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Coaches pick up ball dropped by management

Christmas has come early. I have been sent an invitation to receive “an introductory business coaching package”. A London-based firm, the Coaching Consultancy, has written to me offering a trial run of 10 hours of coaching, including “unlimited e-mail and telephone support”, and at the end of the trial, “a detailed report sent to my manager identifying what progress has been made”.

At first sight this looked like an offer I simply could not refuse. On closer inspection, however, I realised that the deal on the table was not quite as special as I had thought. The package was being offered to me at the “extremely competitive rate” of £3,950 plus VAT. To be honest, this was rather more money than I had been hoping to have to pay. In fact, it was about £3,950 more. But that’s journalists for you: the original something-for-nothing scoundrels.

You cannot blame the Coaching Consultancy for trying. Its letter had been written in a genuine spirit of inquiry. In bold type, halfway through the text, they asked: “Is there anyone at the Financial Times who would currently benefit from business coaching?”

That was such an intriguing question that I decided to forward it, via e-mail, to all my editorial colleagues. Alas, their response was not all that positive. Some struggled with the concept of coaching. I don’t really think everyone was entirely familiar with it. And, of course, my e-mail provoked some rather more subversive thoughts. One mischievous co-worker asked: “Can we recommend people we think need a coach?”

I rang the Coaching Consultancy’s head of marketing, Gina McAdam, who had sent me the letter in the first place, to see exactly what would be involved in this introductory offer. A key first step would be a three-way “contracting” meeting, where I, my manager and a coach would agree together what it was I should be trying to achieve. It certainly didn’t take long for Gina to size me up. After a few minutes on the phone she told me: “I am sure you would benefit greatly from the coaching experience!”

Why has the coaching industry exploded in the way it has? The International Coaching Federation, a US-based trade body, estimates conservatively that there are now about 30,000 coaches working worldwide. Annual revenues are in the order of \$1.5bn. These numbers will confirm the worst fears of sceptics, who will ask: “Who on earth is paying out all this money for psycho-babbling pseudo-therapy?” Bad coaches – and they do exist – help to perpetuate the stereotype. They either bully or indulge their clients. They seem to have more personality flaws and “issues” than the coachee.

Good coaches can help busy people to do better at work. They ask clear, simple questions, and listen carefully to the answers. A decent coach can help you make specific improvements in the way you go about things. They will hold you to account, trying to make sure you do what you say you are going to do.

But when you put it like that, doesn’t it all sound rather like what a good manager should be trying to do anyway? This is why coaching has become so popular: it fills in the gap left by incompetent management. It is, in a way, the supreme example of outsourcing. Management has handed over the task of managing to somebody else, at the introductory rate of £3,950 plus VAT for the first 10 hours.

Only last week we had further confirmation of the essential mediocrity of so much day-to-day management. A survey of 3,000 UK employees for the business organisation Investors in People found that the bread and butter task of appraisals – a basic element of performance management – is being woefully mishandled.

Almost half those surveyed felt that their manager did not deal honestly with them during their appraisal. One-third saw the procedure as a waste of time. (Only one-third?) One-fifth said that their manager only seemed to start thinking about the appraisal once the meeting had started, while a similar proportion said that their boss rarely or never bothered to act on anything that had been discussed. Perhaps some psycho-babble therapy would be quite welcome after sitting through enough appraisals like this.

Do companies with a “coaching culture” handle performance management any better? There is not a great deal of evidence to suggest that this might be the case. If anything, famously well-managed businesses are usually characterised by their brisk and robust approach to these things. Which is not to say that coaching should be seen as “soft”. It is, at its best, all about the very businesslike idea of getting people to be better at what they do. But, as every good boss knows, there is a time when support should be offered and a time when you have to be a bit more “directive”.

Mind you, let me just think about this again for a minute: me in a room for 10 hours, talking about myself, to someone who has to listen and pretend to be interested, with “unlimited e-mail and telephone support”, all for just £395 an hour + VAT? How bad does that sound?

Where did I put that letter?

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