



Don't pass difficult conversations on to coaches – instead include them in a three-way dialogue. Problem solved!

## THE BUCK STOPS HERE

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Too many managers in today's organisations are finding it hard to have 'difficult' conversations with their people, particularly on performance and skill issues. Instead, they are happy to abdicate responsibility to an unsuspecting business coach, turning coaching into a management cop out.

Organisations need to take action to reverse this trend and review how they can – arguably with the assistance of coaching – empower their managers, support the managerial relationship and deliver real value to the business as a whole.

Research by Performance Coaching International in 2008 confirms the scale of the problem. According to its study, "Ninety per cent of managers do not address poor performance effectively" and among 750 managers across public, private and voluntary sectors surveyed, 70 per cent said "they are either unable or unwilling to have the 'courageous conversation' needed to address underperformance from staff".

Reasons behind this include managers' underlying fear of having such conversations, and a lack of understanding about how to go about them. While many have good intentions, concerns about their own performance and ability result in inaction and avoidance.

Regardless of whether you agree with a manager's decision to outsource performance management to a coach, it's happening now and it needs to be addressed. But coaching is not the magical cure that many managers perceive it to be, instead it's a solution that can deliver positive performance benefits to all parties.

A three-way contract between the individual, the manager and the coach is perhaps the most effective way to manage performance and ensure that coaching does not become the easy cop out that many managers would like it to be.

However, this latter coaching scenario – when managed well – will ensure all those involved have a clear understanding of the identified skills, behaviour or performance issues and will encourage all parties to accept their share of responsibility to address, change and resolve them.

Once this framework is in place, the authority and professionalism of the coach can truly be maximised. An experienced coach can effectively and often very quickly manage the expectations and anticipations of the manager and their team member.

Perhaps the hardest task for a coach in this three-way relationship is to develop a common understanding of the situation; for many employees, for example, this may be the first time performance or skill issues have been raised. However, investing time here ensures the coaching intervention remains a positive and productive dialogue rather than a

formal inquisition and that shared goals and objectives can be discussed.

It is too easy for coaching to become a cop out for the difficult and challenging tasks associated with people management – particularly in the current business environment when line managers may feel under pressure to perform and deliver – but this seemingly easy decision overlooks the positive impact intervention can have on the employee, as well as the manager.

Confidence to address performance issues in partnership with a business coach will, in many instances, enable managers to develop their own skills to proactively tackle similar situations in the future.

If this can be achieved, the ultimate goal of any coaching intervention – prolonged and sustainable change – is a given and is certainly not a cop out. ■

“Seventy per cent of managers are unable or unwilling to have the ‘courageous conversation’”