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Making it stick: coaching as a tool for organizational change

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Coaching has been primarily used as an individual growth and development process within organizations, particularly at the leadership or high potential employee level (Hunt & Weintraub, 2002). While developing top talent is undoubtedly an important use of coaching, other organizational objectives can also benefit from using coaching. Organizational Change (OC) is one such area in which coaching can contribute to the overall effort. Organizational Change requires a number of interlocking phases of change from the individual to the team to the organization as a whole, opening up a number of opportunities for coaching to those involved in these types of initiatives. In this article, short overviews of models of individual change and organizational change are given and through the discussion of an OC effort within an organization, the use of coaching as a tool in implementing and sustaining change is illustrated.

Keywords: business coaching; organizational change; individual change, transtheoretical model

Preface

Most of us can relate to the picture of Joe, a business coach sitting in a corporate headquarters or airport club lounge somewhere, meeting with senior leaders and high potentials, engaging in lively conversations and planning sessions to help those leaders become the best leaders they can be. It would be a fairly common scenario, one that has helped propel executive and business coaching into the mainstream of organizational work. But let’s take a different tack down a different path: picture another coach — Kris — wearing a hard hat, safety glasses, a reflective orange vest, walking a mine site, construction site, or manufacturing plant with the leader of a work crew. Not our typical picture of a business coach, is it? Before we get to the conceptual and theoretical how’s and what’s of coaching in these scenarios, let’s take a further look at Kris and one of her client organizations.

The case of ‘progressive construction industries’: embarking on organizational change

Kris and her colleagues were hired to work with Progressive Construction Industries (PCI), a large-scale industrial construction firm (PCI is actually a composite example of numerous heavy industry client organizations and Kris represents a number of coaches’ experience in working with clients like PCI). The firm builds major industrial installations such as manufacturing plants, energy installations, etc.

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Within their overall drive for constant improvement, the management of PCI has focused in a number of areas from leadership to operational efficiency to workplace safety. Looking at safety in particular, they have emphasized the use of best practices and safe work environments, which has given good results. However, the leadership became aware that more could be done to move from good to great safety performance. The best practices and safe work environments are only as good as the individuals who use the equipment and the leaders who actively support that use. When deadlines approach and pressures mount, production can outweigh safety in the moment, with potentially catastrophic consequences. The leadership at PCI recognized the need for a strong, clear message and initiative on safety. In order to engage their workforce at the necessary individual level, they acknowledged they needed culture change. Not handing down more rules, jacking up incentives and/or consequences, or cheerleading from management, rather a real focus on changing the culture in their microcosm of the construction industry.

They hired Sentis, a consulting firm that specializes in the ‘person’ component of a strong safety culture. Sentis brought in a package of assessment, training, and coaching organized to capitalize on the existing safety approaches while working to move the culture to a deeper level of individual and organizational investment in safety. This OC initiative required the organization as a whole to broaden their view of safety and for individuals throughout the organization to embrace new thinking and behaviors. While there were a number of important features of PCI’s OC initiative, we are primarily going to discuss Kris’s use of coaching in implementing and sustaining their safety culture change. Central to that use of coaching is Kris’s application of some theories of individual and organizational change and a broad view of how coaching can be used throughout the organization to accomplish the change goals of PCI.

Introduction

Coaching has been primarily used as an individual growth and development process within organizations, particularly at the leadership or high potential employee level (Hunt & Weintraub, 2002). Some of the earliest articles on coaching described efforts within business to develop managers in various fields (Davis, 1958; Given, 1955; Huse, 1966; Manske, 1966) while others focused on coaching techniques within training (Utagard & Daws, 1970; Wohlking, 1970). More recently, much of the attention in coaching has pertained to leadership development and coaching as an individual growth and development process.

On a larger scale, all coaching is aimed at facilitating some sort of positive change whether it is in performance, development of particular skills, or a broader sense of personal growth. While the literature has been growing in developing models and processes for coaching individuals, relatively little attention overall has been given to the role of coaching outside individual, one-on-one coaching conversations and relationships, athletic coaching of teams notwithstanding. At the same time, there are many group efforts within organizations that might benefit from a dedicated coach, much like athletic teams benefit from someone coaching the team as a whole. As one example, the area of Organizational Change (OC) involves groups and individuals within organizations to work towards a making significant change. There are many external and internal consultants who work with organizations on OC
efforts and some have noted the need for consultants to use coaching with leaders engaged in OC (Beitler, 2003). However, there has been relatively little discussion about how to use coaching as a tool for implementing OC throughout the organization, which we will set out to address in this article. As we begin our conversation, let us focus on one view of how to make organizational change happen and how Kris used this knowledge in her coaching with PCI.

Steps to organizational change

Organizational change is hard. As many who have studied organizations and groups have noted, overcoming coping with the known (for better and worse) in order to move toward the unknown is an uncomfortable process, one in which maintaining the status quo is often the unconscious or even conscious choice. One master student of the OC process, John Kotter (1996), outlined eight necessary steps for leaders to make organizational change successful (see Table 1). As we can see, OC requires a lot from leaders. Once they have the need for change clear for themselves, they will have to be able to inspire others around them to join in the process, make it a priority, take action and ultimately sustain that change over time until it is no longer change, but rather ‘how we do things here’. At the workforce level, individuals need to understand how the OC is meaningful to them and how their individual actions contribute to effecting change.

Looking at coaching at PCI through Kotter’s lens, Kris began working as a coach with PCI’s leadership team for the overall initiative early in the OC process. In a meeting with the leaders identified as the initial guiding coalition, Kris facilitated the team’s fleshing out of the vision of what an expanded safety culture would look like. As they created that compelling vision, Kris also began probing how they would

Table 1. Kotter’s steps to organizational change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Establish a sense of urgency: for leaders to commit to lead organizational change, there must be some recognition that change is needed and important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Create a guiding coalition: a group of organizational leaders must buy in and commit to the change process, and represent the key stakeholders in terms of position power, credibility, expertise, and leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Develop a vision and strategy for the specific change: a shared vision for exactly what the change will look like and a strategy for how to get there must be developed that can inspire organizational members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Communicate the change vision and strategic plan: in order to utilize the vision and strategy, they must be communicated effectively throughout the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Empower individuals for action: leaders must facilitate organizational members’ abilities and engagement in the change initiative. This may require specific training and requires management styles, which clear the path for individuals and support their taking action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Generate short-term wins: building in visible, unambiguous, related successes to support and reinforce the attainability and momentum for change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Consolidate gains and produce more change: leaders need to continue to monitor and support the change effort with further wins to help continue to drive change and prevent relapse back into old patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Anchor the new change in the culture: as positive change happens, leaders must explicitly tie the change to ‘who we are’.</td>
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communicate their sense of the importance and meaning such a safety culture could have to the wider organization and the strategies that would lead to that realizing that vision. As Kris asked them to get specific, three things became clear: (1) invest in the training needed for the workforce (as the team said, ‘put our money where our mouth is’), (2) be seen using the training themselves from the very top, and (3) explicitly recognize when others were using it too.

Kris continued to talk with the leadership team about how that communication would happen, who would ‘own’ that process and what steps needed to be taken to get there.

**The individual change process**

Similar to OC, change at the individual level involves a number of tasks or steps to enact and maintain change. Prochaska and DiClemente’s (1984) Transtheoretical Model of Change (TTM) is a well-supported model of the stages individuals move through in making significant change in their lives (see Table 2).

As Grant (2006) describes, the TTM of change leads coaches towards stage-specific coaching strategies. As an example, for those in the *precontemplation* stage, the aim is to raise awareness, often through asking questions that stimulate the coachee’s thinking about the particular change. Kris used this approach with Gerry before he even came to the training program at PCI during conversations about his upcoming participation. Gerry was someone who had worked in construction leading electrician crews for over 20 years. He had ‘been around the block a few times’ and expressed his skepticism that this training would offer him anything new. As Kris worked with Gerry, she asked a lot of questions designed to assist Gerry’s awareness of the potential for positive change: ‘How would your job be different if your foremen were being more effective in their day to day operational decisions?’ and ‘If all your guys were taking responsibility for their own safety decisions, what would a shift look like for you?’ As Gerry wrestled with questions like these, he began to articulate some new possibilities for not only the men and women working under him on site but also for himself as a superintendent through this OC process.

For individuals in *contemplation*, the key issue is the ambivalence of making change. In this stage, coaches can assist clients by expressing the ambivalence so that the client can explore the pros and cons of change. Our coach Kris might use

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Precontemplation:</td>
<td>the individual is not at this stage aware of or contemplating the need for change;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Contemplation:</td>
<td>the individual has begun to think about the potential need for making change but have not committed to nor made change;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Preparation:</td>
<td>the individual have increased their commitment to change, their intention to make change in the near term, and may have begun making small changes;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Action:</td>
<td>the individual has begun engaging in new behaviors but have not yet cemented these changes over time as yet;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Maintenance:</td>
<td>the individual has been consistently acting on the change made over a period of time;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Relapse:</td>
<td>many change efforts result in periods of relapse where the individual falls back into old behavior patterns.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
statements like, ‘It seems that you could see better communications supporting safer decisions out in the field but on the other hand, talking too many things over could bog things down’ can help get both sides of the issue on the table for discussion. During preparation, clarifying the vision of the change and articulating what specific action steps are required can increase commitment and purpose for the client. The action stage calls for the coach to support the coachee’s self-direction in acting on their change plan and to help the client find points of accountability that can reinforce those actions. Kris might use this knowledge in a conversation with one of field leaders at PCI: ‘So Regina, you said that you want to be able to have a straight talk with George about pushing the guys too hard too fast on setting up the forms. When and how do you want to approach George for that conversation?’

Moving from action to maintenance, coaches can assist coachees stick to their change plan by working on stretch goals and by planning for obstacles and pitfalls. Coming back to Kris’s work with individuals at PCI, she spent a significant amount of time working with one of the very senior leaders, Craig, who had really worked hard to implement the training Sentis had provided. Craig had found his thoughts changing around safety as ‘something we have to do’ to ‘choices we make for what’s important to us’ and had shifted a number of interactional patterns with his people. As Craig found his direct reports more willing to share their thoughts and concerns than they had in the past, Kris worked with Craig to identify further arenas where he might continue his development. Craig began focusing on his interactions with those he reported to and interactions with corporate headquarters to further support the good things that were happening on site with safety and productivity.

Relapse is one aspect of the change process that often is overlooked or sidestepped. When relapse happens (as it will with any changes beyond small steps), the coach can help reframe relapse as a normal part of change and encourage the client to use relapse as a learning opportunity rather than failure (e.g. ‘Well, Craig, sounds like you got stuck in that same old pattern. What sucked you back into that? How do you want to get back on the horse?’). Understanding the different stages of change enables coaches to meet the client where they are in the change process and facilitate their development.

Coaching is a process that can be instrumental in helping clients move through these stages toward both defining and reaching their goals. One of the major benefits for coaches of using the TTM as a lens for viewing individual change is being able to direct one’s coaching conversations towards identifying which stage the individual is at and what techniques or interactions are likely to be most effective.

Linking individual change to organizational change

So how do these two models of change work together? And where does coaching fit into them? Before organizational change is possible, leaders must undergo their own individual change process in relation to the OC initiative. As leaders make those changes and bring the initiative to the wider organization, for organizational change to occur the troops must engage in their own change process. In essence, OC is made up of many, many individual change efforts by different people at different times all directed at meeting a group goal. Coaching is one process that can assist at a number of junctures in OC.
Individual change leading to organizational change: coaching leaders

For leaders initiating organizational change, one benefit of coaching lies in facilitating their own adoption of the intended change. As Kotter (1996) notes, leaders who do not ‘walk the talk’ are unlikely to inspire others to commit to culture change. Consistency between words and action requires leaders to enact change themselves. Blending Kotter’s (1996) and Prochaska and DiClemente’s (1984) models, in order for leaders to be able to:

1. create a sense of urgency,
2. form that guiding coalition,
3. develop a compelling vision and strategy, and then
4. communicate that vision and strategy,

they will need to have moved through

5. their own awareness of the need for change (precontemplation),
6. decision to make the change (contemplation),
7. plan for making the change (preparation)
8. and begin implementing the change (action)

The use of coaching at the leadership level can assist leaders to practice the new approach themselves (‘walking the talk’) and begin moving it out into the organization. For example, at our industrial construction company PCI, the OC initiative involved an expanded focus on the individual people’s safety decisions and actions at work and in their lives. Before embarking on this shift toward a culture of the primacy of the person component of safety, the leaders themselves had to buy into the need for and decision to implement this view of safety. They also recognized that for this organizational culture shift to occur, significant training and support would be required, not just for the workforce but also for themselves in guiding the OC process. In designing the overall safety initiative, a plan was developed for the leadership to first undergo the training and implementation of the person-centered safety approach.

In order to assist the leaders in implementing the training themselves, Kris focused on working with the leaders as a team and as individuals in moving through the TTM stages of change in using the safety training information and the leadership tools that they received alongside. While in meetings with the guiding coalition members, Kris pointed out instances where they were using the leadership and personal tools given in the training with each other. She gave immediate feedback when they were off track in their meetings and asked what they needed to change to re-focus. Most of these coaching conversations supported the team’s preparation for and enacting of the actual behaviors that were required for the OC effort. In addition to coaching at the group level with the leadership team, Kris also was able to identify people on the team who could benefit from some one-on-one coaching and those who could benefit from her acknowledgement of their success and from encouragement to identify further goals in implementing the OC as described in the previous section.

To illustrate Kris’s coaching approach at both the individual leader level and the organizational change level, lets take a look at her work with John, one of the
superintendents at a PCI project site. John took the information provided during training to heart but found it difficult to at times maintain a supportive role with his foremen regarding safety. Kris visited the project site regularly and after attending the safety meeting one morning, asked John if she could spend some time with him that day. John agreed while saying, ‘I could sure use your help because I just can’t seem to stay positive with my guys when I see them cutting corners, even when I know yelling isn’t going to help in the long run.’ After hearing a bit more about John’s struggles to be a more positive leader and what got in the way, Kris began asking John questions using the actual language taught in the training that tapped into his role as a leader on the site (e.g., ‘If you’re trying to address red-zone actions, how can you stay out of being in the red-zone with your people yourself?’). In terms of the TTM of individual change, Kris was working with John at the action stage of change: moving from the preparation of learning new information to actually using it in his work. From Kotter’s OC change steps, Kris was coaching John on how to walk the talk and communicate commitment to change effectively. By working with John this way, Kris was also modeling for John how to empower others to take action.

By coaching the team on implementing actions consistent with the OC initiative within their own interactions, Kris assisted with leaders’ individual adoption of the OC vision while also focusing on the steps needed to communicate that vision to the rest of the organization. As those behaviors took root for the leaders, it became easier for them to create goals that related directly to the OC initiative. For example, the team arrived at a plan for implementing a new format for start of shift talks using the person-centered safety approach and providing support and coaching for the front line leaders to use the new format as they and their crews completed training. The leadership team was now moving the OC effort out into the rest of the workforce.

Organizational change leading to individual change ‘on the ground’: coaching the workforce

As leaders engage in their own individual change required by an OC initiative and begin to communicate their commitment to change, the focus moves out toward communicating the vision and strategy and empowering others to take action too, according to Kotter’s (1996) model. An essential piece of the puzzle when moving the OC effort from the guiding leaders out into the organization is the communication of why the OC is personally relevant and meaningful to individual employees. Many OC efforts fail because while the leadership may be in the action or even maintenance phase of the TTM of change, the individuals ‘on the ground’ may very well be in the contemplation or even precontemplation stage for the desired change. And unless the vision of the OC initiative is seen as relevant and feasible, individual change will not move forward and the OC fizzles. If leaders have taken the time to implement change themselves, they are much more likely to raise others’ awareness, speak to tangible benefits of taking action, and to be seen as credible as they ‘walk the talk.’

Once the time and effort has been invested in communicating the OC vision and strategy and individuals within the organization are at the contemplation stage of individual change, providing the resources, whether time, information, or support, to
enable preparation and action is needed. At PCI, the investment of effort, time, and money in providing training in the person component of safety both represented a visible communication of the commitment by the organization to the culture change and provided some of the tools for individuals to prepare to take action for themselves.

Coaching again comes to the fore in implementing OC at the workforce level. The training provided laid the groundwork for employees throughout the organization to learn new approaches and behaviors, but the training by itself was unlikely to transfer that learning to everyday practice. As Peterson (2006) notes in his application of Druckman and Bjork’s (1991) work on learning and performance, ‘effective coaches use the principle of spaced practice by helping their clients practice new behaviors across multiple sessions; the participant may learn more slowly, but the results last longer’ (pp. 52–53). As individuals in the workforce went through the training, Kris worked directly with individual crews at start of shift talks to use what they had learned in their daily experience. This type of coaching more closely resembled performance coaching in that the crew received very direct information about how to use what they had learned and were given immediate feedback as they implemented the new procedures. Feedback on how the new safety approach was working at the crew level was gathered by the coach in collaboration with front line leaders and relayed back to the leadership for further refinement and support.

Sustaining change: moving coaching into the organization

As Kotter (1996) proposes, OC efforts can also stumble when the short-term gains are not consolidated and then anchored to the organizational culture. As the TTM of individual change informs, maintenance of change and relapse are continuing concerns once action has been established. These stages of change at the individual level can either support the consolidation of OC into ‘this is the way it’s done here’ or can over time weaken the initial changes made in the organization. One way to facilitate the cementing of OC is by building in an ongoing coaching function for the new organizational behaviors and norms. The coach involved in OC can assist the guiding coalition team (which should have expanded by this time to include representation from all parts of the organization if that was not present from the start) to identify a champion who will continue to focus on how to further ingrain the OC into the fabric of the company.

At PCI, to further consolidate the initial gains in shifting culture, Kris provided training and coaching to a few select individuals within the organization to take over the coaching role for sustaining the OC initiative over time. They were given training on coaching skills and specific ways to capitalize on what had been realized during the implementation of their expanded approach to safety culture. Kris worked with them individually and as a team on their skill at identifying trouble spots and at reinforcing norms and behaviors that supported the new safety culture. Over time, the ‘new safety culture’ became par for the course as Kris stepped away and the internal safety performance coaches stepped up their own efforts at reinforcing individual and organizational commitments to safety. Ideas of ‘getting the job done’ changed, shifting from ideas of maximizing production with safety as a cost, towards the idea that a job done well is both effective and safe, because ‘that’s how we do things at PCI’.

D.R. Stober
Conclusion

Using coaching for development of leaders within organizations is nothing new. However, coaching has applicability in organizations beyond individual development. Organizational change is an area of organizational development in which coaching can have tangible effect. For coaches working with organizational change, marrying knowledge of the stages of individual change with steps to organizational change provides direction in applications of coaching at the leadership and workforce level in terms of individuals and teams. Recognizing where the individual and the team are in the change process can assist the coach in honing in on the specific tasks associated with that phase of change. And using coaching in implementing organizational change and making it stick is a valuable tool in the array of processes needed for the hard work of organizational change.

Notes on contributor

Dianne Stober, PhD, is the Business Leader for Sentis North America, where she coaches clients within heavy industries to strengthen safety cultures. Dr Stober is on the Research Advisory Panel for the Foundation of Coaching. She has presented internationally on coaching topics and is the co-editor of Evidence Based Coaching: Putting Best Practices to Work for Your Clients.

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