

Cross Cultural Coaching and Mentoring in International Organizations

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In a period of fast change in business characterised by internationalisation of teams and markets, mergers and acquisitions, and virtual global teams, organizations need interculturally competent leaders and managers to succeed in a complex and global environment.

This paper will explore the specificities of coaching and mentoring in a global environment and it aims to provide an understanding of its potential both for individuals and organizations in a multicultural environment.

I outline the concept of coaching and mentoring, and an overview of the current developments of this approach in organizations in learning and talent development strategy. How can cross-cultural coaching and mentoring help leaders and organizations to leverage cultural differences at work? What are the impacts of culture on organizations, leadership, communication and management in a multicultural environment? How can organizations support their leaders and employees to become interculturally competent?

This article will also provide some tools that can be used by managers, mentors, and coaches at work in a multicultural environment.

1. Coaching and Mentoring

1.1 What is coaching/mentoring?

Business coaching is an approach that helps managers to step back from current issues and allows them to deal with their dilemmas, assumptions and barriers. Coaching/Mentoring is an ever growing field that first emerged as a profession in the United States in the 1990's.

Coaching aims at helping people find and implement their own solutions. For Rosinski, coaching is “*a pragmatic humanism*” (Rosinski, 2003: 3) and “*the art of facilitating the unleashing of people's potential to reach meaningful, important objectives*” (Rosinski, 2003: 4). Likewise, for Whitmore, “*coaching is unlocking people's potential to maximise their own performance*” (Whitmore, 1992: 10). Coaching differs from other approaches that aim at developing people and at improving learning.

1.2 What is the difference between training, consulting, mentoring and coaching?

In everyday speech, coaching is often used as a synonym of mentoring or even training. However, P.Hill (2004) underlines that “coaching is a management skill and is distinct from mentoring, training and counselling”. Some coaching skills can be used in all those roles: listening, questioning, empathy. However, approach and objectives are different:

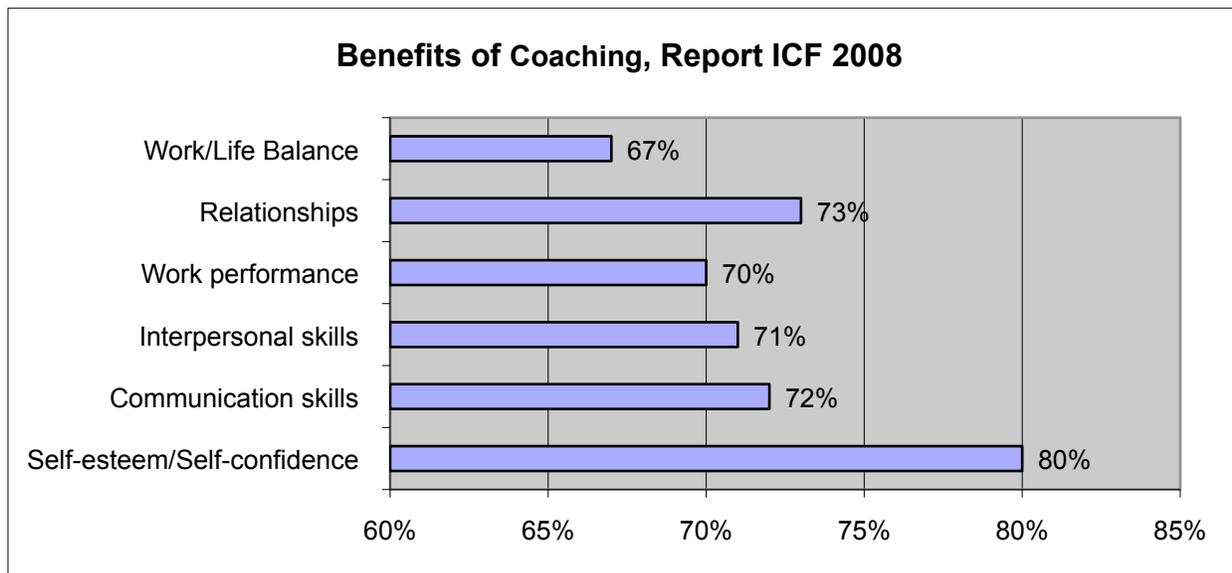
- **Teacher:** teaches a specific skill or knowledge (how to do a P&L using Excel for instance)
- **Consultant:** provides a diagnostic and recommendations to address the client's issue
- **Mentor:** provides advices and guidance within an organisation using his experience and knowledge.
- **Coach:** helps people to find their own solutions to achieve a goal in the workplace.

Each approach has a role and can be used for personal development purposes. The role of a coach is to unleash people potential. A coach works with people and aims to help them to achieve specific goals and to find their own way and their own solutions.

1.3 What are the benefits of coaching for an organization?

There are many benefits associated with professional coaching. According to the 2009 *International Coaching Federation (ICF) Global Coaching Client Study*, companies that use or have used coaching/mentoring for business reasons have seen a median return on investment of seven times their initial investment. In fact, individual clients reported a median return on investment of 3.44 times their investment.

Moreover, the Learning and Talent Development Survey published by the CIPD in 2010 provides data on current and future learning and talent development issues and trends in UK. It reveals that coaching takes place in eight in ten (82%) organizations as part of their learning and development activities. Another research achieved in 2008 by the ICF reveals that for employees being coached identified the benefits of coaching on both personal and professional levels. For instance, 80% coached employees feel more confident with a higher level of self-esteem.



2. The specificities of coaching and mentoring in a multicultural environment:

2.1 What is culture?

A group's culture can be broadly defined as "the set of unique characteristics that distinguishes its members from another group." (Rosinski, 2003: 20). We may belong to multiple groups and

cultures. For instance, we can be British, from Wales, Anglican, have graduated as an engineer, with a Chinese familial background, and be working in the retail industry.

2.2 Culture as a dynamic system

The metaphor of the onion is often used to describe the fact that we belong to different groups at the same time. Like onions, humans have various cultural layers and each layer represents a group to which we belong. The combination of various groups and experiences makes us unique as individuals, constantly changing and adding another “layer” to our core values and beliefs. We evolve through various groups during our lives from manager to executive or board member, travelling from UK to Russia or getting expertise in the retail industry or banking. Culture is dynamic, never static neither set in stone. However, some tendencies can be described and country cultures can be compared.

Extensive research achieved by Hall (1959), Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000), Hofstede (2005), Lewis (1999), Schmitz (2000) describes, compares cultures and provides detailed analysis on cultural profiles and cross cultural management. For instance, German managers tend to communicate more directly and explicitly than their counterparts in the British branch of the same company. Nevertheless, in a mentoring/coaching relationship, the individual is positioned at the centre of the constructive conversation. Therefore, cross cultural coaching would reveal and work on the inner cultural mind-set of an individual whilst avoiding stereotyping or over-generalizations.

3. What is Mentoring/Coaching across cultures?

When a coach communicates with a coachee and tries to understand the goals of the situation, it is important to account for various factors that contribute to its complexity and uniqueness. The intercultural perspective of communication and collaboration involves not only the nationality of the mentor/mentee, but also the whole environment and background of the coachee: industry, profession, position, education, gender and corporate culture. For instance, managing a team may be addressed differently in the UK or Italy, in the fashion industry or in an HR in an international bank.

Coaching in a multicultural environment is specific in many aspects including the use of language, the corporate culture, management, leadership and communication styles.

3.1 Language and culture

When working across cultures, language is often identified as a potential barrier in communication. Coach and Coachee should agree first on the language to be used during sessions. Also, they should feel comfortable using this language and asking for clarification on vocabulary. Moreover, words can have a positive or negative connotation depending on the language and culture. For example, being “emotional” can be perceived as negative in the UK. Therefore, coach/coachee would benefit from keeping the level of language as simple as possible and asking for clarifications about the meaning of culturally related words such as trust, persuasion, professional and success.

3.2 Corporate culture

Organizations can be more or less hierarchical, organized in small project team with a transversal approach, or with specialized departments. In addition, working in a start-up or an international firm involves different skills; however, some corporate cultures value entrepreneurship and innovation, encouraging employee to move forward with new ideas and products, while other companies are less encouraging of these qualities. An organization's culture has a huge impact on the way people work. It becomes even more important to get a deep understanding of corporate culture when the mentee/coachee changes position or gets a new position in a company. The ability to observe and analyze the corporate values and behaviors may become crucial in a period of change.

The following aspects can be discussed to identify the corporate culture and its impact on coaching:

- What type of company do you work for?
- What are the specificities of the industry?
- How is the company structured?
- Have there been any merges and acquisitions?
- Who is reporting to whom?
- What is involved in reporting?
- How do employees report to their manager (e.g., weekly meetings or informal meetings)?
- How is the team organized (e.g., role and responsibilities, reporting, objectives, remote working)?
- Is the company local or global?
- Are the clients/suppliers/stakeholders from different backgrounds or nationalities?

- How culturally different is the staff?
- What is the frequency of intercultural communication?

3.3 Management and leadership styles

National or regional cultures may impact the management and leadership styles. Cultures may value the success of individuals or teams. For instance, there is a tendency for Northern European cultures to value the success and individual contribution to the organization. Some other cultures may attach further importance on teams and collective results.

The way people manage and lead may vary as well from one country to another:

- Do managers value individual vs group performance?
- How do they perceive authority and hierarchy?
- How do they give feedback to their team?
- Do they insist on the process and regulations or on the specificities of the issue to find a solution?

Within the same country, some differences may appear between regions, between the north and the south. For instance, working in Manchester or London, Seville or Bilbao, Marseille or Paris may involve some regional differences in the way people think, act, behave and work.

In addition, the way we approach a problem may interfere with our views and decisions. For instance, when you make a decision:

- Do you want to get a global picture or look at the details of the issue?
- Do you need to get theories and apply them to a certain situation?
- Do you think bespoke solutions are the best?
- Are you fine to make a decision based on the level of trust that you currently have with your partner/colleague?
- Who is responsible for the decision?
- Is the team consulted and involved in the process?
- Where is the best place to discuss and agree (e.g., at the coffee machine, kitchen, corridor, meeting room)?
- What motivates people to apply the decisions and turn them into actions?

- How do people show that they agree or disagree with the decision made?
- What are the impacts on their work and their commitment?

3.4 Communication and culture

Research in intercultural communication shows that culture has a great impact on the way we communicate with others. For instance, Italians show more passion and tend to show emotions and use a lot of gestures when speaking. On the other hand Japanese would not display emotions. Communication patterns may result in irritation, frustration and misunderstandings when they are overlooked or overgeneralized. Therefore, communication patterns should be recognized, analyzed and understood like a code with its own signification.

When mentoring/coaching across cultures, a number of communication patterns should be identified, compared and discussed within global teams:

Communication Patterns

High Context/Low Context	Is the communication implicit or explicit? What is the level of detail provided when communicating? Are there a lot of silences and implied messages?
Direct/Indirect	What is the preference to maintain harmony in the communication? Is getting to the point in a very clear and direct way valued? Or is the message understated not to embarrass the interlocutor?
Affective/Neutral	How appropriate is it to display emotions and passion when speaking? What is expressed using verbal and non-verbal communication?
Formal/Informal	How important is protocol in the communication? What are the various ways to start communicating with an interlocutor in a specific context?

4. Coaching and Mentoring in International Organizations

4.1 Development of Coaching Capability in International Organizations

In 2010, the Learning and Talent Development (L&TD) Survey published by CIPD revealed that for almost two-thirds of international organizations (64%), learning and talent development is seen as a key driver for the international aspects of the business.

To nurture talent, most international organizations use companywide talent management programme for high potentials (55%), coaching and mentoring to help international staff move into key roles (38%), and experienced expatriate staff to mentor and develop local talent (23%). Cross cultural communication and management is becoming a key factor of success for global companies.

4.2 A tool for Coaching across Cultures: *The Cultural Orientations Framework Assessment*

Designed by Philippe Rosinski (2003) and based on multidisciplinary research in management and cross cultural communication, the COF is a suite of online self-assessment materials for individual and team coaching designed to leverage national, corporate and professional differences.

There are 7 categories to describe cultural preferences and capacities for individuals and teams:

- Sense of Power and Responsibility
- Time Management Approaches
- Definitions of Identity and Purpose
- Organizational Arrangements
- Notions of Territory and Boundaries
- Communication Patterns
- Modes of Thinking

For instance, communication patterns and time management may be critical issues for international project managers: How should a manager ask someone to do something? How should they give constructive feedback? How can they make sure that deadlines will be met?

The COF may be used for various purposes such as assessing cultural differences, discovering new cultural choices, bridging between different cultures, envisioning a desired culture and leveraging cultural diversity (Rosinski, 2003: 50-51).

4.3 So what do people need to work in international organizations?

The 2010 CIPD Learning and Development Survey provides details regarding the skills required in expatriate staff for the future by international organizations. To meet business goals in the next two years, organizations mentioned that their staff need to develop management and leadership skills first (42%), followed by intercultural skills to help raise awareness of other cultures (40%) and then people management skills (32%).

International managers would benefit from reflecting on their identity, cultural preferences and abilities to bridge the cultural differences in their working environment. Cross cultural coaching/mentoring can help them to explore new perspectives especially in communication, management and leadership.

Conclusion

Global manager's environment can be divided in four categories: economic, legal, political, and cultural. Unlike the economic, legal and political aspects of a country, culture is largely invisible as it is a set of patterns shared by a particular group such as beliefs, values, and assumptions. Its influence is difficult to detect and managers therefore, often overlook it. However, global managers share a significant degree of similarities in their role regardless the environment, which emphasize the importance of interpersonal skills involved in leadership, communication, negotiation and decision-making. International managers can benefit from coaching/mentoring to improve interpersonal skills at stake in a multicultural environment. A knock-on effect is also visible and measurable on the team's performance as well as on the organisation's results.

The mentor/coach working with a mentee/coachee from another cultural background should be aware that we are inclined to interpret an answer or a behavior of the mentee according to our own perspective, based on our own values. And it may be wise to follow Adler's recommendation (2002): "Assume difference until similarity is proven".

However, in order to communicate effectively in a multicultural organization, managers and coaches should seek for similarities and shared values in terms of objectives and vision in order to build the trust. It is also crucial in a cross cultural coaching relationship to recognize the merits and downsides of each culture to leverage cultural differences. Especially since what may occur during the session is likely to happen in the daily relationships with counterparts, colleagues, client and suppliers.

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