

Coaching teams and groups to integrate sustainability

Sustainability initiatives in leading organisations are increasingly focusing on transformational and systemic change, rather than incremental improvements. Coaching is well-suited for this shifting focus, as it accelerates leadership development, deeper consideration of values and motivation, and adoption of new behaviours and practices.

While coaching in the organisational context has often focused on key individuals like executives, contributing positively to ecological and social sustainability provides a bigger context and more urgent need for coaching. While one-on-one coaching has its place, there is great power in a wider collective exploration of challenges that starts to create new norms and cultures in the process. Sustainability shifts attention from a particular method or particular benefit for an individual, towards doing whatever is appropriate for making the greatest impact in the external world. This wider context expands the work of coaching beyond just supporting the happiness and success of individuals, and towards how they can work with others to be more effective in their contribution to a sustainable society.

In our research, we encountered many examples of coaching approaches to sustainability that went beyond the one-on-one form. This included groups formally and informally coaching each other around personal, organisational and systemic challenges, or about skills development in a particular area. Examples include: breakfast clubs, action-learning and collaborative inquiry groups, eco-teams, and cross-departmental task-forces, and carbon rationing action groups. We also learned about online platforms for 'many-to-many' forms of coaching emerging, especially for people wanting to focus on the same specific action e.g. reduce their carbon footprint.¹

In these group contexts, the coach as an individual may be less important than in the case of one-on-one executive coaching, or completely absent. But, the coaching role still exists; it is just distributed amongst the participants. In many forms of this type of coaching, any one of the people in the room is able to take the role of coach by inquiring, reframing or shifting the attention of the group to a deeper or higher level. This requires some awareness of the process on behalf of the participants, but in practice could be facilitated by providing simple guiding principles or ground-rules for the conversation.

Agreement on ground-rules or principles, and making commitments to other individuals can enhance the sense of support and engage the sense of mutuality or reciprocity amongst members. For example, the Pioneers of Change principles ('be yourself, never stop asking questions etc) that apply to an open process of expressing needs and offers at their monthly 'connect' meetings². This sense of mutuality becomes a powerful force in groups, as individuals make commitments to actions to each other, and know that all the others will be able to hold them to account in subsequent sessions.

All these group or many-to-many processes are relevant to integrating sustainability in organisations. They support new common, shared values and behaviours, while still retaining the transformational characteristics of one-on-one coaching. For example, they still focus on exploration of values, priorities, identity and personal challenges through dialogue. But as an additional benefit, in the group coaching process itself, they model the types of interpersonal processes and dynamics that are the heart of truly embedding sustainability in organisations.

¹ <http://carbonrationing.org/> <http://www.carbondiet.org/> <http://thenag.net/crowds> [2008, 19.08.08].

² <http://pioneersofchange.net/aboutus/philosophy> [2008, 19.08.08].