

# Coaching at Work

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Bath Consultancy Group



**David's story**

**R**oyal Mail Group has had its fair share of upheavals. Just a few years ago former chief executive Adam Crozier delivered sweeping reforms, last year saw embattled dealings between management and the Communication Workers Union and two months ago (July), Moya Greene stepped in as the group's new - and first female - CEO.

The group faces even more change if part-privatisation plans of the UK's new Coalition government go ahead.

Amid all this a steady, significant revolution is taking place in pockets across the 168,500-strong group, currently a public limited company owned wholly by the British government. And the revolution could make all the difference to how the leaders and the rest of the workforce cope with further upheavals.

The seeds of this revolution were sown in 2007 when a senior leader attended an open coaching programme delivered by coaching and leadership-development consultancy Lane4. This sparked a decision to support the reforms by embedding a coaching culture to help change how the 500 senior leaders lead and to improve their capability.

## SIGNED SEALED DELIVERED

With Royal Mail facing continual upheavals, it needed radical change to help its leaders cope. **Liz Hall** explains how Lane4 helped embed a coaching culture that is proving something of a quiet revolution at the postal service

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For Royal Mail, this meant developing a swathe of accredited leader-coaches in partnership with Lane4, who could role-model the new behaviours needed to support the change process. It also meant developing coaching behaviours in its line managers and rolling out supervision to the accredited leader-coaches. And ultimately it will mean developing a pool of internal coach supervisors as well as another level of accredited advanced coaches – senior practitioners.

The leader-coach accreditation programme with Lane4 was launched in spring 2008, accrediting successful participants at European Mentoring and Coaching Council Level 5, Practitioner level.

Royal Mail started building coaching into its line management last year and it recently held its first two-day coaching skills workshop for line managers. It launched coaching supervision for its accredited leader-coaches last August for the first three of six cohorts.

The business reported a 26 per cent rise in operational profits at the end of the last financial year. But under any privatisation plans, the spotlight is likely to shine more intensely on



expenditure and value for money. Certainly, the leader-coach programme should bear close scrutiny. To date, some 55 leaders have voluntarily been through a nine-month accreditation programme, and the average of clients to coach is 5.8.

“I don’t think we’d want to use the word savings but we’ve demonstrated that we can coach internally six times as many people. We can do more coaching for the same amount of money so we can extend the use of coaching across the business,” says Jackie Lawlor, head of people development at Royal Mail Group and a participant on the first cohort of accredited leaders.

“As the number of people accredited increases, they become our internal resource,” says Jackie, pointing out that it is particularly helpful that the

coaches are senior. In the past, if senior people had asked for coaching the group would have had to use externals.

“Over time, we’re reducing our reliance on external coaches,” says Jackie, who says the split is 80 per cent internal and 20 per cent external. Though, as she points out, “20 per cent is still a large amount of money”.

Jackie says the impact is being felt most in HR and communications.

“There is real traction there and the programme had led to significant [new] behaviours, with lots of encouragement for more and more senior people to come on the programme,” says Dominic Mahony, director of Europe Practice at Lane4.

There is still work to be done in areas such as operations but Dominic and Jackie are confident these will follow.

Dave Cunningham, a participant in the current cohort and a leader in operations, adopted an idea from an internal alumni conference at an international operations conference for managers in June. Lane4 coach Jeremy Cross coached Dave in front of his line management team about how coaching will transform the way he works in a team.

Another leader, Mike Sibley, facilitated interruptions to the

## COACHING ROYAL MAIL



From left: coach Jeremy Cross and director of Europe Practice Dominic Mahony, both at Lane4

conversation so observers could see what was happening, with possible next steps, along the same lines as the earlier coaching fishbowl in March where Dominic coached a Lane4 associate in front of delegates.

Jackie says: "Because of senior managers' belief in the impact of coaching and how they absorb ideas, they saw this happen [at the conference] and thought, 'We want to use something like this'."

Participants on the coach training programme are expected to spend five hours a month coaching, although there isn't 100 per cent take-up.

Royal Mail has set up an online portal for all its accredited coaches so they can share ideas. And a number of participants are carrying on with their action learning sets. Lane4 organises an annual alumni event, presenting certificates to those accredited.

### Evaluation

To evaluate the programme Lane4 and Royal Mail devised a tailored 360-degree feedback with questions around confidence, experience, effectiveness and knowledge. Respondents rated the impact of the programme as 6.57 on a 7-point scale and delivery as 6.33 out of 7.

Dominic says: "There is some good anecdotal stuff around participants' confidence to run programmes for their own line managers in sales."

Participant comments include "refreshingly cathartic" and a "step change in how to operate", he says.

Of Jackie's cohort of nine, seven graduated: "As the first cohort, we knew we were developing people with a real passion about coaching. It was hard work but fantastic," says Jackie.

“The programme is very much word of mouth. One of the reasons why it is so successful and impactful is that people choose to do it”

"One of the key aspects about it has been about giving myself permission to have quite a flexible approach to coaching and therefore become a more confident coach."

Jackie says more than half of the participants are currently engaged in formal coaching.

One of the "fantastic aspects" about the programme is that Royal Mail has not needed to advertise it, she says. "It is very much word of mouth. One of the reasons why it is so successful and impactful is that people choose to do it," she says.

Dominic says: "We've learnt that it's so helpful to have business partners around Royal Mail who've done the programme sit down with potential participants because it is demanding."

Once on the programme, participants are required to attend three workshops, in groups of nine to 15, covering fundamentals such as listening, questioning, the structure of coaching conversations and the GROW model.

"It helps to use something people are already familiar with and many people have come across GROW," says Jackie.

Participants are required to do at least 50 hours of coaching around the business and an observed live coaching session.

The programme takes a humanistic relational psychology approach, although in workshop two and sometimes in three, participants each bring along coaching perspectives to share such as Solution Focused and Positive Psychology.

There is also a learning framework: KASE (Knowledge, Attitude, Skills and Experience). Graduation requires a combination of these plus a portfolio of evidence from the business.

Participants are offered one-to-one support from Lane4, to help them put together their portfolio. There is also action learning so participants get peer support on their journey.

Peter Hawkins of Bath Consultancy Group supervises the Lane4 core team that works with Royal Mail, and organisational themes are gathered and fed back into the business. One theme is that senior leaders don't feel they get enough time to offer their coaching as they'd like. Dominic says: "There needs to be the cultural shift."

It's not going to happen overnight. "There is difficulty in being such a large organisation," says Jackie. However, feedback from Lane4 confirms a move from a command and control approach. "It's encouraging people to ask their own questions," says Dominic. ■