

Modern Workplace

Written by Charlie Lang

Executive coaching lets winners shine

Senior executives from a small circle of elite corporations in Hong Kong gathered late last month to attend the city's first public event on executive coaching.

The organiser said the event, "Develop organisational potential through executive coaching", was being held to reflect that coaching was used more often by executives as a managerial tool in Hong Kong.

It was organised by the Hong Kong International Community on Coaching – a registered society, and held on March 27 in Quarry Bay.

"We found it was the right time to conduct this kind of event when awareness about the benefits of executive coaching is becoming more commonplace in leading corporations in Hong Kong," said David Mooijaart, vice-president, executive coaching at the society and leader of the organising committee.

"I was amazed by the ... high level of interaction and engagement of the audience and the open sharing of the panel speakers."

Executive coaching, once viewed in a negative light as merely therapy for troubled executives who were having difficulties coping with their role as managers, has become more accepted in Hong Kong as a tool to enhance careers.

In some organisations, such as top-tier investment bank Goldman Sachs, executive coaching is awarded as a perk for successful senior managers.

The message from the panel speakers – which included senior executives from Goldman Sachs, Barclays Capital, Amoy Foods and Shekou Container Terminals – was that executive coaching was for winners, not losers.

During the conference, attended by more than 30 human resources and senior managers from sectors such as banking, manufacturing and retailing, Brian Maher, director of treasury

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Barclays Capital
Director of treasury



at Barclays Capital, said he was at first highly sceptical and resistant when his superior suggested he get a coach.

Only because he deeply respected his boss did he finally agree to give it a try, he said.

What followed was a development that he would never have imagined.

Mr Maher said that executive coaching provided him with a deeper understanding of his behavioural patterns and how he could use them more successfully, and benefited him in his personal life as he learned to behave and communicate more consciously and effectively with the people around him.

Keynote speaker Alan Sieler, an author on coaching and director of Newfield Australia, explained how progressing as a human being, executive coaching and bottom line results were all related. He talked about the return on investment of coaching and gave an example of a study of 100 executives that found an average return of six times the cost of coaching.

"An increasing number of senior managers realise that executive coaching has a direct positive impact on the bottom line of their P&L [profit and loss] sheet," he said.

Mr Sieler said that conversations and relationships were at the heart of organisational effectiveness and raised two powerful questions: What is the difference between a good coach and a great coach? And do conversations produce waste or value?

Mr Sieler said: "It's not the people who make the difference, it's what people do with their knowledge and skills that matters."

He said one of the main values coaching provides was to keep the coach accountable to take positive action.

Using a World Cafe format in one of the sessions provided the delegates with the opportunity to work in informal groups on pertinent questions related to applying coaching in organisations.

The speakers from a panel of senior managers from Goldman Sachs, Amoy Foods and Shekou Container Terminals were quizzed on how to select coaches, how to evaluate the return on investment from executive coaching, and how to convince senior management to buy in to the concept of executive coaching.

Speakers from Amoy Foods and Shekou Container Terminals said that even in mostly Chinese corporate culture the concept of executive coaching can be successfully introduced.

Theresa Chong, human resources controller at Amoy Foods, said that the key to successful implementation of coaching was to pay special attention to the preparation phase, which included a start-up workshop to determine the expectations of management. While some organisations still used coaches to try to "fix" managers with behavioural problems, it was evident during this conference that executive coaching could be used in a much more proactive and forward-thinking way.

This conference broke new ground for this kind of learning event by allowing participants to share their own situations, actively participate in the conference, and discuss issues which could be addressed constructively through coaching.

As a result of its success, the event will run each year.

Charlie Lang is executive vice-president of the Hong Kong International Coaching Community