



# Upward **SPIRAL**

Coaching needs to be rolled out to a company's entire leadership to create the momentum for cultural change. **Eunice Aquilina** shares the results of her development initiative at the BBC

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**M**any firms still see coaching as a process for individuals, but if it is to reach its potential I believe it must be embraced as an organisational development (OD) initiative.

Coaching enables leaders to generate their own learning, according to research I carried out at the BBC. When multiplied across an organisation through a critical mass of leaders, it acts as a catalyst for seismic change and sustained growth.

The BBC's former director-general, Greg Dyke, launched the



**Figure 1: The coaching proposition**

“Making it happen” initiative in 2000. The plan was to turn around a culture in which demoralised staff viewed the corporation as bureaucratic and complex. The aim was to make the BBC “the most creative organisation in the world”.

Great leadership was seen as the “critical fuel” that would propel the initiative forward. Coaching would be the spark to ignite that fuel. The proposed leadership strategy included improved coaching and mentoring corporation-wide and an annual six-month blended learning programme for 1,500 leaders. They would then take their learning back to the workplace, creating the momentum for massive culture change at the BBC.

### The proposition

The new coaching proposition aimed to help leaders discover and develop a positive, individual approach and focus on their leadership in context (see figure 1, above).

Through the OD lens, coaching was positioned to support leaders to work on the self as leader as well as who they were in relation to others and the wider system. Four

one-to-one sessions were offered over a six-month period. In nearly five years, 7,500 leaders from across the organisation went through the programme, with around 75 per cent opting to support their learning through coaching.

I gathered personal stories from 50 leaders who completed their coaching between 2005 and 2006. These showed how powerfully coaching had changed their leadership practices and therefore the shape of leadership at the BBC.

Through the coaching relationship, clients were co-creating an outward spiral of thinking and acting that was more likely to build sustained change. They had identified how they were creating new realities for themselves. The data also identified what they had “privileged” in the coaching conversation – in other words, what was an important focus for them.

Who they were as leaders was a key consideration. Applying new ideas about leadership to real-time issues enabled them to reconstruct their role. They recognised how this was specific to both them and in the context of the organisation.

“Coaching must be situated in the context, culture and challenges of the organisation”

They realised this was a personal journey which led to recognising an increased potential and capacity in the self as leader.

The cumulative effect of so many leaders learning spiralled out across the organisation. They shifted from controlling to open; from dominating to accepting; from feeling overwhelmed to being calm and confident.

Some of their stories emphasised the importance of the coaching relationship and space made for conversation. The coach created “a safe space”, “a space to think”. They talked about the coach being “engaged and focused”, that they “listened” and “allowed [them] to be vulnerable”. Many spoke about how the coach challenged their assumptions and mental models, helping them to access a different perspective.

Clients felt empowered by the coach, contrary to their expectations. There was agreement on how the coaching helped them to focus on specific issues and discover how to do things differently. Moreover, there was a general understanding of how to use coaching in the future: when they might want to access a coaching conversation and how they might use it. This gave clients a new independence.

### The learning loop

The nature of the learning from the coaching conversations was evident at all three levels of single, double and even triple loop learning (Argyris<sup>1</sup>, Senge<sup>2</sup>, Hargrove<sup>3</sup>). Single

loop learning is highly valuable – clients tend to build on existing strengths. Such “ordinary shifts” added to existing strengths and helped clients to understand their contribution as a leader. Increased confidence was reported, along with an expanded conversational repertoire that contributed to improved team performance.

Double loop learning is a shift in mental models, and a conversation that refines the role of leader. It stops a leader from prematurely jumping to action and encourages listening and reflecting. Senge sees double loop learning as the means by which continuous learning in organisations occurs.

The leaders told of how they had developed a more collaborative style, and valued the contribution of others more. They were able to create an environment where it was safe to make mistakes and learn. They had a better understanding of the potential and capacity of others. Many reported an improved understanding of change and the process of learning. Change now happened with fewer problems.

Triple loop learning, or extraordinary shifts, were evident



in leaders who had changed from needing to be in control to having an inclusive style. They developed a wider perspective on leadership, an ability to step back, to be strategic and see the unseen. This level created learning within the leader that enabled them to change their practices and develop their ability to self-coach.

Five leaders were contacted a year and a half later to reflect on the unfolding of the learning. One said:

“It’s taken about 12 months to embed the learning. This may have had something to do with all the other stuff going on in my life. But the learning is now in my consciousness and I can see the results.”

Reflecting on the coaching, the client said: “I do keep going back to those early sessions and I think you just replay those in your head, not the actual sessions but the kinds of questions and issues you dealt with. You reach back to see, ‘What have I learnt in the past that I can apply to this situation?’, and that is always going to stay with me.”

This shows how the patterns of action created in those early conversations continue to spiral outwards, sustaining the learning, and how the conversation outside the coaching continues.

### Key themes

Through this study, a number of key themes have surfaced. The first is the creation of a coaching proposition that identifies the purpose of the coaching. It must be situated in the context, culture and challenges of the organisation. What is the organisation for and what is the environment in which it operates?

## The research

I took an appreciative enquiry stance which assumed that coaching was valued as a developmental intervention, leaders were already contributing as leaders and that they were being encouraged to be self-organised learners.

The process of encouraging clients to recount their recent experiences through the coaching programme – both of the coaching itself and conversations with others outside the coaching – was based on the concept of the “reflexive rewind”. Harri-Augustein and Thomas<sup>4</sup> suggest a “re-wind” to help learners develop a habit of observing and reflecting on their learning. Barnett Pearce<sup>5</sup> identifies “reflexive effects” – the ability of the individual “to notice the actions and reactions of self and others, in relation to oneself, and use these observations to guide and co-ordinate continuing dialogue and future action”.

Co-ordinated management of meaning<sup>2</sup> provided a methodology for analysis. It attempts to explain patterns of communication and how they are constructed. It focuses on the language patterns people use to generate meaning and co-create the complex environment they live in.

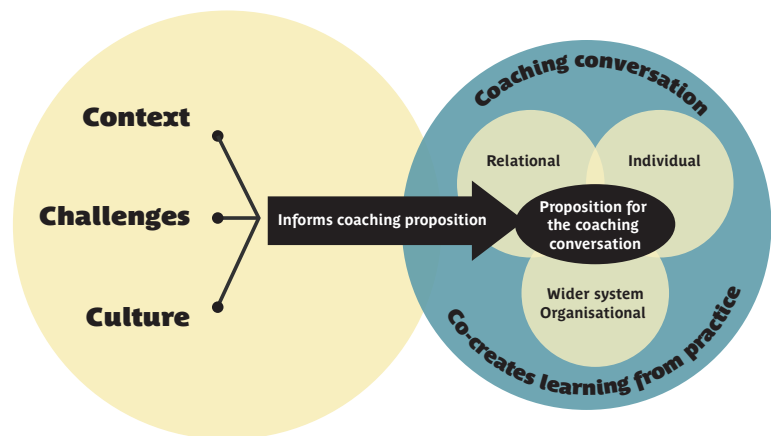
In my research, it provided a way of discovering how leaders were using coaching as a participative communication process both for themselves within the conversation and outside with their wider network. It emphasised the conversation’s process rather than its products and so tracked the learning rather than merely determining its outcome. This showed how leaders continued to develop through action and reflection.

How do things happen in the organisation? What are the challenges facing it? What is it seeking to achieve? There is a need to articulate what the coaching should focus on in order to support OD.

Figure 2 (right) attempts to illustrate the coaching conversation framed within an organisational learning context.

Co-ordinated management of meaning provides a way of understanding the power of coaching conversations and how to access the shifts in practice through the reflexive rewind process (see panel, facing page). The conversations that help leaders to deconstruct their mental models and reconstruct new ways of leading, including self-led learning, are likely to create sustained change. This, when multiplied across an organisation through a critical mass of leaders, may generate organisational learning and development that creates the know-how to sustain leadership effectiveness and support further change (see figure 3, below).

Regularly tapping into the reflexive rewind will indicate the direction of change and help when considering the next activity to continue the learning. It is the involvement of so many leaders in individual but



**Figure 2: The coaching conversation within an organisational learning context**

collective conversations for a common proposition that creates the shift, and changes the organisational conversation.

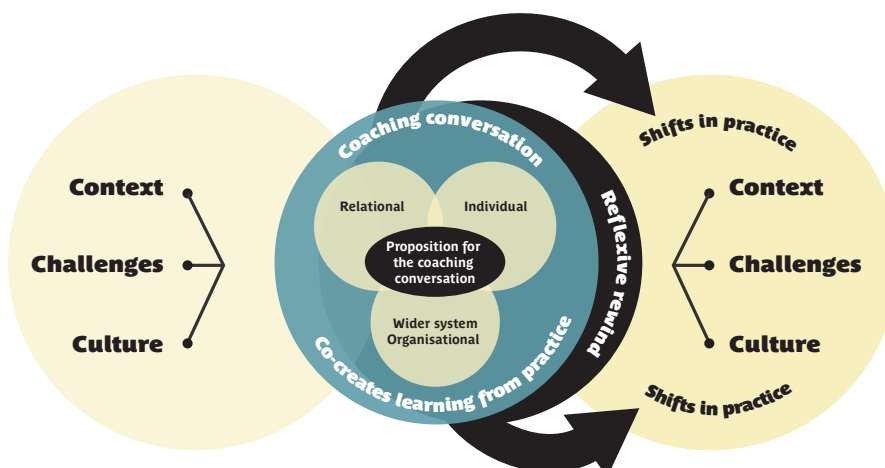
After the coaching programme, BBC staff felt empowered and valued. They felt that they were at the heart of the organisation's pursuit of change. Leaders were able to meet the challenge of leadership.

The client's voice was placed at the heart of my research. This gave a real insight into the richness of coaching as a learning conversation. More and more organisations are asking how to unleash the power of the coaching conversation in a way that supports OD. There is much here to support them.

Organisations are organic, social entities and their conversations are indicative of their culture.

Coaching is uniquely placed to support leaders to learn in context, in practice, through practice and to expand their conversation repertoire. In this way organisational coaching will ensure that learning and shifts in practice are relevant to the context and challenges of the organisation. ■  
● Eunice Aquilina was at the BBC for 10 years. She now works as an independent coach and consultant and is a member of faculty with i-coach academy. She is currently co-authoring a book placing coaching as an OD initiative.

**Figure 3: The power of coaching conversations**



## References

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