

## Less is more : the power of phone coaching

Nowadays it's commonplace for businesses to embrace management coaching to develop their people. The investment is not entirely altruistic there is a return on investment through enhanced individual performance achieving a healthy impact on the business balance sheet as well as fulfilled employees who will 'live the brand' through their values and behaviour.

However, typically coaching will be delivered via face to face consultations for employees, perhaps because this is seen as of higher perceived value than a programme delivered by phone. It's also fair to say that many of the 'serious' coaching fraternity would frown upon phone coaching believing it to be a practice belonging to the 'quasi-coaching' brigade – those who had an epiphany at a weekend course and came out as a "qualified" coach. But listen up, many household name businesses are recognising that phone coaching has many benefits to recommend it.

It seems a natural assumption that unless you can see the whites of someone's eyes it's impossible to build a meaningful relationship and that not being able to assess non-verbal behaviour is a distinct handicap. This seems to be borne out in a recent case study by a well known retailer : prior to phone coaching 86% of participants thought phone coaching would be less effective than face to face coaching. However, following phone coaching 82% thought that phone coaching was highly effective with all participants rating it at least "effective"

People's first reaction to the choice of face to face or phone coaching is to opt for the former. Says, Michelle Lucas of greenfields, the Director of an executive coaching business based in Berkshire 'I first explored phone coaching out of necessity when I worked with a consultant who spent chunks of time in Australia. The sessions needed to continue to support his development so we agreed to hold some sessions by phone. I was surprised that some of my best work with this client was done over the phone and as a result I now believe this is a powerful coaching method. So much so, I actively seek out clients who are already used to using the phone as part of their remote management work practice e.g. Area Managers'.

- Michelle continues 'my positive take out was that the anonymity afforded by the phone has some definite upsides. People seem to reveal more than they expected perhaps because they feel safer at a physical distance. Certainly as a coach, less energy is taken up trying to process non-verbal signals instead needing to become more curious and check out more about the feeling behind the words articulated. Similarly the participant is not occupied by trying to mask those non verbals that might "give them away". The net result is that more energy is available for focusing on the thinking and the dialogue itself. Interestingly it becomes possible to tune into the client at a much deeper level as you are listening to less "data". Awareness of voice tone, nuances, pauses become valuable alternatives to non-verbal behaviours. When you are in "flow" with a client even their silences will "speak" to you – it becomes possible to feel the different energy and know when your client is thinking, reflecting or stalling.

A very practical benefit is that the coach is able to write discreet notes to themselves without impeding the flow of the session this is particularly useful if you want to use "clean language" as it makes it possible to "play back" phrases verbatim at a later date.

The most obvious benefits of phone coaching are of course time, money and convenience for both parties. The coach is able to work from anywhere, attaining their own work/life balance, whilst being able to be flexible to the needs of all their clients. Location becomes irrelevant and time zones less problematic – down time between clients is less pronounced with the coach only needing to consider the time needed for their own restoration rather than juggling logistics between appointments. Typically phone coaching sessions tend to take 2/3rds of the time that a face to face session would take and so coachees find they can integrate coaching much more easily into their work routine because the session takes less time. Similarly, both coach and coachee find that when needed, they can squeeze in an unplanned session with relative ease.

Some things are of course the same for both methods and these essentials include:

- Establishing a contract
- Building a rapport
- Planning the sessions so that the meeting can take place in a good environment i.e. without interruptions
- 100% attention focussed on the coachee for the duration of the session
- Good preparation by both coach and coachee to ensure both parties are “present” in the session
- The coach reporting back to the organisation that the sessions have taken place, without divulging the content or progress within them

As the world of work is increasingly fast-paced and businesses are going global, interventions that are flexible and can be delivered easily across continents and time zones make more and more sense. Therefore it's increasingly important to recognise phone coaching has a genuine place in corporate life and is not the preserve of poorly trained life coaches.

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