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Virgin Mobile had a sophisticated approach to Learning and Development (L&D). They’d invested in psychometric and behavioural tools and believed they had a coaching culture. Indeed, coaching was seen as one of their biggest levers to drive performance. But first they had to understand what true coaching was.

Coaching is hugely misunderstood. Organisations often think they have a proactive coaching culture, yet all they do is conduct surveys and give feedback to poorly performing staff. “What Virgin Mobile actually had was an open feedback culture,” says Liz Rochester, Partner at Blue Sky. “The coaching that did take place focused on practical skills or induction. Little was focused on changing people’s behaviour, performance and management style. True coaching is about development -

moving people on against an agreed set of criteria and raising performance.”

Emotional intelligence

Virgin Mobile’s coaching was measured by the number of sessions delivered rather than their effectiveness. It was also solely focused on front line staff. Senior managers received no coaching whatsoever. If they weren’t being coached themselves how could they become role models?

Liz Rochester says, “Not all managers can be best-in-class coaches. Some coach because it’s part of the job – a task, not because they appreciate the value it brings, and some aren’t equipped from an emotional intelligence perspective to deal with the behavioural changes needed to see a steep change in an individual’s performance.”

The company did have some talented and intuitive coaches. They just hadn't been recognised, or had their skills nurtured and developed.

Light bulb moments

The senior team, which included the Customer Service Director and his direct reports, were the first to go through the coaching programme and have their coaching capabilities assessed. One-to-one sessions explored the senior team's perceptions of themselves, then those self-perceptions were validated by each manager's direct line reports. Says Liz, *"After validating the managers' often high perceptions of their coaching capabilities with coaching questionnaires, focus groups and our own observations, we had some straight-talking discussions. These formed the basis of the action-oriented coaching sessions that followed and resulted in some real 'light bulb' moments. For the first time, senior managers heard how they were perceived. This enabled us to identify where their gaps were, and focus on what needed to change."*

Practical solutions

Says Mark Adams, Service Improvement Manager, Virgin Mobile UK, *"Liz got a real insight into me and my team. What was so valuable is she knew how to use those threads of information and translate them into practical solutions."*

One of Mark's development goals was to make his team more self-sufficient. He'd made too many allowances, repeatedly gave them second chances and often did the work himself. Liz coached him in the rapid return technique: be clear about what's wrong with someone's work, why it's wrong, and get them to do it again. If they do it wrong a second time, reinforce why it isn't satisfactory and get them to do it again. *"What Mark had been doing was sending out a message that if a piece of work was wrong his team didn't have*

to worry because he'd put it right," says Liz.

Mark saw behaviour within his team change within two weeks. *"Instead of coming to me with problems, they started to take ownership and bring me options and solutions."* Mark's team now takes more responsibility and has a greater pride in their work. *"It's good news for me as a recruiting manager because I know I'm going to keep those staff for longer."*

"I've developed some really practical tools and techniques and my management skills have improved. This experience has reinforced my belief that developing individuals through behavioural coaching is absolutely the best way."

Individualised results

Virgin Mobile's coaching programme delivered individualised, targeted and focused results that have made a significant impact on senior managers' relationships with their direct line reports. This has had a knock on effect on performance levels and staff satisfaction. Says Liz, *"Because coaching is so individualised*

there's not that sense of a one size fits all approach you often get with generic management development training. It's also more cost effective and less time consuming because we fit the coaching around the managers and they only need spend short amounts of time away from their team."

Although the programme was designed to create a team of best-in-class coaches and role models, managers wanted to be coached to help their own development. They valued talking to someone they perceived to be an objective and neutral peer. It gave them strategic thinking time and a safe place to explore their own issues without feeling vulnerable.

Liz adds, *"They want to be coached to be more effective not only in terms of coaching and managing their team but how they come across in meetings, their presentation style, their entire business persona."*

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