

Set your people free

IN THE SECOND IN A TWO-PART SERIES, MIKE TAYLOR TELLS **GRAHAM BUCK** HOW COACHING AND MENTORING CAN HELP RAISE ORGANISATIONS' PERFORMANCE IN A LASTING WAY.

With no early end in sight to today's austere market conditions, achieving more with less may well be the mantra for business leaders for several years to come. "In tough markets with uncertain futures, performance is everything," says Mike Taylor, CEO of coaching/mentoring organisation the RBP Group.

Most companies are fairly good at devising what to do to maximise performance, but relatively few are as adept at how to deliver results to give them a competitive edge. So how can leaders rebuild an environment which encourages staff to generate new ways to create value and grow – and hold back costs too?

THE CASE FOR COACHING AND MENTORING "There's no silver bullet," responds Taylor. "There's no quick fix, no one thing that organisations can do that will get the best out of all staff. But the solution is within everyone's grasp, with the right mindset and a commitment to the long-term development of the business."

There are two helpful starting points. First, no-one wants to come

to work to do a bad job. And second, handled properly, staff will deliver more – there's lots of evidence to confirm that an engaged workforce adds more to the bottom line. "People have an amazing capacity to surprise," says Taylor, "and the way leaders lead makes a huge difference to value creation and overall business performance."

Improving the quality of internal communications is often a tactical first step. By sharing news (both good and bad) regularly, managers and staff feel more informed and trust levels rise. Adding coaching and mentoring to leadership styles is a more strategic solution. Through a series of conversations to help achieve business goals and potential, leadership becomes more inclusive.

Taylor cites the example of when a director was looking to raise the contribution of his direct reports. Taylor asked him how he preferred his boss, the CEO, to delegate issues to him. The director said he liked the CEO to outline the issue, set a date to resolve it by, and then challenge him to get on with it. Taylor then asked the director how he delegated to his own team. His answer was: "Well, I think it's important for a boss to think an issue through before delegating, work out what the action steps are, and give clear instructions with milestones for delivery." Eventually the penny dropped and the director realised that in trying to do the thinking for his team, he was getting in the way and holding them back.

Leadership is about more than just setting the direction; it's also about encouraging people to follow. Taylor's example shows both the limitations of a traditional command and control leadership style and how a challenge and support style frees up people to think for themselves. Coaching and mentoring techniques are motivational and encourage staff to make a difference.

CURRENT ORGANISATIONAL TRENDS Despite tight corporate budgets, Taylor says that many companies see a sound investment case for coaching and mentoring, starting at the top of the organisation and extending to all functions in the business. Taylor identifies five trends:

- **Senior leaders value external coaching support.** The seat at the top can be lonely and a coach mentor can add new insights and perspectives from their business experience. Organisations want to raise the performance of individual leaders in a lasting way.
- **Company boards benefit from external evaluation and support.** Today's governance standards require formal board performance reviews annually. Team coaching is increasingly used to raise board effectiveness, a technique also relevant for key teams across the business.



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■ **The use and composition of internal coaching teams is growing.**

While senior leaders often use external coaches (to gain wider perspectives), internal coaching builds skills and knowledge in-house and increases capacity at lower cost. Some internal coaches are full time, some act as part of an HR or learning and development role, and some are leaders from across the business.

■ **Formal mentoring programmes are being set up.** Informal mentoring schemes have limited success in many organisations. Adding structure and some formality increases commitment: experience is shared willingly and openly as trusted relationships are formed and mentees' performance improves quickly.

■ **For managers, being a good coach is key to getting more out of individuals and teams.** Google recently published an analysis of what makes its best managers successful (you can read it at <http://bit.ly/pZJKwR>). The top-performing characteristic was being a good coach – ie. making time for regular one-to-one meetings, challenging and supporting the team and showing an interest in staff as individuals.

There are no surprises on Google's list but the power is in how it ranked the best managerial habits. Technical competence, for example, had historically propelled its engineers to management positions, but the analysis placed this bottom of eight good behaviours. But neither was this about "soft" stuff – a results orientation and a context of business goals and strategy featured strongly too.

"Many of these activities are relatively low cost and high value, which helps," says Taylor. "Some investment in skills and competence is part of best practice when setting up internal coaching and mentoring, including relevant professional training and operating within standards, and a code of ethics recommended by an industry body. But payback is very fast and the benefits compound."

COMPETITIVE EDGE In Taylor's experience, the most exciting benefit comes from leaders across the business becoming internal coaches and mentors. Open, trusting conversations are rare in corporate life. They bring many wider benefits for the business including more effective decision-making, positive and earlier resolution of different views, difficult issues and conflicts, higher confidence levels and even faster budget setting.

"Coaching and mentoring are now used as a marketing strategy," Taylor says. "A major accounting firm recently asked clients what they wanted from their adviser, and found that they didn't want traditional salespeople but individuals who understood their business, were willing to listen, asked the right questions and challenged their thinking." Evidence indeed that coaching and mentoring skills bring competitive edge in difficult times.

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