

# **The Link between the Process of Change and Coaching in an Organization – A Case Study**

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The Asian Conference on Education 2015  
Official Conference Proceedings

## **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to highlight the empowerment of coaching in the process of change in an organization using case study - a real life change project in an institution. The article hopes to demonstrate the critical importance of coaching during change, for successful change to occur, and any sustaining change requires ongoing coaching as an integral part of the process. The article tries to heed a call on adopting coaching to support organizational learning and change. It also attempts to open further research interests in the link between the process of change and coaching, and the benefits of coaching in change management today.

Key Words: organizational learning and change, change management, coaching for change, empowerment

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## **Introduction**

Today's dynamic world is causing organizations, groups and individuals to reframe their view of what 'normal' is: 'Change is the new normal', or 'the new normal is continuous change' (Jorgensen, et al., 2008). Drivers of change can be positive or negative. They can be environmental or personal. They can be of external or internal environment. Changes of external environment can be due to factors like markets, legislation, competition and economy and all these will have consequences for organizations, such as its strategy development. Changes in strategy can lead to changes in the way the organization is structured, which can impact on relationships, responsibilities and ways of working. The way in which change is implemented and accepted through the organization will be largely influenced by its leaders, their attitudes and behaviors as perceived by their subordinates. When there are changes in the work carried out, skills of the employees would have to be assessed, usually training is needed in order to cope with the new skill requirements and coaching is also necessary to facilitate the mobility (Gallwey, 2000) (Burke & Litwin, 1992). Changes of internal environment can be of immediate working environment, like a change in job to a new organization, a change in personnel, or a change in terms of conditions of service, which are likely to invoke a range of emotional and political responses from relevant stakeholders. Every organization has its unique culture, and culture change only evolves over time as a result of many other changes happening around.

In the Executive Overview of the Best Practices in Change Management – 2014 Edition, the report suggests that two of the greatest contributors to success are: employee engagement and participation; engagement with and support from middle management (Creasey & Hiatt, 2014). The study reported that the main obstacles when implementing change projects were: changing mindsets and attitudes; lack of motivation of involved employees. The "soft stuff" was the hardest to get right (Jorgensen, et al., 2008). Therefore, the most significant challenges are people oriented, motivation is the key to effective change, and to maintain motivation in the pursuit of change is a real challenge (Burke & Litwin, 1992). And here a coach can play a pivotal role in facilitating the change process (Downey, 2003).

The premise of this research is that change coaching is an optimal support to facilitate effective change, however, coaching is not the only valid support (Bennett & Bush, 2014). The article aims to establish the link between the process of change and coaching in an organization. Using real life project example to demonstrate how a coach could help in facilitating the change process, and in maintaining motivation throughout the changing events. It also tries to bring out the benefits of coaching for change by looking into a list of change process related factors in a pre- and post-coaching setting.

## **Coaching for Change and its Assessment**

Coaching is an effective skill for helping individuals and groups change, and coaching for change can have an impact on the organization or system (Bennett & Bush, 2014). While the efficacy of coaching is still not well understood, the AMA/Institute for Corporate Productivity Coaching Survey 2008 reported that two of the main reasons behind the termination of coaching assignments were: the inability of certain employees to change and the difficulty of measuring return on investment (ROI) (American Management Association, 2008). 'Coaching engages with people, the

essentially human nature of coaching is what makes it work – and also what makes it nearly impossible to quantify’ (Sherman & Freas, 2004).

One way to track the benefits associated with coaching is through the use of assessments. The critical lesson for coaches is to administer these assessments in a pre- and post-test format (Americian Management Association, 2008). Though there are several different ways organization can use coaching, the most commonly used method of coaching is to make it an integral part of a supporting programme.

### **Background of the Case Study**

Introduction of a new Student and Course Record System – a case study in a tertiary education institution in Hong Kong (called the Institution hereunder).

The Institution was experiencing rapid growth and to support the academic development and operation of the Institution, the Academic and Management Board had decided to partner with Cloud Business Services to implement a new Student and Course Record System in 2013.

When introducing an initiative – a new IT system, it required staff to change the way they think and do things within the Institution. These disturbances to their behavior or thinking were likely to be met with resistance in some form (Prochaska, J., et al., 2006), and the Institution Management saw that to bring about changes in behavior, a pervading change in context was required (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008). They also saw that to change behavior at the individual and organization level, the expectations, individual roles, behaviors, hierarchies and coalitions that existed within the systems of the organization needed to be examined and made more flexible (Peltier, 2001).

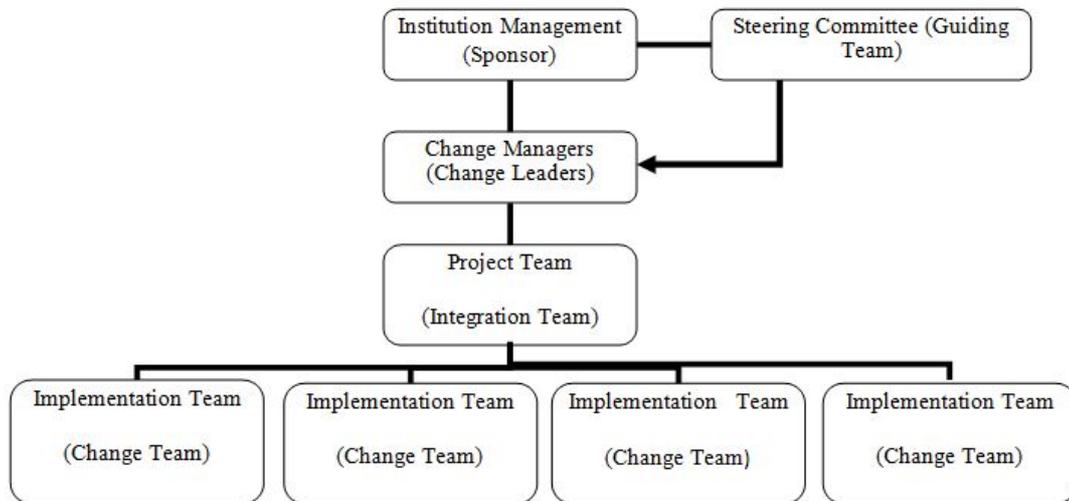
According to Peltier (Peltier, 2001), below are opportunities or ways that coaches can help:

- a. ‘When big things in the organization change.’
- b. ‘Skill development for individual/group transitions.’
- c. ‘Specific skill development.’
- d. ‘Resolving specific problems.’

The Institution Management, as the Change Sponsor, realized the new system would be a big thing in the Institution, the staff had to go through stages of learning and skill development, and finally, they would benefit from an improved work flow with greater ease in administration, record keeping and retrieving, and enhanced technological skills. This is a directed change project driven from the top of the organization and relies on authority, persuasion, and compliance (Kerber & Buono, 2010, Spring).

On this project the Institution Management had established a Change Team Infrastructure (Galpin, 1996) – Figure 1, to manage the process of change in order to make the implementation of the new system a success.

Figure 1 – The Change Team Infrastructure (Galpin, 1996)



The Steering Committee guided the coalition roles. The Change Sponsor appointed two Change Managers. Since the project was for large-scale change, in addition to the Steering Committee, was that of a Project Team. The Project Team coordinated across the Implementation Teams, identifying and resolving issues, its members were the leaders of the Implementation Teams. It provided a coordination function, offering regular forum for communication and learning among all the teams (Bennett & Bush, 2014).

The Change Managers had conducted a few Change Agent Engagement Sessions, followed by a series of Fundamental Change Briefing Sessions and System Live Demo to the Change Agents, whereby the concepts of the new system were explained, and upcoming changes on the operation processes were highlighted. In this change project, the Change Managers focused on several critical areas: communication, employee involvement, teamwork and change management (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008), and managing the transitions (Bridges, 2009).

During change, the Change Managers advised the Institution Management to repeat the message again and again – emphasized the need to change and the benefits of the new system. A website was established to introduce the background of the project and the new system, the Change Sponsor, the Change Agents and the System Partner, the go-live schedule of the system and the project status. Newsletters were distributed to all stakeholders regularly to update them on the progress of the project, and to announce interim victories and the ultimate success.

Employee participation in the system design workshops and meetings had been highly encouraged during the core system design stages because the Change Managers believed that participation gave substantive benefits for both individuals and the School. When the staff saw that their input was valued, they would increase their commitment, involvement, and take greater personal responsibility for the new system outcomes (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008).

During change, people went through a series of stages and emotions (Kubler-Ross, 1973):

Pre-contemplation /Denial

Project Team at the Institution faced a lot of changes in work load, project priority and did not believe in the urgency of the new IT system. Programme administration teams in the Institution did not want to accept the news and expose themselves to the new and long journey ahead.

Emotional arousal – anger, bargaining, upset

After acknowledgment, some project team members would still ask questions like, ‘Why now?’ ‘Why me?’ ‘Why not employing somebody else to do the additional work?’ When they came to meetings, they still showed their faces that they did not want to accept the changes in work arrangement and of wanting to do anything but getting involved in the project. This caused frustration of those members who had already been convinced of the benefits of the project – the Change Sponsor which included everyone in the management team and the Change Agents which were group of individuals who had the responsibility to make change happen.

Due to insufficient manpower for redeployment, some programme teams started to bargain and requested to spread out the duration of the project to a longer time. This bargain could be due to panic, low confidence, and desperation.

After many rounds of meetings on the project, project implementers had been convinced of the need and that they were not going to escape from the situation. Nonetheless, they were still upset by the new arrangements of workload, which meant they would have to compromise some of their routines and were grieving for the loss that they were about to endure. This upset could take the form of sadness and emotions, depending on individual’s status.

Contemplation /Acceptance

The Change Managers saw many team members move out of their denial, anger, bargain and upset to a stage of acceptance. They were prepared to accept the reality of the situation, and the new and long journey ahead, but they were still uncertain about the impact of change and were in a state of anxiety.

A discovery journey of preparation, action, maintenance and termination

‘At the end of the contemplation stage you decided to change your problem behavior’ (Prochaska, J., et al., 2006). Helping relationships between partners, peers, teammates, and subordinates played an important role during the preparation stage. ‘Action is the busiest period of change. Now more than ever, you need to depend on your helping relationships’. (Prochaska, J., et al., 2006)

In this project, the Change Managers guided the project team to communicate and relate in a way that engenders commitment, responsibility and accountability.

Resistance was part of the territory of change (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008), it occurred when people experienced the discomfort and ambiguity associated with change (Prochaska, J., et al., 2006). The Change Managers listened to all the resistance and addressed them in order to assist the staff to develop new behaviors and thinking. The strategies and techniques they adopted were ‘keep repeating the communication’; ‘acknowledge and legitimize feelings’; ‘raise awareness’; ‘support individual learning and development’; ‘build confidence and provide feedback’; ‘reward and acknowledge progress’ to provide support that utilized resistance and enabled people to change (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008). ‘Resistance exists and will never go away, the easier it will be to embrace it and use its energy to build support for change.’ (Maurer, 1996)

The Change Managers were leading the change by applying critical skills like communication, presence, engagement, listening, showing empathy, understand the

change curve and negotiating resistance. They also consistently used sound change management strategies and techniques to move people through the change cycle (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008).

They listened and agreed with the request that the change agents would need some coaching in order to do their job well. They sought approval from the Institution Management to hire an external coach to conduct a workshop – ‘Team Building with Focus on Change Management’ for the Change Agents. The objective was to equip participants with knowledge and skills in managing change in the teams through coaching. As the Change Sponsor, the Institution Management had been pleased with the progress of the changing events, and had been very supportive in approving the recommendations made by the Change Managers.

### **Methodology and Findings**

This article reflected on a change project in a tertiary education institution in Hong Kong (called the Institution hereunder), from 2013 to present (it was on-going at the time of writing the article). The project covered changes in the process of a system revamp caused by drivers in the internal environment. The content described the rationale of the changes, planning, review and achievements in progress, and the way forward. The article specifically reviewed the link between the process of change and coaching in an organization. Values and benefits of coaching for change reflected were a collection of feedbacks from relevant stake holders via formal surveys in pre- and post-workshop setting and informal sharing sessions. In this survey, multiple questions used the well-accepted Likert-type scale, with a 1 rating designated as “lowest/least” and a 5 rating designated as “highest/most”. There were 9 questions in all, with a 10<sup>th</sup> question in the post-workshop survey.

The questionnaires had been designed to include below factors related to the change process (Prochaska, J., et al., 2006):

- clarification on the change process
- degree of emotion aroused in you
- degree of your resistance to the change process
- allowance to give feedback
- helping relations with your peer in the change team
- commitment to implement the change process
- sufficient knowledge and training on implementing the change process
- ability to manage the change implementation process
- confidence in implementing the change process
- enhancing the assertiveness in implementing the change process (only in post-workshop survey)

### **Pre- and Post-Workshop Questionnaire**

#### **The Change – a new Student and Course Record System**

Reflecting on the change process, please circle the appropriate score as answer to each statement/question.

1. Please rate your degree of clarification on the change process.
2. Please rate the degree of emotion aroused in you during the process of change. For example shock, denial, anxiety, confrontation.
3. Please rate your degree of resistance during the process of change.

4. How far are you allowed to give feedback? For example identifying dysfunctional thoughts.
5. Do you feel you have established helping relationships with your peer in the Project Implementation Team during the change process? For example empathy and warmth.
6. Do you feel you are committed to implement the change process?
7. Do you feel you have been provided with sufficient knowledge and training on implementing the change process?
8. Do you think you would be able to manage the change implementation process?
9. How confident are you in implementing the change process?
10. Do you find the coaching session enhancing your assertiveness in implementing the change process? (only appear in the post-workshop questionnaire)

The questionnaires were distributed face-to-face before and after the one-day coaching session, and were to be completed by all participants in anonymity. The pre-workshop questionnaire was collected before the session started and the post-workshop questionnaire was collected immediately after the session finished. The scores to each question were organized in table and graphic presentation with focus on the differences in the pre- and post-workshop ratings.

There was a total of 40 participants, with 14 attended the first workshop and the other 26 attended the second workshop. Participants were of various positions in the organizations: among them 13% were director, 17% were manager, 17% were senior executive officer, 20% were executive officer, 13% were executive secretary and 20% were executive assistants (Table 1). And, 20% were male and 80% were female (Table 2). With 36 questionnaires returned from a base of 40 participants, the response rate was 90% (Table 3). Differences in the score ratings of each question at pre- and post-workshop settings were presented in table (Table 4) and graphic formats (Figure 2). And were calculated and expressed as percentage variance (Table 4).

Table 1 – Background of Participants

|                              |     |
|------------------------------|-----|
| Position in the organization |     |
| Director                     | 13% |
| Manager                      | 17% |
| Senior Executive Officer     | 17% |
| Executive Officer            | 20% |
| Executive Secretary          | 13% |
| Executive/Assistant          | 20% |

Base: 40

Table 2 – Gender of Participants

|        |     |
|--------|-----|
| Male   | 20% |
| Female | 80% |

Base: 40

Table 3 – Response Rate

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| No. of respondents | 36  |
| Response rate      | 90% |

Base: 40

Table 4 – Survey Results: Difference in Pre- and Post-Workshop Average Score and Percentage of Difference in Average Score

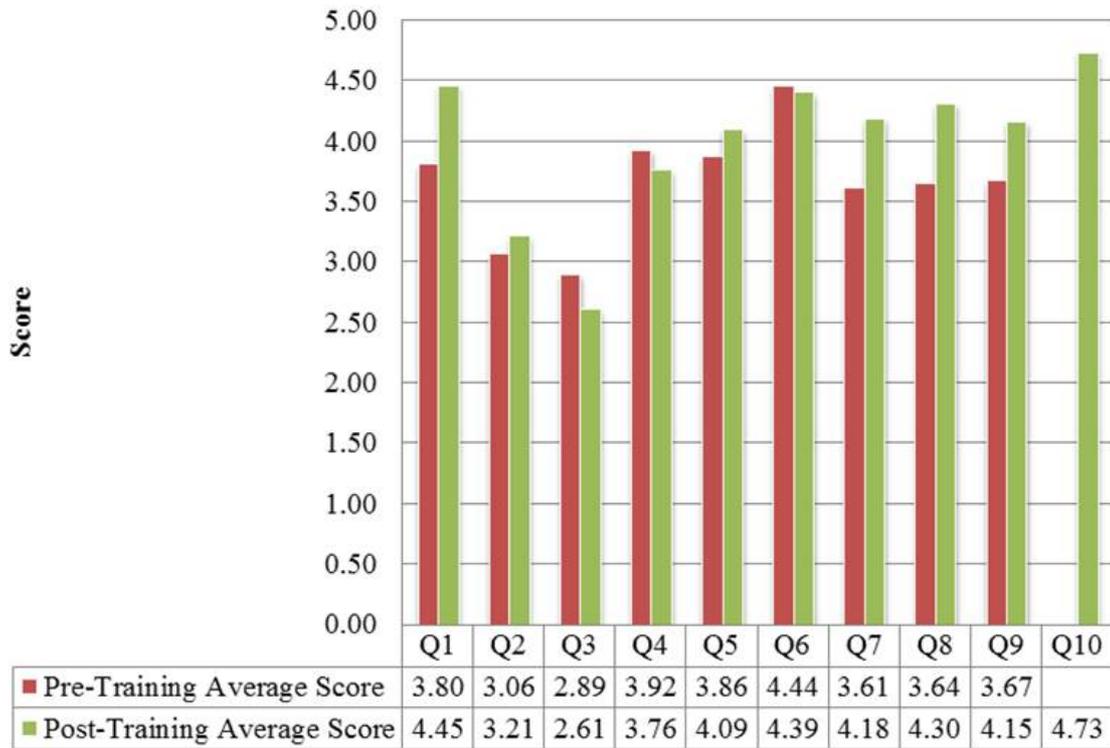
|     | Factors related to the change process                                                         | Average Score* |               | Percentage increase/decrease |
|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|------------------------------|
|     |                                                                                               | Pre-workshop   | Post-workshop |                              |
| Q1  | Clarification on the change process                                                           | 3.80           | 4.45          | +17.1%                       |
| Q2  | Degree of emotion aroused in you                                                              | 3.06           | 3.21          | +4.9%                        |
| Q3  | Degree of your resistance to the change process                                               | 2.89           | 2.61          | -9.7%                        |
| Q4  | Allowance to give feedback                                                                    | 3.92           | 3.76          | -4.1%                        |
| Q5  | Helping relations with your peer in the change team                                           | 3.86           | 4.09          | +6%                          |
| Q6  | Commitment to implement the change process                                                    | 4.44           | 4.39          | -1.1%                        |
| Q7  | Sufficient knowledge and training on implementing the change process                          | 3.61           | 4.18          | +15.8%                       |
| Q8  | Ability to manage the change implementation process                                           | 3.64           | 4.30          | +18.1%                       |
| Q9  | Confidence in implementing the change process                                                 | 3.67           | 4.15          | +13.1%                       |
| Q10 | Enhancing the assertiveness in implementing the change process (only in post-workshop survey) | -              | 4.73          | -                            |

\* Likert-type scale, with a 1 rating designated as “lowest/least” and a 5 rating designated as “highest/most”

Figure 2 – Survey Results: Difference in Pre- and Post-Workshop Average Score

Base: 40

**Summary - Workshop Questionnaire**



| Remarks:                                                |                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Q1 – clarification on the change process                | Q6 – commitment to implement the change process                                                     |
| Q2 – degree of emotions aroused in you                  | Q7 – sufficient knowledge and training on implementing the change process                           |
| Q3 – degree of resistance to the change process         | Q8 – ability to manage the change implementation process                                            |
| Q4 – allowance to give feedback                         | Q9 – confidence in implementing the change process                                                  |
| Q5 – helping relationships with peer in the change team | Q10 – enhancing the assertiveness in implementing the change process (only in post-workshop survey) |

Upon administering the assessments in the pre- and post-workshop setting, the findings were as below. After the coaching workshop:

1. There was a 17.1% increase in the average score on “clarification on the change process” – the 2nd top benefit;
2. There was a 4.9% increase in the degree of emotion aroused in participants;
3. There was a 9.7% decrease in the average score on “degree of resistance to the change process” – the 5th top benefit;
4. There were only slight differences in the average score on “allowance to give feedback” (4%);
5. There was a 6% increase in the average score on “helping relationships with peer in the change team” – the 6th top benefit;
6. There were only slight differences in the average score on “commitment to implement the change process” (-1%);
7. There was a 15.8% increase in the average score on “sufficient knowledge and training on implementing the change process” – the 3rd top benefit;
8. There was an 18.1% increase in the average score on “ability to manage the change implementation process” – the 1<sup>st</sup> top benefit;
9. There was a 13.1% increase in the average score on “confidence in implementing the change process” – the 4<sup>th</sup> top benefit;
10. The overall average score on “enhancing the assertiveness in implementing the change process” after the workshop was high at 4.73, against a scale with a 1 rating designated as “lowest” and a 5 rating designated as “highest”;

Examples of feedback from informal sharing session with randomly selected participants:

“I am happy being able to participate in the project from its design stage. As I have been with the Institution for more than 15 years, I am fully aware of the downsides of the current student record system and I do not wish to see the new system not meeting my practical needs in future. I have always been committed in implementing the change process and help my teammates as much as I can. This workshop gave me extra opportunities to share my view with peers in the change team.” – by A. Chan

“I appreciate the continuous communication and transparency of the change events so that I could brief new staff on the prospect of the new system, as they are complaining about the time they have to spend on working with the current system which has been obsolete for a long time! This workshop gave me an insight into coaching and equipped me with useful tools – listening and questioning skills, which would help me in dealing with my colleagues during the implementation process in future.” – by B. Lee

“As change agents, we would have to guide and train other programme staff in the Institution on the new system when it is ready. We do not have any experience in handling changing project and the resistance to change which we may encounter. We hoped to receive some training and this workshop has given me extras strengths. And it has enhanced my understanding on a change process in an organization.” – by C Cheung

## **Discussion**

Coaching had been applied in the changing processes in the above project with very positive feedbacks and appreciation from the Change Team. However, it only served as an integral part of the supporting programme in the change process.

The Change Managers recommended hiring an external change coach because they believe an external coach would have an independent perspective, credibility and experience to support and facilitate effective change. In addition, external coach has greater financial motivation to succeed with their clients than do internal coach (Bennett & Bush, 2014), and after all, senior leadership have already been heavily loaded with change work and related activities. However, the combined roles of project leader and coach, change manager and coach in project examples of other organizations is not uncommon, it is frequent to see executives wearing more than one hat and performing multiple functions in parallel in this fast-moving working environment.

Since the number of participants of the workshop was 40, they were divided into two groups to attend the workshop in two separate days. Team coaching was selected due to budget reason and also due to its anticipated benefits as described by Clutterbuck (2007), 'helping the team improve performance, and the processes by which performance is achieved, through reflection and dialogue' (Clutterbuck, 2007).

According to the survey in *Best Practices in Change Management – 2014 Edition*, two of the top five obstacles to success in change management in organizations are: resistance to change from employees; and middle management resistance (Creasey & Hiatt, 2014). The project example is a directed change project driven from the top of the organization and relies on authority at the top, persuasion in the middle, and compliance at the bottom (Kerber & Buono, 2010, Spring). In the pre-workshop survey, the resistance from staff was moderate at an average score of 2.89 against a scale with a 1 rating designated as "lowest" and a 5 rating designated as "highest"; and after the workshop, there was a 9.7% decrease in the average score of this factor, to 2.61, which is still exceeding the medium level. It indicates that more work has to be done in regard to persuasion in the middle. However, other supporting activities such as communication, employee involvement and managing the transitions may attain synergy benefits as a whole.

In this change project, coaching had been made as an integral part of a supporting programme. Change Managers listened and agreed with the request that the change agents would need some coaching in order to do their job well. Despite it was only a one-day workshop for each of the participants, the benefits for the group speak for themselves through the differences in the score rating on the factors related to the change process at pre- and post-workshop setting. Further coaching intervention in future may be necessary to the processes of reinforcement and sustainment, as soft and people-related factors typically present great challenges in these processes. The development of the Change Managers to become internal coach may add value in this situation, and using more cost-effective internal coaches would be useful for managers and supervisors. However, when training internal coaches, using externally based development programmes or bringing in external talent as trainer may lead to higher coaching success (Americian Management Association, 2008).

Combining coaching and change management could be very powerful in facilitating changes in an organization. 'Dealing with organizational change and dilemmas is not for the faint-hearted' (O'Neill, 2007). 'Through experience on the sea, sailors learn to read the wind. Once they are on the water, subtle cues tell them when to tack and when to open the sails full.' (Maurer, 1996) The same applied to the coach of change, the Change Manager was reading a few of the signs: key players, support change agents, timing, go for understanding and keep moving. Only experience and a

willingness to act support a coach of change to move on. Nonetheless, to be instrumental of change, he needed to have his own ongoing reflective space, in which he could reflect on his own practice (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). And the Change Manager may expand his practice to include a blend of education and coaching, which would be a very powerful tool in facilitating a change process.

### **Conclusion**

The results of the survey in the case study had demonstrated the link between the process of change and coaching in an organization, and they were positive energy as below:

- enhance the clarification on the change process
- increase in the degree of emotion aroused in participants
- decrease in the degree of participants' resistance to the change process
- enhance the helping relations with participants' peer in the change team
- increase in the level of knowledge and training on implementing the change process
- increase in the ability to manage the change implementation process
- enhance the confidence in implementing the change process
- achieving a high score in enhancing the assertiveness in implementing the change process after the coaching workshop

However, any sustaining change may require ongoing coaching as an integral part of the process.

Change becomes more important as an organization ages, because it keeps the organization and its management team updated, stay contemporary and being risks sensitive. The business environment is changing rapidly and it is important for an organization and its people to be ahead of the changes, or at least excited to move along with them. Coaching is extremely helpful when an organization is aware of its needs to change, no matter whether the changes are being driven by external or internal environment. In situation where people are trying to make changes at the emotional level, 'there would be push back, they may be in the form of panic, lack of confidence, avoidance or insecurity, due to the people have to move far outside their normal patterns of response' (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). A coach is a professional who have the skills to help others effect personal change.

Organizations are using a variety of methods to measure the success of their coaching initiatives. However, some observers believe 'coaching is not well suited to metrics' (Americian Management Association, 2008). The observations and processes described and the reflections made in this article had been based on a real life project in a sizable organization. Quantitative and qualitative reflections on practical cases can truly demonstrate the link between the process of change and coaching in an organization, and it is evident in this study that the link creates positive energy in the change process, especially in raising ability and confidence.

### **Limitation and the Need for Further Studies**

The limitations of the study were: it was case study base; the sample size was small; the questionnaires had not been validated and the data collected had not been analyzed statistically. Nonetheless the premise of this research has been validated – change coaching is an optimal support to facilitate effective change (Bennett & Bush, 2014). The benefit of coaching in sustaining change in the case study is to be ascertained (the project was on-going at the time of writing the article). The article can heed a call on adopting coaching to support organizational learning and change.

Further reflections, studies and or empirical research are warranted to foster the value of coaching in change management today.

**Note**

All names in the assignment have been changed to preserve anonymity.

**Appreciation**

The author thanks The University of Hong Kong, School of Professional and Continuing Education management for their support in this case study.

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