

Trust me — I'm a management coach

EVERY now and again some new management fad such as "process re-engineering" or "total quality" will pop up, only to fade into obscurity after a year or two. Coaching is the latest fashion.

Since its beginnings in America in the early 1980s, the concept has spread to Britain and is booming. Talk to anyone in human relations and the message is that coaching is big business.

"It's a growth area," says Sheena Crane, a coach to top companies such as BP and Diageo and managing director of Penna Change Consulting.

Laurence Lyons, a leading coach, co-author of *Coaching for Leadership* and research director of the Future Work Forum at Henley Management College, says: "It's sweeping Europe, where many companies have coaching programmes."

Crane says the difference this time is that this is a growth area set to stay. "Some things come and go, but coaching is sustainable as an industry in its own right. It has a long-term impact on people's performance," she says. Training, experience and per-

Coaching is not just another fad — experts say it can boost an executive's performance long term. Report by Roger Eglin

sonal-development courses can all improve performance, but Crane believes coaching has that extra x-factor.

There's something about coaching that accelerates people's development. It's tailored around their personal needs as well as their jobs and that makes a difference," she says.

A few years ago coaching was looked on as "a weird idea", says Lyons, but he believes the driving force now behind its growth is the recognition that the new economy demands different working patterns.

"Technology has had a big impact

on the way people work. There's more demand on individuals to plan and organise their own work. Where in the past they were rewarded for repeating more of the same, the emphasis now is on self-management."

Yet while people are being asked to improve their performances, the flatter hierarchies of most companies mean that they get promoted faster with less chance to acquire experience on the way up. The finance man coming to the top of the tree may be dextrous at managing the accounts but lacking the general skills and behaviour that make a top executive.

Enter coaching as the answer. "It's very much about assisting business leaders to enhance their performance," says Bruce Collings, a former senior executive with Johnson & Johnson, the healthcare giant, and now chief executive of Superhumanism, a coaching company he set up last year.

Lyons says: "Senior managers are very much the target group. The world's far less predictable now and this means that the old management models don't offer them much."

Coaching is easier to define by what it is not. It is not consulting. It is not usually a form of psychotherapy, nor just giving business advice. Much of it is about behaviour and relating to one's colleagues. The coach can be a confidant who can be used as a sounding board by a newly promoted director before he airs his ideas to the board.

"Some of it is about releasing talent," says Crane. "It's about understanding your own behaviour and how to manage yourself in relation-



In the mainstream: Lyons says coaching is no longer seen as a weird idea

ship particularly where you have had difficulty with someone in the past. It leaves you with a better grasp of what you want to do in your career and how to deliver that for yourself."

Managers at all levels can benefit. The real test is: does the candidate feel any improvement?

A relatively modest amount of coaching — say, what Lyons would regard as a minimum programme five or six sessions — can deliver impressive results, which can be sustained by a monthly conversation.

Its effectiveness will depend on the degree of preparation. Both Crane and Lyons like to probe a candidate's performance in the eyes of his or her colleagues using 360-degree feedback techniques. This helps to identify weaknesses or issues that need to be

worked on in the coaching sessions, making them more rewarding. Repeating the scrutiny a month or two after coaching allows improvements to be measured.

Collings questions whether senior executives here are more reluctant than their American counterparts to undergo this sort of scrutiny.

Acceptance of coaching at the top helps spread its benefits through the management. One leader's performance improved radically after the coach suggested he thank subordinates for good performance rather than take it for granted. But you do not have to have a problem to thrive on coaching. — "Some 90% of it is dealing with people who are successful," says Crane.

EXECUTIVES REAP THE REWARDS

THREE executives with the joint venture set up between Sita and Equant to manage their global telecommunications networks have become enthusiastic about coaching after sessions with Laurence Lyons. "It's much better than I expected," says Diana Leonard. "I was afraid it would be very theoretical, but I saw immediate results that I could implement straightaway." Her colleague, Patricia Waldren-Werner, agrees it was practical. She says: "It's exactly the right formula for busy people. They don't have the time to spend sitting in three to four-day training sessions." Alexandre Gouvea agrees that the beauty of coaching is the time it saves, and says: "It focuses on my needs now and what is important to me."