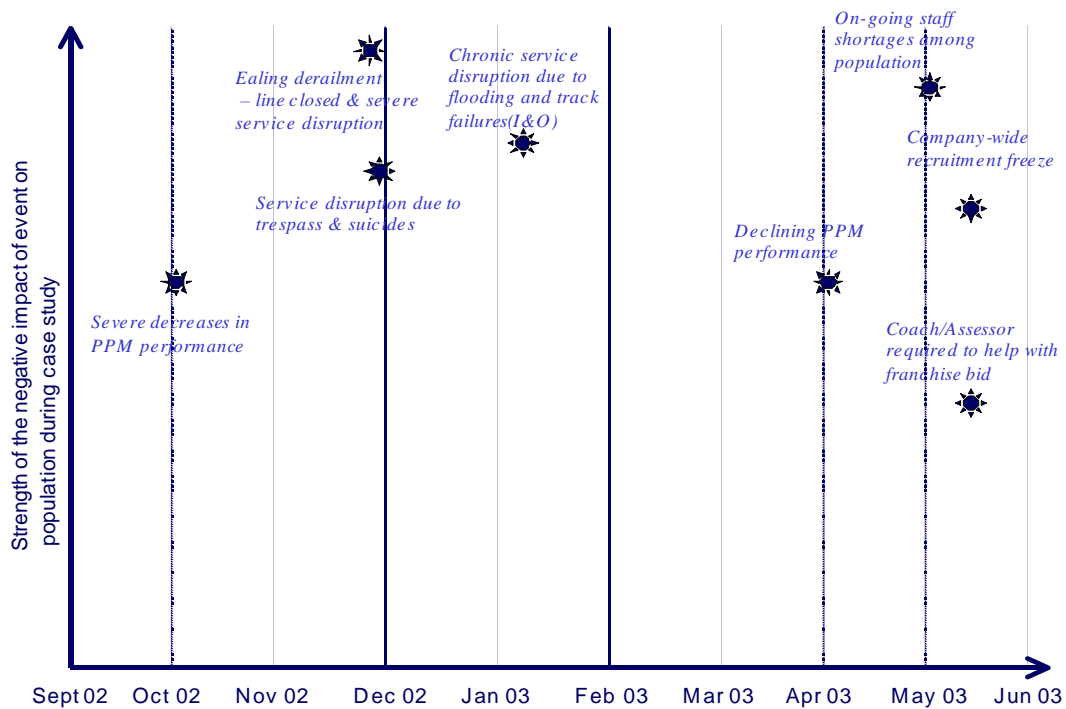


Figure 14: Time –ordered matrix of real world situation resulting in significant negative impact on the population during the case study

There were four events that could have had a direct positive effect on increased employee competence and their ability to perform consistently. These centred on additional resources for coaching and periods of stable train performance. In addition, there was a possibility that the introduction of NVQs in September 2002, additional staff in October 2002 and Catering Managers in January 2003 may have had an indirect positive effect on morale, and confidence that the TOC was investing in the population’s future (Figure 15).

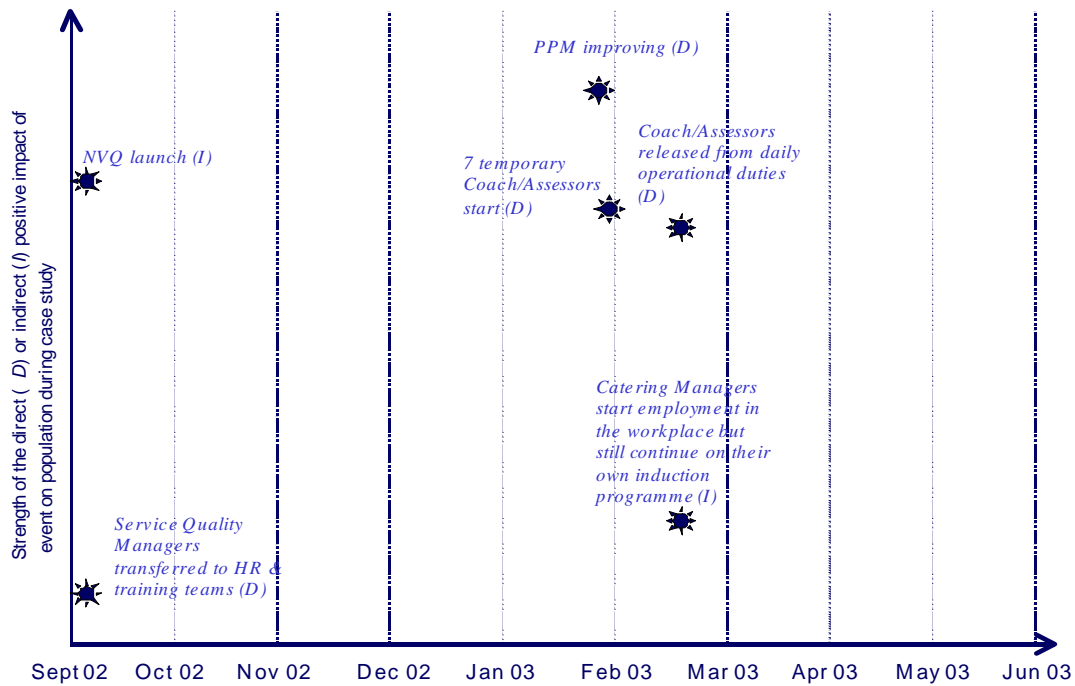


Figure 15: Time –ordered matrix of real world situation resulting in direct or indirect positive impact on the population during the case study

I suggest that the negative factors had an overall greater impact and this therefore increased the validity of the results, in so much as the evidence showed improvement despite the many negative variables. I believe the effect of coaching would have been greater if the Coach/Assessors had more regular access to the population during a time of sustained organisational calm. However, this is real world research and the world of the case study company is rarely that stable.

The Coaching Relationship

Throughout the case study incremental improvements in the overall coaching relationship were found and these correlated in timeframe with the increased vocational skills of the population, thus I argue reinforcing the research of Billett (1993, 1994a) who believed coaching strongly supported the acquisition of knowledge and attributes required for vocational expertise. I analysed and drew conclusions on the nature of these coaching relationships in relation to three specific areas:-

- Motivation to learn
- Relationship with Coach
- Coaching methods used

Motivation to Learn

Forty of the forty-five people sampled throughout the case study had enrolled on their NVQ (89%), (Figure 16). The NVQ structure was chosen by the TOC as a means to incorporate guided learning in the workplace and to ensure that learning was against a defined range of standards and performance criteria. This structured approach supported the learning undertaken during induction and informal learning from peers and ensured that incorrect practices were identified and remedied. I argue this strategy further supports the work of Ragoff (1995) on guided learning and that a developmental framework encourages the individuals to think positively about learning new ways of doing things and therefore accepting change in the workplace. I believe that this is particularly true in this case study due to the historical role of the Coach/Assessors as 'Enforcers of Standards' and the traditionally adversarial nature of management/employee (trade union) relations in the rail industry.

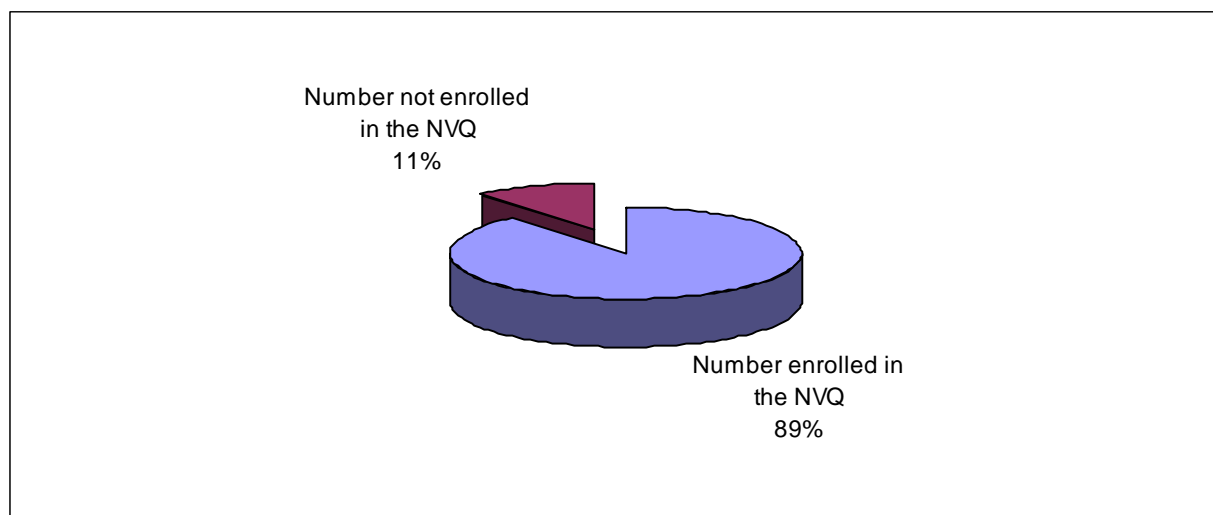


Figure 16: Percentage uptake of NVQ among interview sample during the case study

I suggest that this strategy also strengthened the likelihood of workplace learning, as the NVQ structure ensured that the population was briefed on their coaching and assessment schedule. This appears to support Billett (2000) who argues that preparation is necessary for workplace learning to be effective.

The standards required by the TOC were communicated through a specification manual. The presence of this manual appeared not to be detrimental to the individual's propensity to learn. One interviewee stated that "*They tell me what I am going to be assessed on and so the night before I refreshed myself by going through the manual*". This appears to contradict Karakowsky and McBey (1999) who proposed that organisational scripts are negatively related to the level of potential for adult learning. However, these specifications manuals, although highly prescriptive, were task-focused and did not include rigid guidance on how an individual should 'behave', thus enabling individual personalities to 'shine

through'. This appears to support one of Karakowsky and McBey's (1999) other propositions that submission of personality is detrimental to learning.

I believe that the presence of NVQs at work significantly increased individual motivation to learn (Knowles et al 1998) as each valued the qualification that changing behaviour would bring. However, I argue that although improving the overall outcome, the presence of NVQs as a guided learning strategy merely strengthened the potency of the coaching and was not the significant reason for the population's improvement in competence.

The data also showed that although competence increased, the reported numbers of coaching sessions was not high. The results showed that there were many more assessments than coaching sessions over the period of the case study (Figure 17).

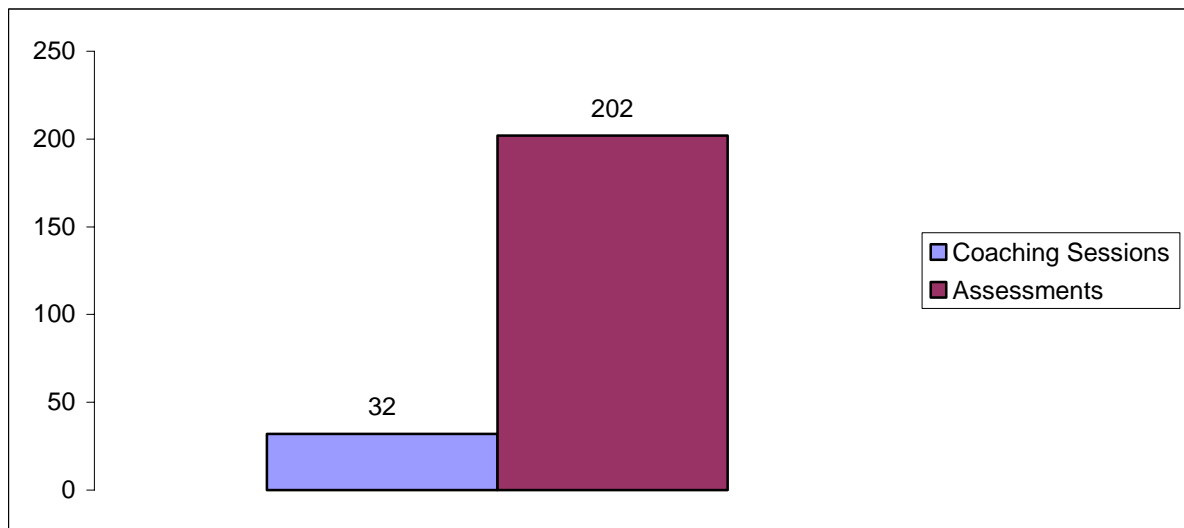


Figure 17: Number of coaching and assessment sessions reported during the case study

It should be noted, however, that there is a significant possibility that individuals were reporting multiple assessments that occurred during only one assessment 'session'. I believe this discrepancy between the numbers of coaching and assessment sessions should be treated cautiously as there were a few reports that coaching behaviour was concurrently occurring during an 'assessment'. This would fit the model of coaching for the TOC, as the Coach/Assessor would want to identify knowledge and skills gaps before beginning coaching. Nonetheless, I believe that further research is required on the effectiveness and efficiency of coaching as a method of increasing intermediate vocational skills in the workplace, as some of the more experienced individuals appeared to require little coaching to achieve competence once they had read the specification manual.

Relationships with the Coaches

The Baseline data showed that the population viewed the Coach/Assessors as 'Managers' and 'Enforcers of Standards', rather than 'Trainers' and 'Coaches'. I was concerned that this perceived positional power may affect the quality and nature of the relationship (Ragins 1997). However, with the passage of time this perception changed (Figure 18). Although

early indicators showed a shift in perception on both scales, Data series two showed no movement in the perception of the Coach/Assessors as 'Enforcer of Standards'.

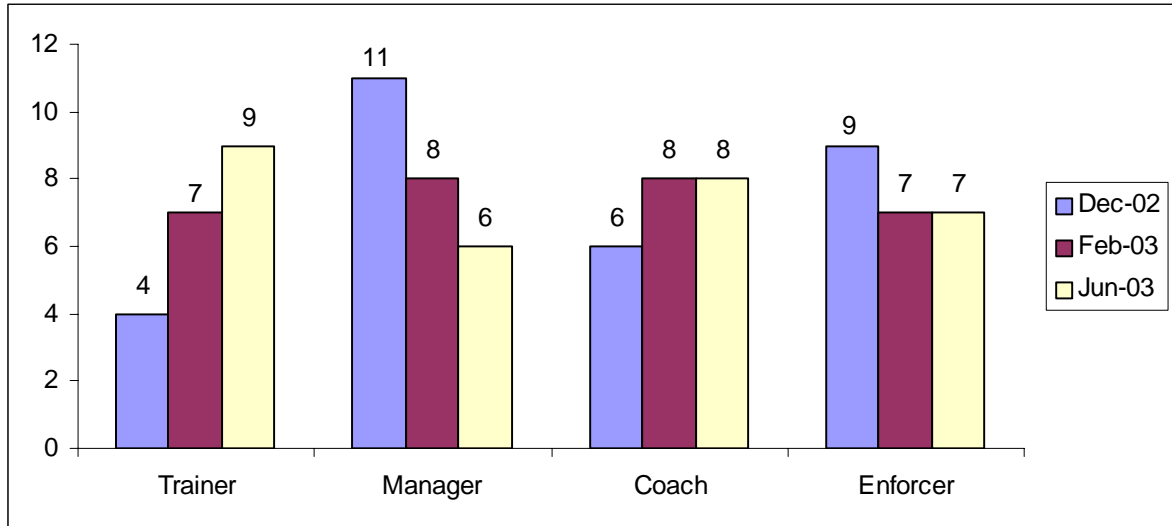


Figure 18: How the perception of role of the Quality Coach/Assessors has changed during the case study

I argue that although the perception of the population is important, it is the actual construction of the developmental relationship that is more valid as an indicator of a developmental coaching relationship and not the propensity of the population to choose one role descriptor over another. The evidence showed how the overall quality of the developmental relationship improved during the case study and I argue this has stronger validity because it is based on the presence or absence of particular factors, rather than individual perception and interpretation of a single statement.

Within the A.C.E.R coaching model the characteristics of a 'good coach' were introduced (Figure 5). Many of these indicators can also be seen within Murphy's (1995) stated coaching roles and responsibilities. Figure 19 shows the average perception ratings of stated important aspects in the coaching relationship(s).

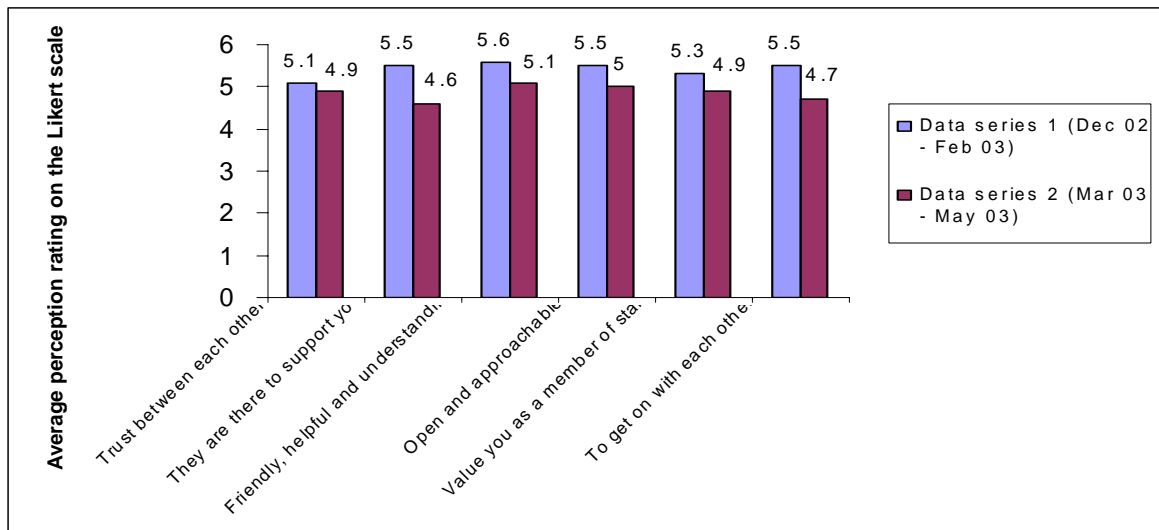


Figure 19: Average perception ratings of stated important aspects in the coaching relationship(s) – Data series one and two

When analysing the data it can be noted that there was a slight decrease in the reported presence of these ‘important aspects’ (Figure 20). I argue that this decrease may be due to the increased presence of multiple developmental relationships and strengthened my belief that ‘enforced’ coaching together with multiple developmental relationships weakens developmental relationship tie – strength (Higgins and Kram, 2001). I suggest that further research is required in this area.

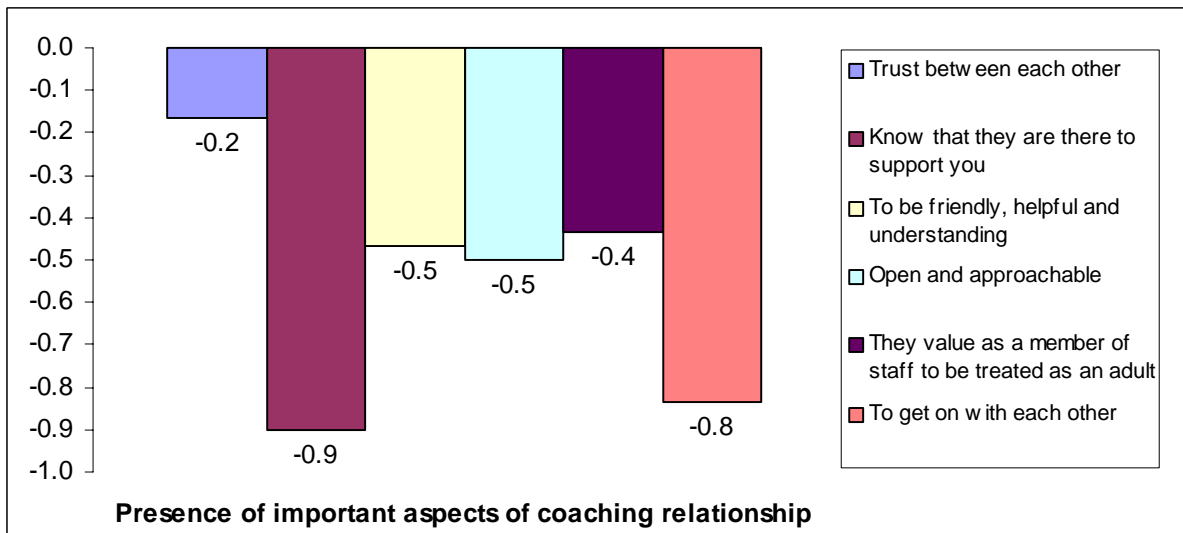


Figure 20: Shift in the perception ratings of stated important aspects in the current coaching relationship(s) during the case study

Despite this slight decrease, Data series two showed that the aspects were still present in significant degrees (Figure 19). The levels of ‘important aspects’ reported within the coaching relationship meant that the population felt ‘psychologically safe’ with the Coach/Assessors. This was born out in their increasing propensity to proactively seek feedback or coaching, thus supporting the research by Fisher et al (1982) and Wills (1991)

on psychological safety. I also believe that this feeling of psychological safety was increased due to the consistency of coaching approach as reported in the increasing presence of defined A.C.E.R coaching behaviours, which also contain many of Murphy's (1995) roles and responsibilities. Figures 21, 22 and 23 show the presence or absence of these behaviours during the three data collection points. Figure 24 shows the percentage point shift in the total presence or absence of specific coaching behaviours between Baseline and Data series two.

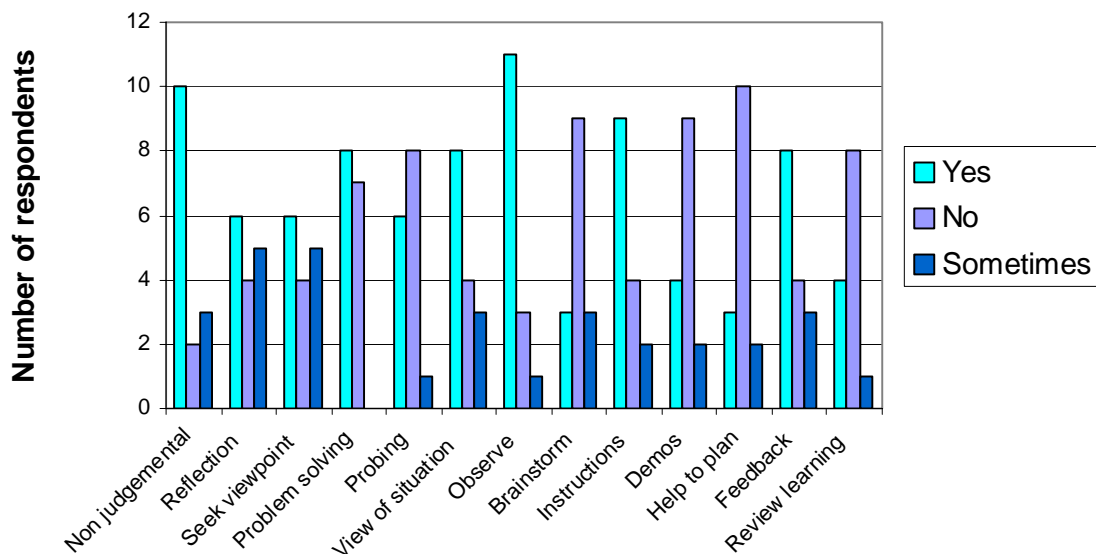


Figure 21: Number of respondents indicating the presence or absence of specific coaching behaviours by the Coach/Assessors - Baseline data (Sept 02- Nov 02)

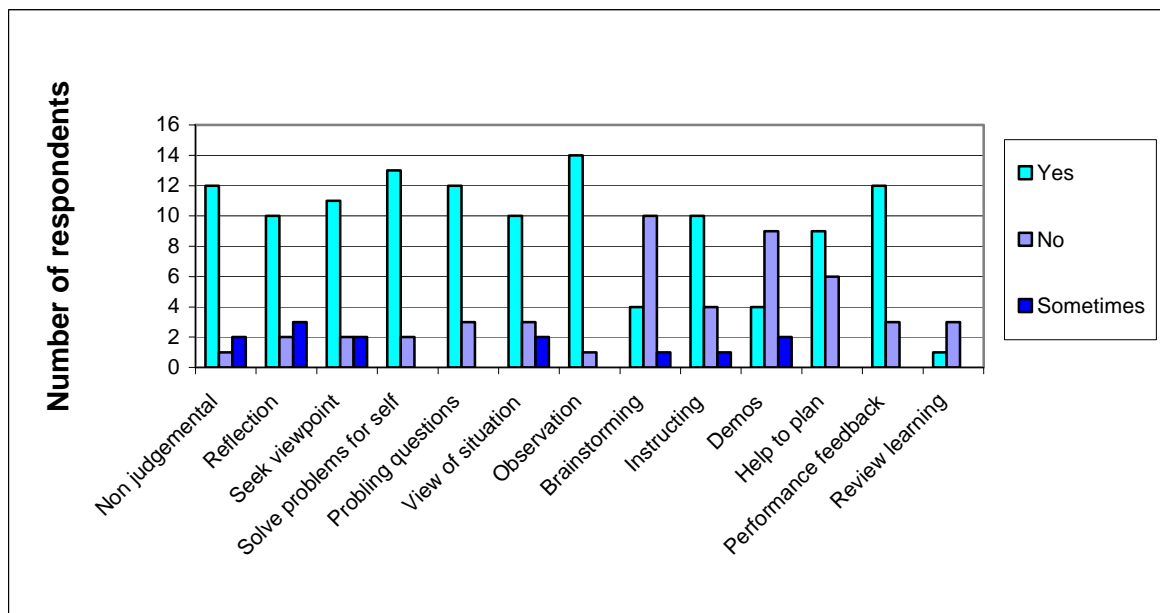


Figure 22: Number of respondents indicating the presence or absence of specific coaching behaviours by the Coach/Assessors - Data series one (Dec 02 – Feb 03)

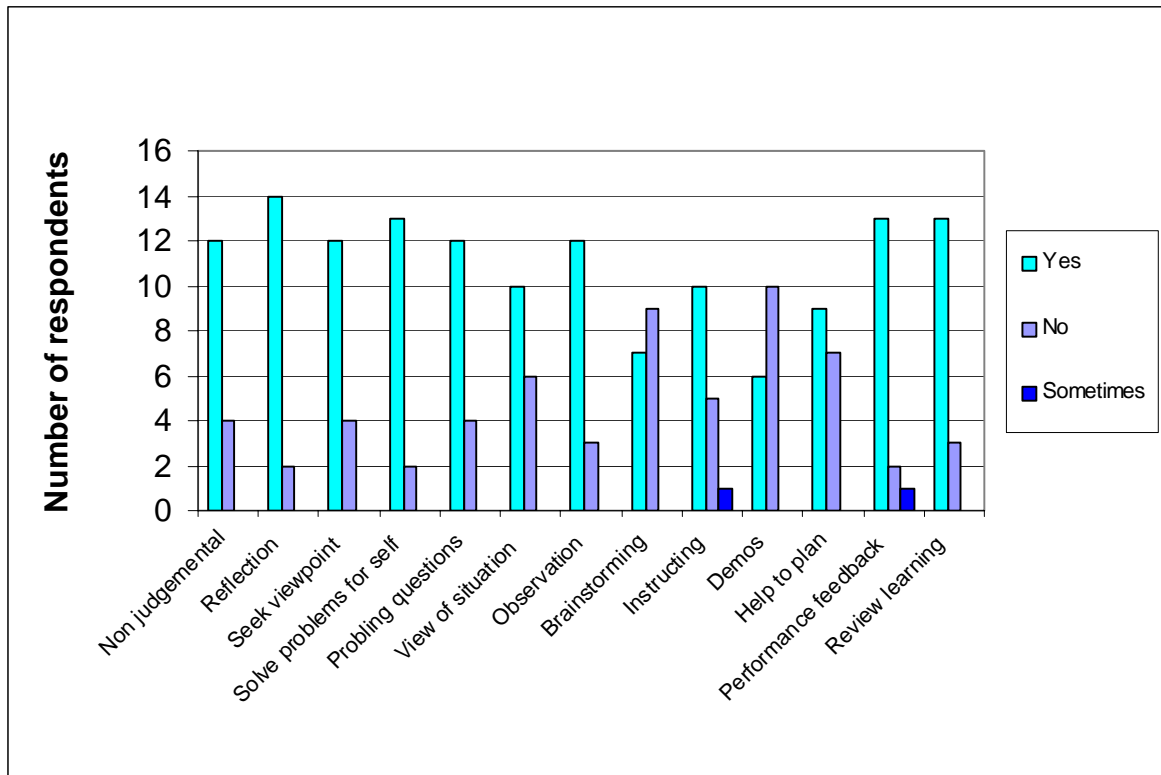


Figure 23: Number of respondents indicating the presence or absence of specific coaching behaviours by the Coach/Assessors – Data series two (Feb 03 - May 03)

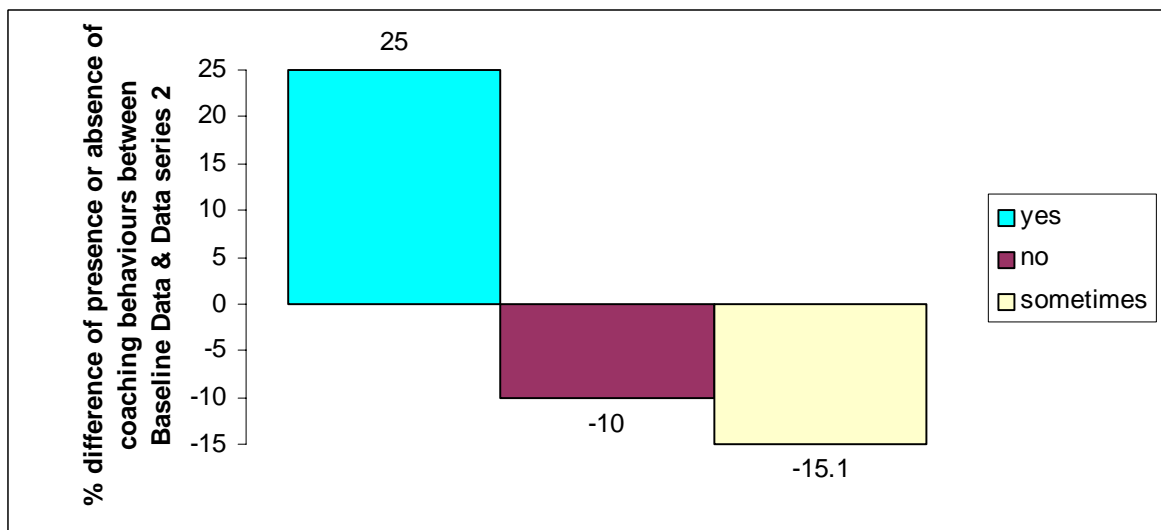


Figure 24: The increased levels of A.C.E.R coaching behaviours during the case study

The high level of these aspects being present within the relationship proved that it was coaching that was taking place as defined within the A.C.E.R model, and this was supportive of Brookfield's (1986) definition of an adult learning facilitator in so much as the coaching enabled the population to:

..consider rationally and carefully the perspectives and interpretations of the world that diverge from those they already hold, without making [them].. feel they are being cajoled or threatened. (Brookfield, 1986, p.286)

I also argue that it was coaching rather than on-job training, as defined by Gold (1981) that was occurring. This is important to recognise, as Bowerman and Collins (1999, p.219) state that the traditional view of coaching was little more than an “enlightened step beyond telling”. Given the traditional command and control leadership style within the TOC this was a significant step forward in the company’s organisational development. However, there was no evidence of generative coaching, (Flaherty, 1999, Guest, 2000) whereby the individual and coach continually reassessed their mental models. I suggest that this may be due, in part, to a culture where collaborative learning is uncommon and to the fact that intermediate vocational skills development does not lend itself to this type of coaching occurring.

The combination of all these aspects appeared to support the work of Murphy (1995) and Billett (1994a, 1994b), and resulted in the vast majority of the population accepting multiple coaching relationships and that having more than one Coach/Assessor was “*not a problem as they are all coming from the baseline standard*”.

Overall the nature of the developmental relationship is best described as ‘opportunistic’, (Higgins and Kram, 2001), as was expected, and I assert that although the population felt ‘psychologically safe’ the ‘enforced’ nature of the coaching relationship delimited the probability of strong and proactive relationships developing. This ‘enforcement’ was particularly evident in Data series two, where there was found to be an increased level of passivity towards gaining a qualification at work. For example, “*We were getting assessed as part of our job so we may as well get a qualification for it.*” was a typical response from many of the individuals interviewed. In addition, the lack of change in the perception of ‘Enforcer of Standards’, I argue, is evidence of the potentially detrimental nature of enforced coaching.

Assessing Population Competence

Throughout the period of the case study the Coach/Assessors had varying ability to undertake formal NVQ assessments. Nonetheless, they were able to assess a total of 2,882 tasks against company standards and the coaching that had been undertaken had a significant impact on the population’s propensity to behave consistently to standard.

Mystery Shopper

Throughout the case study significant improvement was seen in the Mystery Shopper data specific to the population (Figures 25 and 26). Figure 27 shows the variance in Mystery Shopper results for the population during the case study. The results show the actual behaviour seen among the population and correlates closely with the company standards. I argue that this is valid and reliable evidence that overall there was significant and increasing improvement in the performance and consistent application of company standards among the population and that this was directly attributable in substantial part, to

the coaching they received during the case study. The two significant decreases are in the area of uniform standards and this is explained by the difficulty experienced within the TOC to receive and distribute adequate uniform supplies to the population. The minor decrease of -2% in ‘Thank you/Farewell’ I suggest is due to the increased levels of customer service on-board and the inability of the individuals to be in two places at once

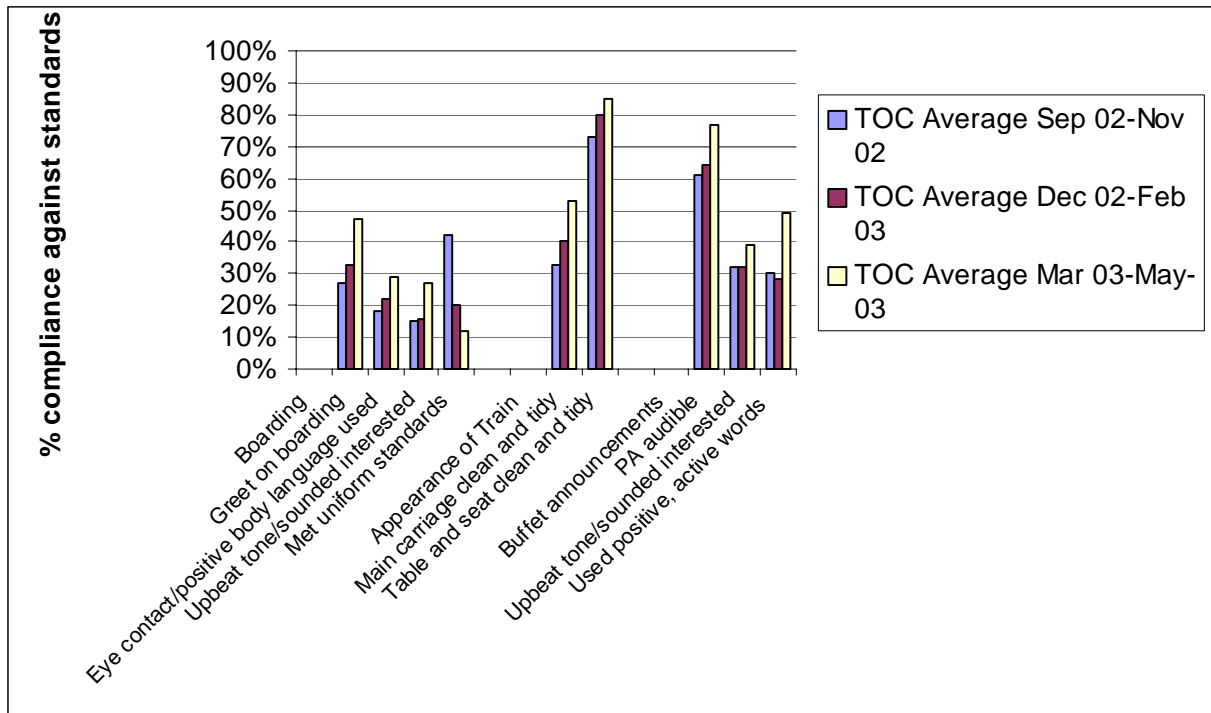


Figure 25: Average TOC Mystery Shopper results for the population during the case study (1/2)

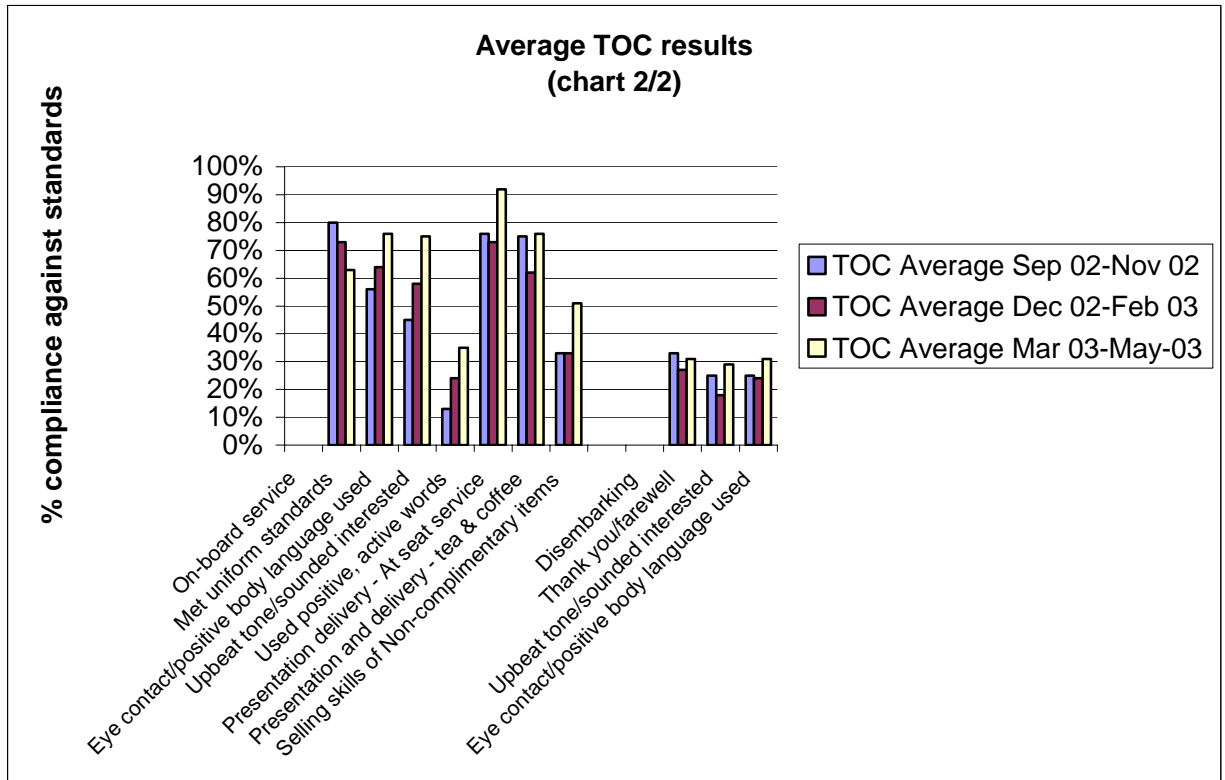


Figure 26: Average TOC Mystery Shopper results for the population during the case study (2/2)

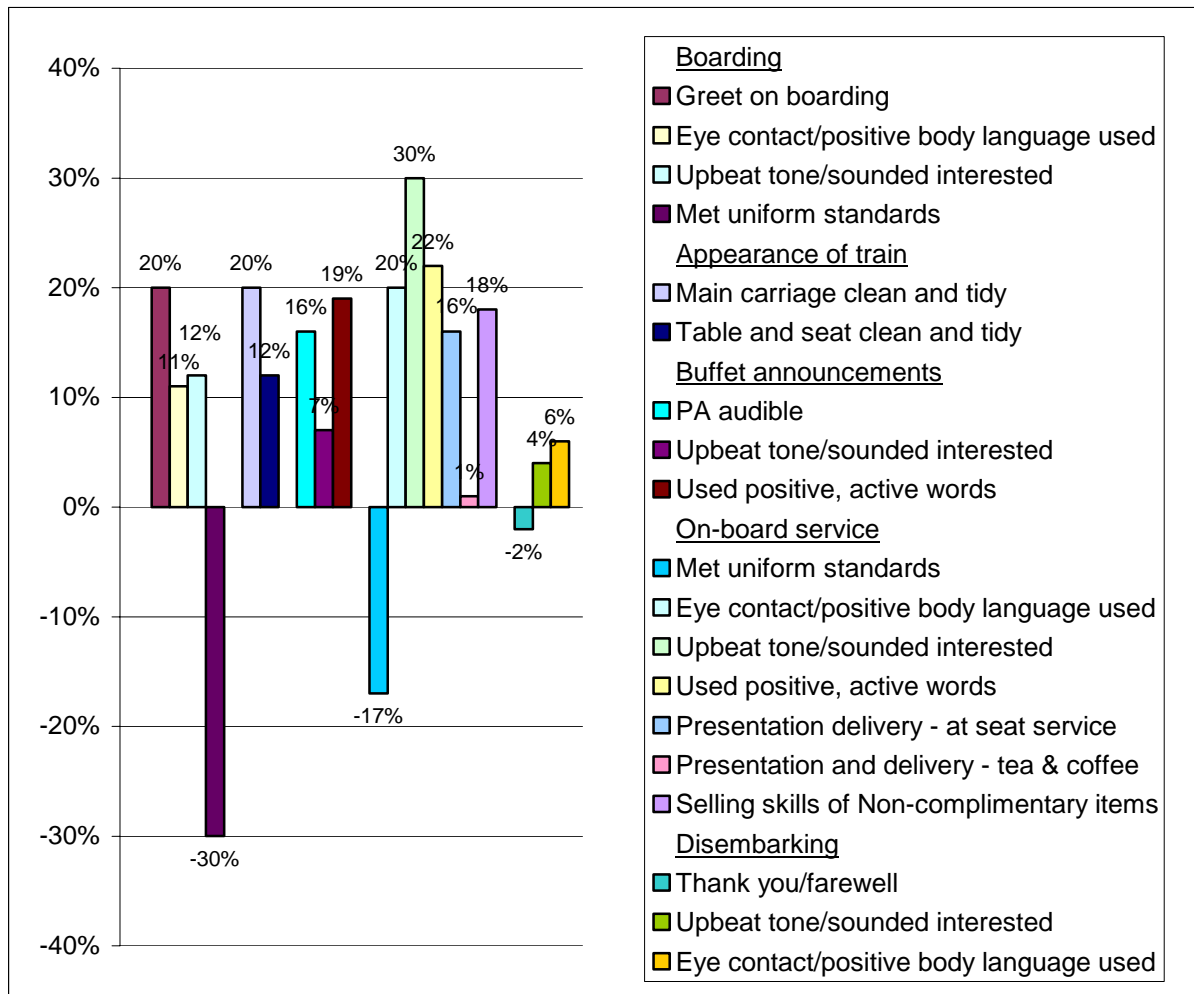


Figure 27: Variances in Mystery Shopper results for the population during the case study

Customer Satisfaction Monitor

The relevant extracts of the Customer Satisfaction Monitor data analysis are shown below in Figure 32. These results represent all data collected during the case study. The results show a mixed picture, with an overall increase between Baseline and Data series one, but a significant decrease between Data series one and two.

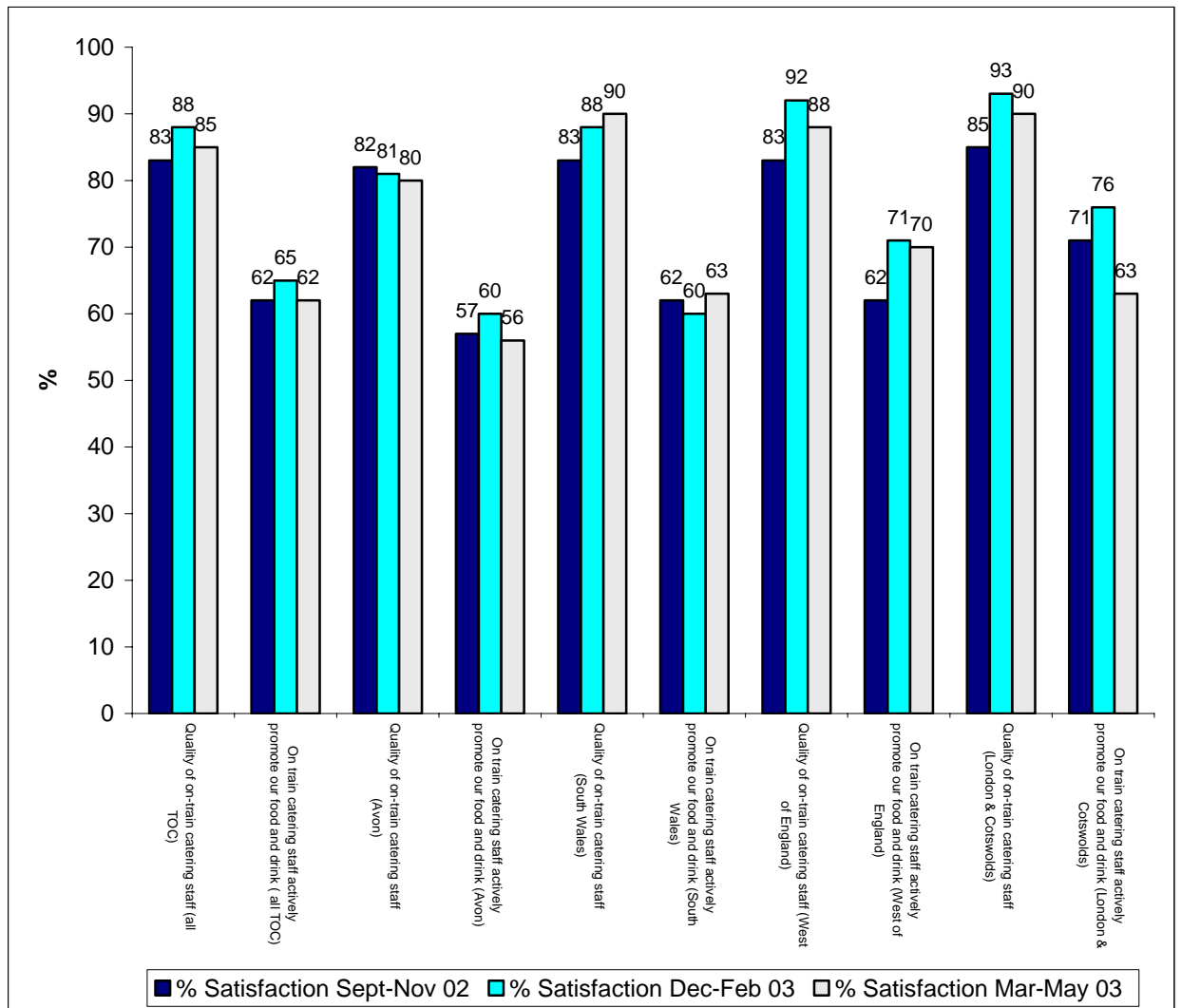


Figure 28: Customer satisfaction scores from the Customer Monitor survey for the population – September 2002 – May 2003

Figure 29 shows the variances between Baseline and Data series two. When comparing increased customer satisfaction over this longer timeframe we see that there have been increases in levels of customer satisfaction on six of the ten variables.

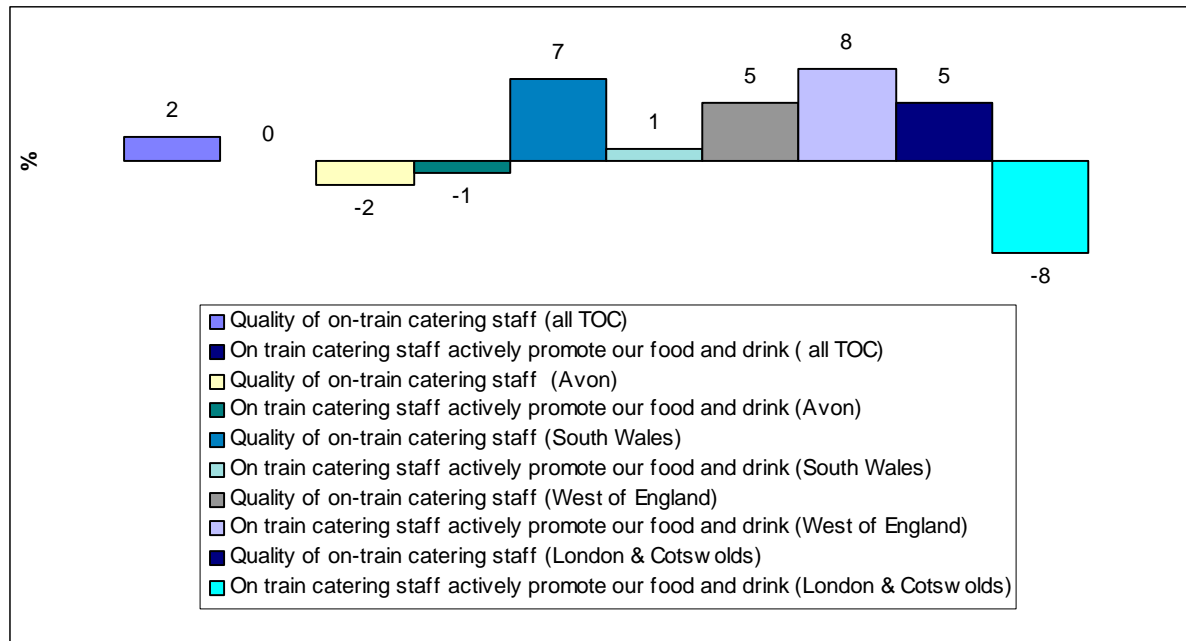


Figure 29: Variances in Customer Monitor results for the population between Baseline and Data series two

Although one could conclude that the increased compliance to company standards had an impact on levels of customer satisfaction and that the level of increased compliance appeared to correlate, in part, with the levels of increased customer satisfaction, the dynamic nature of customer perception and the degree of influence the confounding variables had on it meant that the validity of these particular results were not as strong as all other data results and should be treated with some caution.

Summary

This case study set out to prove the research theory that the introduction of workplace coaching can improve employee competence when measured against company standards for an intermediate vocational skills role within a UK train operating company. Using NVQs as a guided learning and assessment framework, the resulting increases in competence would be evidenced by the individual’s successful assessment against company standards and that this would lead to the consistent application of standards in the workplace, as evidenced by increasing Mystery Shopper scores. Because customer standards were increasing this would then have a positive effect on the level of customer satisfaction with the population.

This study demonstrated that coaching did occur in the workplace as defined by the TOC’s workplace coaching model; ‘opportunistic’ developmental relationships did develop (Higgins and Kram, 2001) and the important characteristics of a coaching relationship were evident throughout the case study. This research also proved that the coaching had a significant effect on developing employee competence, although I believe that there was a significant contributing factor. The introduction of the specifications manual contributed to defining ‘what good looked like’ in the TOC and supported the consistent ‘coaching – in’

of the standards in the workplace. This manual also acted as a comprehensive guide for the more experienced members of the population who proactively read the manual to ensure they passed assessments. I believe that the presence of the specifications manual for more experienced employees meant that the level of coaching they required was probably lower than less experienced members of the population. This is important as it leads me to question how effective and efficient workplace coaching is for this level of vocational skills, especially when there are clearly defined organisational scripts.

I am confident that the NVQ assessment process was a valid measure of competence and that the introduction of the NVQs did give the population an increased level of motivation to learn new things and change their behaviour. However, I argue that the presence of NVQs merely added strength to the coaching outcome and the introduction of NVQs themselves did not have a direct impact on improved employee performance, however they did have a significant impact on the population's ability to accept change in the workplace in return for the reward of a national qualification.

The level of increased employee competence was successfully evidenced through the significant increase in the Mystery Shopper scores on nearly all aspects during the case study. I believe this shows that the coaching has helped to change the mental models of the population who are now performing to standard without management supervision.

The impact of coaching on levels of customer satisfaction is less clear due to the confounding variables that affect the public's perception of satisfaction. Overall I believe that the customers received 'better' service as a result of coaching but this did not strongly correlate with their perceptions of satisfaction. I also argue that rail customers have suffered journey disruption and poor quality service over such a long period of time that they now expect the worst and therefore subconsciously filter out the improvements that do occur, remembering only what went wrong. These confounding variables are part of a real world situation. Throughout this research I have sought to identify and analyse the effect of these variables on the population and research phenomenon and this further strengthens my belief that the methodology I adopted was appropriate and has led to the collection of valid and reliable data that, in turn, has proved the vast majority of my research theory as true. The limitations of the case study methodology and timescale of research meant that I was not able to make significant adjustments to the Coaches' performance that would have been possible through Action Research. Given the case study results I suggest that the effect of workplace coaching could have been more significant if Action Research was used. I believe that future similar research would benefit from a longer time frame and this alternative methodology.

Nonetheless, I believe the level of generalisability is significant within many customer service contexts. Ashton and Felstead (1995) suggested that we are far from demonstrating that training represents a key determinant of an organisation's financial performance. This research showed the significant business impact workplace coaching had and is a timely example, so keenly sought by the current Government (White Paper, 2003) that could encourage more employers to invest in the intermediate skills levels of their employees. I also argue the lack of research on workplace coaching has meant it is seen as a 'nice to have', disjointed from the 'real business' of the organisation, and has not been considered

seriously when discussing ways to improve organisational performance. I believe this case study showed beyond doubt that coaching can improve individual and organisational performance. I hope that this research helps to overcome the UK's long-standing indifference to training at the intermediate skills level, which is seen by many (Hallier and Butts, 1999) as responsible for holding back the UK's ability to compete in the value-added/high quality international markets.

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