WORKPLACE COACH AND ADULT LEARNING:  
A SYNERGISTIC RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

In terms of expanding organizational capability, there is an increased expectation and demand for employee development. For an employee to become more self-directed there is an increased need for interpersonal skills. In this context, there is a growing recognition that learning based practices such as workplace coaching can satisfy this need for skill development. Despite this, in the coaching literature there is no explicit discussion of learning practice from an adult learning perspective. In this article we review the potential synergy that exists between adult learning and workplace coaching literatures from an organizational perspective.

Key Words: workplace coaching; adult learning; workplace learning

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, it has been argued that organizational competitiveness is a function of the various kinds of capital available to an organization including: human, financial, physical and social capital (Joseph, Kessels and Poell 2004). Recently there has been a shift in emphasis on to the importance of human capital as a determinant of organizational competitiveness, and at the same time a de-emphasis of traditional forms of capital such as financial and physical capital. Whilst there could be many reasons for this change, a very important reason is the value of knowledge and innovation to an organization in a dynamic operating environment, and the role of employees in developing these resources (Illeris 2003).

The emphasis of human capital has many implications for the way organizations operate. For instance, there has been a trend toward the empowerment of employees, and on the promotion of teamwork (Hotek 2002), which has necessitated a new approach to work roles and relationships. This new approach can be
seen at the manager and subordinate level. At the sub-ordinate level, a trend toward empowerment and team work necessitates greater autonomy: being able to self-direct by assuming greater responsibility and autonomy for their motivation, thinking and behaviour; and, to be able to make choices and judgments for themselves (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). Conversely, at the management level, a trend toward empowerment and team work necessitates less control: actively relinquishing some of their authority and control to subordinates; fulfill a new role as coach, mentor and employee developer (Sussman and Finnegan 1998; Humphrey and Stokes 2000; Hotek 2002); become strategic learning managers (Larsen 1997) and learning champions (Ellinger and Keller 2003; Dirks, Gilley and Maycunich 2004). So, for both the manager and their sub-ordinate, the emphasis of human capital as a means of competitive advantage necessitates a new approach to work roles. In reality, since a manager is usually a sub-ordinate as well as a manager, the implication is double edged - they must be able to transition between the two roles.

Accompanying these changes is an increased expectation and demand for employee skills. Specifically, for an employee to become more autonomous, there is an increased need for interpersonal and communication skills; as well as self-regulatory skills such as cognitive, emotional and behavioural. On this basis, it is reported that there is an increase in the human resource development (HRD) effort within organizations to help employees develop appropriate capabilities (Judge and Cowell 1997; Joo 2005).

So, the reported link between human capital and organizational competitive advantage has implications for the way organizations operate. From a human resource perspective, this is evidenced in a trend toward the empowerment of employees and team work, which has affected the nature of work roles and relationships at the level of both managers and their subordinates. This change necessitates greater autonomy for subordinates, and less control for managers. The associated demand for skills has prompted a concerted HRD effort by many organizations to meet these demands.
The aim of the paper is to integrate workplace coaching with adult learning. The paper demonstrates how workplace coaching can be applied to develop employee capability and enhance organizational performance. The paper is conceptual, we are interested in exploring the relationship between workplace coaching and adult learning.

**Coaching**

As a support to the HRD effort, workplace coaching (WC) has gained popularity with some organizations. It is reported by some researchers that it has become an integral part of learning and development strategies of many organizations (Joo 2005) and even a replacement for all executive training (Judge et al. 1997). It has been suggested that workplace coaching has been embraced because of its efficacy in addressing gaps in job-related capabilities, and performance (Hodgetts 2002). However, there is no concrete evidence as to the efficacy of workplace coaching in this regard or the extent to which organizations have embraced it. Nevertheless, from the ‘supply side’ there is compelling evidence that coaching has become popular amongst coaches themselves. For instance, according to the International Coaching Federation which claims to be the largest global workplace coaching association, it has grown to 10,000 registered members in eighty countries since 1995 (International Coaching Federation, 2006). In Australia there are numerous professional organizations (public and private) that provide executive coaching and coaching training/certification including the Workplace Training and Advisory Authority and the Institute of Executive Coaching.

Given that workplace coaching is reportedly being utilized by organizations as a learning and development strategy, it would be reasonable to expect that the workplace coaching literature would be adequately informed by learning related disciplines such as AL and HRD. However, this is not the case – the body of knowledge is almost completely devoid of such content. Whilst learning is an acknowledged goal of coaching, there are few elaborations or investigations. This is a major concern given that workplace coaching is unambiguously recognized as a form of training and development (Kurecka,
Austin, Johnson and Mendoza 1982; Olivero, Bane and Kopelman 1997; Arnaud 2003; Clegg, Rhodes, Kornberger and Stilin 2005; Hackman and Wageman 2005). Given the close association of workplace coaching with adult development, the AL and HRD literatures could be seen exist as part of a synergistic relationship with workplace coaching literature. Therefore, the thesis of this paper is that AL and HRD literature has an important role to play in the development of workplace coaching literature, and needs to be integrated in some depth into the body of coaching literature knowledge.

The Adult Learning Debate

Although not the focus of this paper, it is pertinent to recognize the considerable debate concerning the scope and distinctiveness of the HRD and AL literatures as a means of adequately identifying these bodies of literature. This paper does not seek to extend this debate; however for the sake of clarity in this matter, the debate is explored briefly, and some relevant conclusions are made.

Some scholars argue that the disciplines of AL and HRD are one in the same; and yet others argue that each is unique. The proposition that each body of literature is distinct could be supported by a number of factors. For instance, the AL literature tends to straddle several contexts, including: organizational, social (non-work), and political contexts (Yang 2004); whereas, HRD focuses more on the organizational context (Harrison 1997; Garavan, McGuire and O'Donnell 2004). Whilst both AL and HRD are concerned with how adults learn, the pre-dominance of the organizational context to HRD (Yang 2004) specifies that human development is directly referenced to the strategic objectives of the organization. Consequently, in HRD, human development is not only measured in terms of behavioural change, but organizational measures such as performance are also applied (Yang 2004). This is not to say that these same frames of reference are not utilized in AL; rather, that the organizational context is more of a specialization of HRD.

Another reason that AL and HRD could be viewed as distinct concerns the maturity of the disciplines. The HRD literature has advanced over the last 30 years (Dirkx et al. 2004), but it is not as advanced to the
same degree as the Adult Learning literature and is not yet considered a mature standalone discipline. For example, it is argued that HRD is characterized by a lack of consensus as to its theoretical underpinnings (McGuire and Cseh 2006); a lack of original HRD theory; and also the failure of HRD to develop a unifying theoretical model of HRD (Medina Evarts 1998). In contrast to this, Adult Learning is arguably a more mature discipline, having evolved earlier from psychologically oriented scholars such as Knowles (1950), Revans (1945) and Lewin (1935). Further, AL is widely considered to be a recognized foundation of HRD theory (Swanson and Holton 2001; McGuire et al. 2006) described as an entirely separate body of knowledge, the content of which has “consumed” by the HRD discipline (Swanson et al. 2001; McGuire et al. 2006). For reasons of context and maturity, the two areas could be seen as distinct.

Yet despite the evidence that the disciplines are distinct, there are many similarities between the two literatures. This is evidenced in the content of the two disciplines. For instance, AL incorporates developmental themes such as: self-direction, learning environment, learning design, and critical reflection (**). Similarly, HRD also strongly emphasizes learning (Swanson et al. 2001; McGuire et al. 2006) incorporating: workplace learning, training and development, employee development, organizational development, performance development, career development, instructional design, theories of individual learning, consulting, formal and informal learning. Further, HRD scholars emphasize five meta-theories of learning: behaviourism, cognitivism, humanism, social learning, and constructivism (Swanson et al. 2001). Each of these theories emphasizes a different aspect of learning, for example, behaviourism and cognitivism emphasize re-inforcement consequences; humanism emphasizes self-direction; and social learning emphasizes the influence of the social context (environment).

So, whilst there is considerable debate concerning the scope and distinctiveness of the HRD and AL literatures; there is enough evidence to demonstrate that the disciplines are closely related. There is a case to be made that both share adult development as a common theme; and despite the broader context of AL over HRD, the organizational context is a uniting factor. Further, despite the assertion that HRD is not a
standalone discipline, it is also likely that AL has significantly informed HRD literature. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to rely on this proposition – that the two disciplines are closely related, and so for reasons of convenience, in this paper no clear distinction is made between the two bodies of knowledge. They are referred to as the Adult Development Literatures (ADL).

**DISCUSSION**

**The Synergy of ADL and WC**

Earlier, it was established that a potential synergy could exist between WC and the ADL learning literatures based on their links with adult development and learning. The purpose of the remainder of the paper is to delineate this synergy. This is achieved by first reviewing the origins of WC and ADL to establish the shared foundations between the two areas; and then identifying the key areas in which ADL can inform WC in terms of organizational concepts. There are a number of themes which are explored: social capital, learning organization, and strategy. On this basis, a roadmap is then created, which could be used as a guide by researchers for the development of the WC body of knowledge from an ADL perspective.

**Origins**

ADL can offer WC a broad perspective of learning based on social, organizational and political perspectives (Yang 2004) all of which may be useful in an organizational context. This broad perspective is mainly attributed to its multi-disciplinary origins. Though there is no clear consensus as to the exact origins of ADL (McGuire et al. 2006), it is known that it has roots in both psychology and adult education literature (Yang 2004); draws from other disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, political sciences, and history (Jarvis 1991); and in particular has strong affiliations with applied disciplines such as industrial and organizational psychology (Swanson et al. 2001). Also, ADL is also said to include adult education (Swanson et al. 2001; McGuire et al. 2006); economic and systems theory (Wimbiscus 1995; McGuire et
organizational development, human capital theory, career development, individual development, organizational behaviour, organizational theory, and communication.

Although not delineated, some of these same origins are acknowledged by WC authors as likely foundations of WC (Whitmore 1994; Witherspoon and White 1996; Laske 1999; Garman 2000; Grant 2001; Dean and Meyer 2002; Grant and Palmer 2002; Wasylyshyn 2003; Kilburg 2004; Sherman and Freas 2004; Hackman et al. 2005; Joo 2005). It is argued that as a multi-dimensional construct, workplace coaching should be examined from the perspective of a multitude of disciplines (Zimmerman and Protinsky 1993; Kilburg 1996; Cho and McLean 2002) for the sake of the development of a robust model of practice. Given the extent of shared origins between ADL and WC, ADL is well positioned to inform WC literature. Therefore, on the basis of their shared origins, a potential synergy could be seen to exist between ADL and WC.

Social Capital

ADL can inform WC with regard to the building of social capital. Social capital refers to the trust and cooperation that results from social bonds, bridges, linkages between people in a community such as the workplace (Hunt and Weintraub 2004). In an organizational context, social capital acts a mechanism for the exchange of existing knowledge, innovation, and continual improvement (McLean, Yang, Kuo, Tolbert and Larkin 2005); and is correlated with the speed and efficiency of the organization in creating and transferring knowledge (Kogut and Zander 1996). An organization can develop social capital in a number of ways: bringing people together from diverse backgrounds; building communities of practice; facilitating access to and sustaining social networks; and communicating the vision of social capital to organizational employees (Joseph, Kessels and Poell 2004).

Though there is no reference to social capital in coaching literature, WC’s may need to utilize the existing structures of social capital within an organization to influence the learning of employees, and build further
social capital. One prominent example of this in WC is the use of 360 feed-back in which a coach elicits feedback about a coachee from relevant peers, subordinates and supervisors. In this role, the coach effectively builds social capital in a number of ways: by assisting in the development of ongoing communication channels between recipients and raters (Tobias 1996; Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas and Kucine 2003); creating a forum which allows everyone to get their feelings off their chest in order to create a sense of shared vulnerability (Tobias 1996); dealing with discrepancies between self reports and rater-feedback (Luthans and Peterson 2003). Because of the use of 360 degree feedback in coaching, it is proposed that there could potentially be a strong synergy between ADL and WC in terms of social capital. Specifically, there could be investigation into the relationship between WC and the creation and transfer of knowledge; the building of trust and co-operation between employees; innovation, and continual improvement.

Learning Organization

The ADL literature can inform WC with regard to the learning organization (LO). An LO is one which creates an integrated culture of learning within the organization (Hammond and Willie, 1991) as opposed to an ad-hoc use of learning in one off training events; and is viewed as an ongoing and iterative process (Garavan, Heraty and Barnicle 1999). For an individual employee, this means: learning how to learn (Mumford 1997); facilitating learning in the workplace (Nadler and Tushman 1980); and individual ownership and participation in learning (Pettigrew, Jones and Reason 1988; Senge 1993). At an organizational level, it means the consideration of learning as an organizational strategy (Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell 1994) to facilitate major organizational change initiatives through learning (Banham, Frazer and Heath 1987); adopting a learning culture to develop the capacity to learn, and innovate as one unit (Senge 1993); to acquire new knowledge and utilize it effectively (Stewart, Marhine and Hall 1999). Organizations that want to change and achieve their objectives must adopt AL as part of its strategy (Garavan et al. 1999). Non-learning organizations are at a great disadvantage as they are unable to develop
new knowledge or make use of it because the culture of the organization inhibits the change and innovation that flows from it (Garavan et al. 1999).

As with the ADL literature, there is also recognition of the importance of the learning organization to WC. For instance, it has been acknowledged that WC help organizations become learning organizations (Tobias 1996). There are also three studies in the literature which contextualize workplace coaching within the LO framework. For instance, in McLean et al (2005), a scale for the measurement of workplace coaching was developed, and the LO was acknowledged as an antecedent to WC. Also, in an exploratory study of workplace coaching, Ellinger and Bolstrom (1999) examined the behaviours exhibited by managers in an LO context. Additionally, Bowerman and Collins (1999) described the establishment of coaching networks in some Canadian companies as a way of building personal innovation and creativity. However, despite the acknowledgement of the importance of the learning organization to coaching, it could not be said that the notion of learning organization has received any direct attention in coaching literature. For instance, there is no delineation of the definitions, concepts, characteristics of LO, nor any substantive links made between WC and LO. Rather, the studies that have been conducted have essentially only referenced LO peripherally. Given this, in the context of LO there is potential for synergy as ADL informs WC in a number of ways: with regard to WC as an ongoing and iterative process rather than an ad-hoc approach to learning; WC and learning how to learn; coaches as facilitators; the effect of coaching on employee ownership of learning; the efficacy of WC in assisting organizations become LO – that is, implementing change strategy. Other areas may include: adopting a learning culture; WC and innovation; knowledge and skill acquisition; the comparison between WC in non-LOs versus LO.

**Strategy**

ADL can inform WC in terms of organizational strategy. ADL identifies the importance of learning as a strategy for competitive advantage. The most important source of competitive advantage that an organization has is its intellectual capital, defined as the knowledge embedded in its people (Kotkin and
Devol 2001; Cho et al. 2002). This is evidenced by the fact that a common characteristic of organizations that dominate their markets is the prioritization of ADL activity (Sonnenfeld, Peiperi and Koller 1988). If AL is to help the organization develop and maintain a competitive advantage, it must be considered as part of the strategic plan (De Freine 1985) and organizations must also continuously invest in AL initiatives (Pettigrew et al. 1988). ADL is focused on supporting the achievement of organizational objectives (Garavan et al. 2004), and for this reason is specifically designed to enhance the utilization of human resources (Harrison 1997). Yet, a problem is that some organizations do not integrate AL into their organizational strategy. This phenomenon reflects a classical or systems thinking view of AL – that it is a reactive rather than proactive activity (Jones 1981) and not a core strategy of the organization (Garavan, Costine and Heraty 1995). This approach can be explained by the significant challenges faced by AL professionals in adequately linking AL initiatives with strategy (Ruona, Leimbach, Holton and Bates 2002).

Strategy is an under represented concept in WC literature. Nevertheless, there are a number of authors in the WC literature that refer to it in terms of organizational learning strategy (Dean et al. 2002; Ellinger et al. 2003; Joo 2005). As an important part of learning strategy, it is argued that for coaching to be effective the WC and organizational systems must be aligned; for example the culture, reward systems, and expectations (Ellinger et al. 2003). Moreover, there must be a balance between the needs of the organization in terms of strategy and individuals; that is, a balance between personal, interpersonal, and organizational goals and objectives. For example, workplace coaching must be individually tailored to the needs of the individual; and at the same time deliver results that reflect the strategy, vision, and values of the organization (Dean et al. 2002). However, in the literature, there has been no link made between WC and strategic concepts such as competitive advantage, intellectual capital, or knowledge creation. For instance, the terms ‘knowledge creation’ and ‘intellectual capital’ cannot be found in the literature. The absence of these links and terms highlights the extent of the knowledge deficit, and the need for ADL to inform WC in this area. Given the supposed strategic importance of WC, ADL could have a significant
role in informing WC literature in regard to intellectual capital, and knowledge creation as a source of competitive advantage; and the importance of utilizing coaching as a pro-active strategy.

CONCLUSION

The Workplace Coaching Roadmap

This discussion has served to highlight the potential synergies that exist between ADL and WC in terms of broader organizational concepts. Because of the capacity of ADL to inform WC, there are a number of proposed synergies that may exist in the areas of social capital, learning organization, and strategy. With regard to social capital, ADL can inform WC with respect to the creation and transfer of knowledge; the building of trust and co-operation between employees; innovation, and continual improvement. Additionally, in its capacity to potentially build social capital and its importance as a coaching tool, special consideration should be given to the concept of feedback or 360 degree feedback. With regard to the LO, ADL can inform WC with respect to learning as an ongoing and iterative process, rather than an ad-hoc approach to learning; learning how to learn, and self-regulation; the role of the facilitator in learning; the effect of facilitation on self-direction; its efficacy in assisting organizations become LO and implement change strategy. Additional areas may include: the development of a learning culture; learning and innovation; knowledge and skill acquisition; the comparison between learning in non-LOs versus LO. Finally, with regard to organizational strategy, ADL can inform WC with respect to intellectual capital; knowledge creation as a source of competitive advantage; and the importance of learning as a pro-active strategy.
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