
The art of coaching

Learning from assessment

Linda Aspey

One of the hot topics around the corporate coaching world is how some organisations, particularly larger ones, are increasingly using assessment centres to select coaches to work with them.

If you haven't yet encountered the term, they assess several coaches against key criteria or competencies (ie knowledge, skills and experience, usually evidenced by behaviour). They utilise a variety of exercises so that coaches can demonstrate their competencies in different ways, hopefully enabling fair, transparent and accurate selection decisions. Occasionally they are run purely as development centres, where coaches go through the assessment process and then decide for themselves if they want to apply to join the coaching pool.

Word of mouth alone is no longer good enough and it's easy to see why. Nowadays it's much more complex for purchasers to decide who to hire, faced with higher numbers of coaches, numerous types and levels of coach training, coaching methodologies, different professional standards and various accreditation processes.

Times have moved on and so must we if we want to coach in these corporate domains. But we may have to change the way we think. Bearing in mind we're trained to bring out the best in others, we're not always comfortable when it's us in the spotlight. We're trained to ask questions, not to answer them; to listen and draw out others' thoughts and ideas, not to give too many of our own; to affirm the client in the moment, not ourselves. So for some practitioners, the idea of an assessment centre where they need to shine, in a sometimes competitive environment,

fills them with dread.

Yet whilst there are horror stories of assessment centres that allow little or no preparation time, with scary interviewers firing questions at breakneck speed, and highly pressurised exercises – in one case I heard of 'speed coaching', where you have to coach an assessor for five minutes then move on to the next one! –, many organisations are investing considerable efforts in making sure that their selection processes are validating and enriching experiences for the coaches too. In effect, they are modelling the type of coaching they want for their own organisation.

I've been designing assessment centres for many years and am heartened by the growing number of positive stories out there. For example, a colleague recently applied to join the coaching pool in a large public sector organisation. They invited him to a day-long assessment at an assessment centre, to take place four weeks later, fully explaining all the activities he'd be asked to undertake. A week beforehand they called to ask if he had any questions. He duly arrived on the day, well prepared with two anonymous case studies to discuss – one where he felt that he'd done his very best work, and the second where he'd learned a significant, even difficult lesson. He then participated in a group discussion about different approaches to supervision.

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After lunch he was shown around the organisation, following which he met with a 'client' for a one-hour coaching session (a real manager, with a real-life issue) which was discretely videoed.

He then met with two assessors for a mutually discursive interview, and finally, at the end of the day, was offered their feedback. They didn't feel he was yet ready to join their coaching pool, and gave him several examples of where his strengths had shone through and where they had not. For example, he didn't create a safe enough space in the coaching session and moved the client on too quickly towards action. They offered him the video of his coaching session to take home and he was invited to give them feedback on their own process there and then, or if he preferred he could reflect and write in. Despite the rejection, the skill and care with which the day was conducted and the way the feedback was handled left him feeling validated, respected, stretched and developed.

If coaches can see assessment centres as a positive challenge to learn, stretch and grow, so much the better. If you're invited to one, I'd encourage you to seize the opportunity as you might really get something more from it than a 'yes' or 'no'. And whilst not all organisations will manage their processes as well as that experienced by my colleague, I think it's increasingly rare to find assessment centres that treat you like you're on *The Apprentice*. Honestly! ■

Linda Aspey is an executive coach, organisation development consultant and MD of Aspey Associates. Visit www.aspey.com or email linda@aspey.com