

# Coaches can play a powerful role to improve performance when teams are in transition, reports Carly Chynoweth

Coaching has a bit of a touchy-feely reputation in some business circles. Coaches' emphasis on getting people to solve their own problems and frequent use of words such as empowerment and reflection can sound more like lightweight therapy than a process that belongs in the boardroom.

However, over the past few years there has been a change. Coaches are being hired less frequently by HR departments and more often by operational managers who want more than warm fuzzy feelings for their money.

Chris Chaplin, head of grocery logistics at Premier Foods, brought in business coaches three years ago to help teams formed after the merger with RHM to develop joint working practices as fast as possible. From the outset he was determined to make sure the service paid its way.

"It was done as an investment in performance improvement," he said. "We wanted to see what the benefits of the investment were and how to measure them. That's not always easy, because you might be talking about softer benefits, such as how much it improves team working, but it has to be linked to the bottom line or it becomes a very woolly exercise. So we measured it against, for example, the financial contribution the team made."

Even a woolly effort would be an improvement for some organisations. Recent research from Hays, a recruitment consultancy, suggests that 15% of them don't make any attempt to measure coaching's effect.

Chaplin said poor measurement is one of the main reasons why people have misconceptions about business coaching. The coaches from Tinder-Box who came into Premier were anything

experts in logistics, so they were never going to drive right to a logistics solution [as a management consultant might] but were able to provide clarity on the real problem . . . and then help us to develop business strategies based on those they had used before and seen to work."

Too often, business coaching offers nothing more than general reassurance or expensive executive hand-holding, said Jason Miller, a director of Finder-Box.

"It was once used for motivation, or as a sort of reward, but it's all about performance," he said. "A coach has a stopwatch. Sometimes they tell you what to do." He believes that those instructions should primarily serve corporate objectives, not individual employees. "We work for the business, which is why it's important that business leaders hold the purse strings," he said.

Corporate and individual needs can often coincide. Kevin Chapman, Price Waterhouse Coopers' head of HR for the Lehman Brothers administration, used business coaching to make sure they did.

He had to ensure the invest-

## Now the coaches get a grilling

"ONE of the big issues with coaching is that the point of entry is so low," said Helen Pitcher, who chairs Iddas, an executive consultancy. "Someone with no experience or who has been on a one-day course, can claim to be a coach. They can put together a website and they are ready to go."

The profession knows that the proliferation of qualifications — and lack of any required standards — is a problem, which is one of the reasons that a number of professional associations, industry bodies and business schools now accredit various

ment bank kept the people it needed to make the administration work after the collapse. "A lot of senior leaders were asking themselves what [staying] would look like on their CV, and whether they were capable of leading a team in administration, which

was something they had never had to do before," he said.

"We needed to keep these people because of their knowledge and experience . . . [and] because we needed to run the business efficiently."

Coaching had a number of bene-

courses and offer membership. Even so, there is no single standard, and businesses are increasingly setting their own.

"More big companies now put coaches through their own assessment process, even though they have been through their professional body," said Pitcher. "For example, at one bank we had to spend four hours filling in an application form, then go along and do a simulated coaching exercise . . . then we had a panel interview, where we were grilled pretty thoroughly."

She understands why businesses do this

fits. It helped the administrators find out what they had to do to keep the people they needed (provide more clarity about the future of the administration and what it meant for job security). And alongside that, individuals were given the support they needed to meet

the reshaped organisation's objectives.

"Business coaching is powerful when you have people going through a transition," Chapman said. "In our case, it helped a lot of people who had to step into new roles, run new teams and deliver new objectives, all under tremendous pressure."

Individuals' conversations with coaches can be difficult, said Chaplin, who also underwent coaching at Premier Foods. "They might look at the person's motivation and why they are doing what they're doing. That helps the business to ensure that we have round pegs in round holes."

Two of his people chose to move on after talking with the coach, though they are working elsewhere in the business. This wasn't a specific goal of the coaching — they weren't trying to get rid of anyone — but clearly it is in the interests of the business and the individual for everyone to

## Chris Chaplin at Premier Foods drafted in coaches to improve working practices after his company merged with RHM

