



The University of Westminster:

Developing a Coaching Culture

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What is this about?

We have featured coaching in our provision at the University of Westminster since 2008. More recently, having experienced the impact coaching can have on individuals, we became interested in what is referred to in the literature as a “coaching culture”.¹ We wanted to experience the contagious and transformative nature of using coaching-style conversations.

The key driver to strengthen and accelerate our efforts towards developing a coaching culture was the launch of our Westminster 2020 Strategy in 2014. Westminster 2020 is underpinned by a commitment to “enabling and empowering our staff to grow...through a high-quality staff experience: proactively developing and supporting staff to realise their full potential in a collaborative, open, equitable and respectful working culture.”

The People Strategy, which was also introduced in 2014, is one of the main enablers of Westminster 2020 and describes a set of activities that contribute to “foster(ing) a high performing culture where all staff are fully engaged in achieving the success of our single shared vision of professional service.”

We decided to accelerate our progress towards developing a coaching culture at Westminster to help us move towards the high performing culture everyone agreed was needed. The Alexander and Renshaw model of high performing cultures² suggests an environment that poses high levels of challenge on one hand with high levels of support on the other. Coaching is the embodiment of these two elements – challenging in a supportive, safe environment – and was seen as a main vehicle to empower elements of the desired culture.

WE ADOPTED THE DEFINITIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF COACHING CULTURES OFFERED BY CLUTTERBUCK AND MEGGINSON:

- A coaching culture within an organisation “is a culture where not only formal coaching occurs but also where most people use coaching behaviours as a means of managing, influencing and communicating with each other.”
- A culture where “coaching is the predominant style of managing and working together and where commitment to improving the organisation is embedded in a parallel commitment to improving the people.”³

WHAT WOULD THE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE LOOK LIKE?

- Everyone in the University of Westminster believes that learning is critical to individual and organisational success.
- The leaders of the organisation use a non-directive leadership style – that is, they employ a coaching style with peers and direct reports.
- Decision-making is devolved as far as possible to those who are closest to having to implement the decisions. They are given freedom to take risks and set their own goals.
- Managers use a coaching style in the way they manage staff on a day-to-day basis.
- Managers view developing others and creating a learning environment as one of their major responsibilities.
- Peers coach one another to share knowledge, to pass on expertise and help one another, and also raise their own standards and general standards of professionalism.
- Having a coach is viewed positively, and people are encouraged to see coaching support at various stages in their career and for various reasons.

We also used the questionnaire to measure progress towards a coaching culture recommended by Clutterbuck and Megginson.⁴

¹ Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005)

² Alexander and Renshaw (2005)

³ Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005)

⁴ Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005) p99



What did we do and why?

The project has three levels/strands that are being developed concurrently:

LEVEL 1: DEVELOPING COACHING SKILLS FOR MANAGERS

The aim at this level is to introduce managers to a coaching style of management and offer opportunities for them to experience the power of asking questions.

The main vehicles to deliver this are:

- Coaching skills for managers – two day workshop.
- Managing PPDR (appraisal) conversations.
- Introduction to management (emphasis on coaching-style conversations).
- Future leaders: introduction to GROW and experience of coaching as a coachee as part of the programme.
- Action learning sets.

LEVEL 2: COACHING AS A DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTION

At this level, the aim is twofold: to offer coaching as a development opportunity to staff and also to develop an internal pool of coaches from a cross-section of staff at Westminster who will be the champions and ambassadors for the project.

We develop our internal coaching capability by offering the ILM Level 5 Certificate in Coaching and Mentoring. So far, 37 members of staff have been successful in gaining the qualification and we will offer the programme for one more year (2015-16) then review the number of coaches against coaching requests at the end of 2016 in order to determine the right size for our coaching pool at Westminster.

We offer group coaching supervision in the form of action learning sets with the option of one-to-one supervision as and when is required.

We also engage five external coaches, selected on a number of criteria, and we work with the Leadership Foundation coaching service to provide coaching to senior managers who need support to work through highly sensitive and confidential matters.

LEVEL 3: ORGANISATIONAL CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE COACHING

At this level, the aim is to monitor and influence the organisational conditions that would support the development of a coaching culture. Some of the conditions that we monitor are: buy-in of senior management; the provision of adequate resources; clear strategic intent; our understanding of staff preferences through a thorough needs analysis and the levels of staff engagement etc. We also ensure that there is a robust evaluation framework that helps track our progress towards a coaching culture.⁵

What impact did it have?

It is still early in the project to have thorough and long-term impact evaluation information. However, the first indications of the project's impact are very positive:

At the individual level, the recipients of coaching report that this intervention has helped them reflect and take action on a number of issues in a safe and highly supportive environment.

The trainee coaches found that developing their own coaching capability was a transformational experience that has helped them personally, as well as their clients, to meet their aspirations.

In terms of culture, the staff engagement results have seen increases in satisfaction with the managers' engagement with the development of their staff. The activity fits in really well with our commitment towards continuous improvement frameworks, such as Investors in People and Customer First and other awards that feature in the implementation of our Single Equality Policy and Plan, such as Athena Swan and the Race Equality Charter Mark.

We aspire to the integration of a coaching service to both staff and students. This will have impact on the employability of our students and will strengthen our organisational development plan by encouraging closer interaction between all stakeholders of the University of Westminster.

⁵ See attachment: Questionnaire to measure progress toward a coaching culture, Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005).

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Lessons learned

The project didn't create much interest at first. Managers felt more comfortable telling others what needed to be done and peers gave advice to each other based on their experience and their own perspective. For us to achieve what felt at the beginning to be a very nebulous and highly utopian coaching culture, fundamental rules and habits of interacting, managing and engaging with each other had to shift.

This project was instrumental in helping us understand how the individual, group and organisational elements interconnect and influence each other at Westminster. What has helped immensely was mobilising a group of academics who are interested in coaching, personal development, resilience and health, who share our vision for a coaching culture and have become our early adopters and champions for the project.

RESOURCES

ALEXANDER, G and RENSHAW, B (2005).
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Making Coaching Work: Creating a coaching culture.
London: CIPD.

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About the author

Nick is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, an experienced Human Resources professional, a Leadership Coach and a Chartered Manager with a special interest in leadership assessment and development and organisational development and change.

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