PEER COACHING: THE EMERGENCE OF UNINTENDED CULTURE CHANGE IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a longitudinal case-study of a culture change initiative at the senior management level in a large high technology company (LHT). It has long been recognized that organizational change attempts often result in unintended consequences, and the situation at the LHT was no exception. A program was designed to transform senior managers into high performers, and peer coaching groups were set up to facilitate this change. Based on our observations and interview data, we report how the peer coaching program deviated from its intended objectives and resulted in a highly positive culture of consultation and open discussions within the coaching groups. We argue that the existing readiness for change in the peer group and the fact that they had to meet regularly with their formal groups generated the unexpected but positive outcomes out of this change initiative.

Keywords: Culture change, unintended consequences, senior management, executive coaching

INTRODUCTION

A large multi-national high technology company decided to modify the organizational culture and assigned a new VP, with this mandate to initiate a culture change program for the senior managers. The pattern of thought in this practical situation, goes like this: if the way we do things does not result in desirable outcomes, we must change our ways by initiating a culture change and the best way to bring about culture change is by changing the behaviour of the leaders who are responsible for the desired outcomes in an organizational context. Finally, as it is easier to design and implement change programs for people, rather than change the structure of the organization to accommodate culture change, the management devised a program for changing the behaviour of senior management.

In this paper we report on the performance of senior managers who participated in the culture change program with the stated objective of making them "high performers." This paper will include how the "coaching" groups emerged and evolved its own "culture" and often continued voluntarily beyond the required time frame. Also, we will discuss some theoretical issues related to culture change. We argue that culture and culture change are strongly influenced by the situational constraints which are usually ignored, even though Lewin's (1951) model of change is based on adjustments of these constraints.

LITERATURE

The literature on culture change

The concept of culture gained popularity as the North American manufacturers tried to imitate the Japanese in the 1980s (Mintzberg et al., 1998) based on the assumption that their "culture" was responsible for the superiority of the Japanese production system. However, the early studies of North American firms' attempts at imitating the Just-in-Time production

culture indicated that the difficulties of implementation were often related to "hard" constraints such as the daily production quota, performance evaluation system, and the lack of coordination among functional units (Safayeni & Purdy, 1991; Duimering & Safayeni, 1991). Two observations from these studies are relevant to the current literature on culture change. First, it is useful to think of "culture" as an output of the work situations as opposed to some shared values in people's mind. Second, culture change may often require changing the context or the organizational situation in order to promote the desired culture as opposed to just changing people.

The general theories of change started with Kurt Lewin's (1951) three stage model in which a successful change will require "unfreezing," "moving," and "refreezing." *Unfreezing* refers to the relaxation of the constraints on the socio-technical system undergoing change, *moving* is learning a new pattern of behaviour, and *refreezing* means adjusting the constraints to maintain and to reinforce the new pattern of behaviour.

Lewin's model has remained as a useful way of viewing the process of change. There are a number of researchers who have observed that most models of change end up being Lewin's three stage model (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Brodnik & Lewin, 2017). There is also a recognition that difficulties in the implementation of the change process is either at the unfreezing or at the refreezing stage. For example, Jones et al. (2005) have pointed out the importance of being ready for change in the context of successful implementation of a new end-user computing system, and Buchanan et al. (2005) have discussed the difficulties of refreezing the change in the organization. It is worth noting that although Lewin's model of change has survived the test of time, the application of Lewin's field theory-the basis of his model- to the process of change is uncommon (for a good example of applying field theory to the process of change see Coch and French, Jr. (1948)).

The studies of culture change at the managerial level have been relatively rare (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003; Doppelt, 2017), particularly at the senior management level. One of the more recent mechanisms of changing behaviour of senior managers by practitioners is executive coaching (Sherman & Freas, 2004). However, the empirical studies on coaching are also quite limited (Joo, 2005; Feldman & Lankau, 2005). Feldman and Lankau (2005) have recognized this deficiency and pointed out that there is a need for better understanding on why coaching can make a difference in the behaviour of the senior managers. In other words, there is a need to know more on the dynamic properties of coaching, how do they translate to "better" leadership, and how does better leadership make the organization more effective?

There are different definitions for coaching. Some have emphasized the relationship between consultant and executive (Douglas & McCauley, 1999; Feldman, 2001), whereas others have viewed it as a gradual process by which a person develops and becomes more effective (Peterson & Hicks, 1995). The current debate in the coaching literature is on whether the feedback should come from a professional consultant trained on coaching techniques with little or no knowledge of the business (Sperry, 1996; Foss & Saebi, 2017), or from a coach with relevant business knowledge (Corfield & Paton, 2016). Clearly, both types of information can be useful and there is no reason why they should be treated as mutually exclusive. Moreover, the literature often views coaching as a dyadic function. Again, there is no reason to assume that coaching has to be a one-on-one process; it can be within a small group. In fact, the small group setting for coaching is the basis of our study.

Study Background

The selected organization is a large multi-national high tech (LHT) company, with over 30,000 employees. The organization is designed as a combination of functional, matrix and product structures. The LHT is functionally designed, but, when new products were introduced, cross-functional teams operated in a matrix structure, and new product lines operates much more autonomously compared to the older functional units. The hierarchy structure has several VPs reporting to CEO forming the upper level of the management. There are approximately 700 directors reporting to the VPs who are responsible for various functional outcomes. Each director supervises several associate directors and managers who in turn look after projects, programs, and personnel working in their teams.

The LHT was a bureaucratic organization with a huge number of rules and procedures for dealing with any situation at work. The geographical layout of the company, the organizational commitment to being "high-tech," and prospects of reducing the cost of downtown offices resulted in relying on communication by emails and launch of work from home options. Most meetings took place via phone conferences and work teams were often operating virtually.

The culture change program we investigated was designed for the directors of the company with the assumption that culture change at this hierarchal level will have a significant impact in changing the culture of the organization. This is based on the desire to use the directors as agents of culture change within their business units to spread out the change throughout the company.

The program was designed in collaboration with the HR department and a reputed consulting firm. The HR department conducted initial interviews of a few directors across different functional areas and identified a number of behavioural dimensions that are viewed as unproductive. These behaviours include:

- Excessive compromises during decision making;
- risk avoidance;
- inability to form a clear perception of the problems at hand;
- inability to perceive the importance of other cross-functional, interdependent processes that affect their projects, and
- lack of personal interactions with team members.

The postulation is that if these behaviours are unproductive, then the opposites must be "high performance" behaviours. Thus, during the training session, the following five behavioural dimensions are presented to the directors as desirable attributes of a high performing leader:

- To be decisive even if there is opposition (decisiveness);
- To be able to take reasonable risks (risk taking);
- To be able reach a clear understanding of various dimensions of the project from the beginning. (onset clarification);
- To be able to learn and understand the interdependent processes needed for project completion (process understanding), and
- To be able to develop intense interpersonal relationships within the teams (relationship building).

During the training, the directors were asked to assess their competence on each of the five behavioural dimensions and prompted to select two of the five dimensions that they perceive

requiring improvement. Each participant director selected a project each on which they are currently working and requested to concentrate on improving the selected behavioural dimensions related to that project for the next 12 weeks. The directors assessed their competency on the behavioural dimensions on weeks 6 and 12. Feedback questionnaires were distributed to their teams. Finally, two telephonic conferences were scheduled for the entire pilot group during the weeks of 6 and 12 to discuss the features of the training and to provide feedback to the program organizers.

At the end of the training workshop, all directors were assigned to a coaching group, referred to as "coaching circle," with five to nine other directors from the group. Coaching circles were set to meet biweekly and the directors were expected to share their practice of implementing the improvements to behavioural dimensions and then receive coaching from their peers. They were told that effective coaching involves asking questions as opposed to providing solutions, and encouraging an individual to realize on their own, the root cause of the problem and/or potential solutions.

As researchers, we did not participate in the identification of the dysfunctional behaviours or in the design of the training program itself. We were invited by the LHT as independent investigators to examine the training effects on the pilot group of senior managers with the intention to add value to the learning process through our investigations.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted the study in two phases: at the beginning of the training we participated and observed one of the training sessions (phase 1) and after eight months we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with 19 directors (phase 2). Throughout the duration of the training, the HR department provided us with self assessment and attendance data from the directors. Thus, the data for the study came from three different sources: our observations of the training, data provided by the organization and the in-depth interviews with the directors.

Phase 1: Observations during the training session
The pilot group consisted of 45 directors. They were trained in small groups (10 – 15 members) in half-day workshops, followed by a 12-week peer coaching support group activity.

Towards the end of the training, the directors completed their first self-assessment questionnaire concerning their competency on the five desirable behavioural dimensions and selected two of those dimensions to improve upon within the next 12 weeks. The training session concluded by getting the directors to sign up for one of the coaching groups (five to ten directors per group), and finding volunteers to act as the coaching group leads.

During the next 12 weeks, the directors were expected to relate, apply and improve their chosen behavioural dimensions to the projects they were working on, meet with their coaching groups to discuss the challenges they encountered and received peer coaching.

The coaching circle leader was responsible for scheduling bi-weekly meetings and facilitating the discussions during the five 1.5-hour coaching circle sessions. Coaching circles were introduced to the directors as a form of peer support group where they could share their problems on tackling the behavioural dimensions and receive coaching. All directors were expected to provide coaching and receive coaching. Each participant could receive coaching

when he or she had a problem and needed help. In the coaching process one of the individuals was acting as "trainee" and shared his/her problems with the rest of the group. The group was expected to get coached by asking "coaching" questions as opposed to providing solutions.

During the training workshop, the directors received instructions on how to provide effective coaching. They were told that "coaching" is NOT "telling," that is, the coach is supposed to encourage the "trainees" to get a better understanding of their own problems and finding solutions in consultation within the group, instead of receiving a prescription how to do it. The directors were instructed to ask coaching questions like: "Can you tell me more about that?", "How do you feel about that?", "Do you really believe that?", "What do you really need?", and "What results do you want to achieve?"

The form of coaching that the LHT has selected for its directors is quite different from the conventional forms of coaching described in the academic and practitioner literature. It is worth pointing out that the LHT's directors in the pilot group never had any prior workshops or training on how to coach or conduct effective coaching sessions. They were only given a list of coaching questions and an explanation of the idea of coaching. Thus, none of them was a trained coaching specialist; but a group of peers working on similar problems who experienced similar obstacles and frustrations in their work environment. The relationship within the directors' coaching circle was one "trainee" to multiple coaches, and each individual had opportunities to play both roles during the same coaching circle session.

Meeting with their coaching circles became a part of the directors' schedule, and it became the only "hard constraint" for them. All other requirements were simply guidelines for the directors to adjust their behaviour in a desired manner, and these could be seen as "soft constraints" compared to a more explicit adjustment to the directors' schedule.

Phase 2: Post-implementation Interviews

The interview questions were designed based on the Echo interview methodology. The methodology is particularly useful in studying organizational culture (Cunningham, 2001), since it was originally designed to get at group ideology (Bavelas, 1942). The Echo approach has been successfully applied in various studies of organizations (Safayeni et al., 2008; Scala et al., 2006; Duimering et al., 2006; Duimering & Safayeni, 1991). The advantage of this approach is that the participants are encouraged to provide concrete examples instead of more abstract and potentially vague responses.

Participants. We interviewed 19 directors from five different functional units. The HR department selected these directors for our study from the original pool of based on the completion of the training program. Average experience of our participants in the role of a director was 2.4 years, while the average tenure in the organization was 15 years.

Procedure. The interviews were conducted in-person. Most were face to face, while the directors from distant locations were contacted over phone. Each interview lasted about 90 minutes and recorded with permission for analysis. Each interview began with a set of general background questions, followed by a set of specific questions pertaining to the training program, its effect on their performance and their coaching circle experience.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Training outcomes
Overall performance improvement. During the interviews, we asked the participants to indicate whether there was a change in their overall performance level as the result of their participation in the training program on a 10-point scale ranging from "-5" to "5." Negative values on the scale represented the extent of being less effective, positive numbers represented the extent of being more effective, and "0" represented no change compared to their performance prior to the training. All directors indicated an improvement in their performance. The average reported improvement was 3.0 ($\sigma = 0.9$).

These results were consistent with the data collected by the organization five months earlier, independent of our study. The pilot group's self-assessment on the behavioural dimensions at the end of the training program showed significant improvement relative to the beginning of the program ($\chi^2 = 23.9$, $p < 0.05$).

Improvement on the behavioural dimensions. At the beginning of the training, each director selected two of the five dimensions to improve upon. To remind the reader, the dimensions were decisiveness, risk taking, onset clarification, process understanding, and relationship building.

It is interesting to note that more than half of the participants selected the "decisiveness" dimension at the beginning of the training program; but when prompted for examples of the situations that demonstrated their improved effectiveness, only 11% of the directors provided examples. This result was consistent with the self-assessment data collected by the organization, where the decisiveness dimension showed the least amount of improvement at the end of 12 weeks. There were very limited instances of improvement on the risk taking dimension and it was rarely selected.

The directors reported that on an average it was easy for them to apply the behavioural dimensions in 60% of their work situations. The directors attributed the ease of application to situations which were under their control (e.g. relationship building within their teams), and to work with other directors who received the same training (e.g. onset clarity). The difficulties in application were associated with hard constraints, such as:
- the necessity to challenge the hierarchy to impose your decision (e.g. decisiveness);
- dealing with people who have not received the training;
- attending to frequent crisis situations;
- complexity of the existing processes affecting comprehension (e.g. process understanding), and
- Highly distributed workforce affecting personal relationships.

Coaching circles experience
The only hard constraint placed on the directors in this training was to attend their coaching circle meetings. Coaching circles were a major part of the training and was the mechanism that facilitated the moving and refreezing stages (Lewin, 1951) of the culture change program. As we indicated above, this approach to coaching where peers with no previous coaching experience provided coaching to each other was unlike the more traditional executive coaching found in the literature.

In order to understand the directors' experience with their coaching circles, we asked them to provide examples of supportive and unsupportive aspects of their coaching circle experience. Overall, the directors freely provided 87 supportive and 30 unsupportive instances of the coaching circle events or every unhelpful example was matched with almost three helpful examples. We put all the supportive examples from the coaching circles into four general themes: interactions in the coaching circle, being generally a positive experience, attitude towards coaching circle meetings, and comments specific to the training program. Table I lists the categories within each of these themes, reports percentage of comments for each category, and provides a typical comment for each category.

Table I: Summary of comments regarding the helpful aspects of the Coaching Circles (CC)

Theme	Category	comments
1. Interactions in the CC (39%)	1.1 Consulting, helping with issues	19%
	1.2 Networking/ meeting new people	12%
	1.3 Learning about the company	9%
2. Positive experience (30%)	2.1 Enjoyment	8%
	2.2 Openness	7%
	2.3 Sense of community/ therapeutic	7%
	2.4 Valuable/ Not a waste of time	6%
3. Attitude toward the CC meetings (16%)	3.1 Extending meetings beyond the 12 weeks	13%
	3.2 Desire to continue CCs	4%
4. Training specific comments (15%)	4.1 Reinforcing the behavioural dimensions from training	8%
	4.2 Coaching experience	7%

Table I shows that 85% of the comments were related to interactions, positive experience, and positive attitude. Only 15% of the comments were directly related to training. Within the theme of 'interactions within the coaching circles,' the 'consulting/ helping with issues' category had the highest percentage of comments, followed by the 'networking/ meeting new people' and 'learning about the company' categories. The comments for the theme 'positive experience' were evenly distributed among four categories of 'enjoyment,' 'openness,' 'sense of community/therapeutic,' and 'valuable/not a waste of time.' For the theme 'attitude toward coaching circle meetings,' most of the comments were made by those who continued their coaching circle meetings beyond the required 12-week period and a few others expressed interest to resume their coaching circle meetings. The comments for the theme 'training specific comments' were equally distributed between two categories of 'reinforcing the behavioural dimensions from the training' and 'coaching experience.'

Table II reports the summary of the comments regarding the unhelpful aspects of the coaching circles which were much less frequent than the helpful comments.

Table II: Summary of comments regarding the unhelpful aspects of the CC

Theme	Category	comments
1. Directors' busy schedule (50%)	1.1 Scheduling/ time allocation difficulty	33%
	1.2 Too many dimensions to work on	10%
	1.3 Multitasking during calls	7%
2. Deviation from the intended objectives (30%)	2.1 Venting Sessions	13%
	2.2 Irrelevant issues	13%
	2.3 Lack of focus on personal development	3%
3. Implementation issues (20%)	3.1 Bumpy start in CC	10%
	3.2 Disciplines lack concrete actions	3%
	3.3 No openness	3%
	3.4 Short duration/too few meetings	3%

For the theme of 'directors' busy schedule,' which constituted 50% of the comments, the most frequently mentioned difficulties were issues related to scheduling the coaching circle meetings and time allocations, followed by 'too many dimensions to work on' and the least number of comments were related to multitasking during the meetings. It is interesting to note that the concerns related to scheduling were also echoed by the coaching circle attendance data collected by the HR department. Even though, the pilot group of directors were volunteers, the attendance of the coaching circle meetings was not perfect. The average number of missed coaching meetings per individual in all groups was 1.4 (28% of the total number of meetings). From our interviews, the participation in the coaching circles was sometimes abandoned due to other pressing issues.

For the theme 'deviation from intended objectives,' which constituted 30% of the comments, the two frequently mentioned categories were 'venting sessions' and 'irrelevant issues' followed by 'lack of focus on personal development.' Finally, for the theme 'implementation issues,' the most frequently mentioned category was 'bumpy start in the coaching circles' followed by 'disciplines lack concrete actions,' 'no openness,' and 'short duration and too few meetings.'

Overall, there were more helpful comments (47 comments) than unhelpful comments (6 comments), indicating highly positive working relationship between peers from the same coaching circle. The majority of the helpful comments were related to providing consultations, sharing ideas with each other, supporting each other, having very positive reciprocal relationship, and resolving work-related issues. Some directors also indicated that shared training tools and intense communication with their coaching circle peers were also helpful in their working relationship (11% of the comments).

The most common negative comment was related to missing the due dates for their deliverables (50% of the unhelpful comments) and the remaining three comments were diverse.

89% of the directors indicated that participation in the training program, especially in the same coaching circle, had a positive impact on their working relationship with their peers.

88% attributed this improvement to building a personal relationship and getting closer with their colleagues in the coaching circle, while 29% pointed out that sharing the same language and tools from the training helped to improve their working relationships.

Overall, 68% of the directors placed their coaching circle colleagues at a higher level than other directors in the company for their task related interactions, while 32% reported no difference between the two groups.

Theoretically, we have argued that the hard constraint that played a significant role in the emergence of the coaching circle culture was the fact that the directors had to meet and discuss their problems in adopting their chosen behavioural dimensions. The softer constraints such as the instructions about how to coach and to keep their discussion on the behavioural dimensions were either not followed at all, or not followed very rigidly. One possible explanation is that the instructions were not appropriate for the setting. For example, it is difficult to play the role of a coach when you have knowledge and experience on the topic of the discussion and the "trainee" is asking for your advice. It is much easier to limit yourself to coaching questions when you are not familiar with the business and the intricacies of the problem at hand. Similarly, to discuss problems of 'being decisive' requires a description of the situation which is far more complex than simply exerting your will upon others in a group. It is worth pointing out that Ogbonna and Wilkinson (2003) and Corfield and Paton (2016) explained their findings on "culture change" among managers in terms of hard constraints of organizational restructuring tended to reduce autonomy and create a more centralized organization as opposed to changes in values of the managers.

Lewin's theory of change is also related to hard constraints as he was a strong advocate of understanding human behaviour as a function of total situation. Thus the notions of unfreezing and refreezing are not simply instructions or attitude adjustments but rather required changes in the hard constraints which defines a given work situation. The situational approach has been rediscovered. For example, Suchman's (1987) notion of "situated action" is an attempt in this direction.

Previous researches typically identify unfreezing and refreezing (or lack of adjustments in the hard constraints) as reasons for the failure of a change program, whereas we narrate how a single hard constraint resulted in unintended but positive cultural dimension within the organization.

CONCLUSIONS

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from this study. Any attempt at culture change will be accompanied by unintended consequences. In our study the coaching circle culture emerged as a "counter-culture" where the norms of behaviour were honest discussions and mutual help to solve various problems. This was opposite to the LHT's highly political culture characterized by hidden agendas, lack of trust, and lack of information sharing.

Coaching can be conducted in a small group setting quite productively. Further, we found peer coaching can be an effective means of consulting, learning, and problem solving.

From our analysis it can also be seen that a kind of mutual trust that developed among the group of directors led them to think above parochial considerations igniting a spirit of cooperation leading to a positive culture of consultation and team thinking.

The study also points to the fact that attempts to force cultural change may not always give the intended results because the participants involved may not deliberately move along the charted course while they may unintentionally move or drift into the charted course when reinforcements are generated by natural interactions between the group members.

The results of the study can also be interpreted as the notion of managed cultural change or official intervention to change culture can perhaps only 'trigger' the change while the magnitude and nature of change depend on informal interactions between the participants occurring within the managed training environment. In other words, cultural changes are unintended or leveraged consequences that deviate from intended outcomes.

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