

Coaching as the Swiss Army knife of sustainable development?

Sustainability initiatives in leading organisations are increasingly focusing on transformational and systemic change. This includes a range of initiatives including leadership development, ethics and diversity, and carbon and waste management. In each of these areas there is a different focus and content, but there are commonalities in the process of learning, change, and transformation.

This means coaching can be a powerful tool in most cases. Coaching is powerful because it supports both 'inner' (personal development, organisational values and culture development) and 'outer' (organisational, business, market, sustainable) development. Coaching can help integrate both new values and culture, and new behaviours and systems.

In our research, we defined coaching broadly and within this, identified a set of more than a dozen characteristics that distinguish different forms of coaching. These include whether the focus of the coaching is a specific purpose, or open; whether the coaching is done by an internal or external coach; if it is formal or informal; and if it is one-on-one or done in a group.

Below are five descriptions of different forms of coaching that combine different characteristics, and can be appropriate for different aspects of integrating sustainability in organisations.

1. Coaching for leadership development and personal transformation. This form of coaching integrates the personal and professional, often supporting a major change in performance, values and even identity. This is most common with senior executives, emerging leaders and sustainability champions, and includes forms such as one-on-one executive coaching by external coaches;
2. Groups formally and informally coaching each other around personal, organisational and systemic challenges, or about skills development in a particular area e.g. breakfast clubs, action-learning groups, or carbon clubs;
3. Coaching teams, communities or the organisation itself, through individuals but not focused on the individuals. In this case, individual's development and enhanced performance is contextualised as a means to higher-performing or transformed teams or organisations. Examples include team coaching, whole-of-business coaching, or hosting communities of practice;
4. Amateurs coaching each other one-on-one using toolkits. This may focus on leadership development, but is more commonly about skills and knowledge in a particular area. This method costs less, is able to be distributed more widely. Examples include "we-coach", and social entrepreneurs and sustainability practitioners coaching each other;
5. Integrating sustainability into performance management. This means adding social and ecological goals to the development plans for individuals.

The many options for integrating coaching to improve the impact of a sustainability initiative is great for but may make choosing the right one difficult. From our research, we identified two key ways to choose the right form of coaching:

- ▶ Firstly, different forms of coaching are appropriate for different organisations and individuals at different stages of development. So, identify what stage your organisation is at – is it focused on compliance with basic regulations, or is it explicitly trying to change the world? (these stages are described in the report).
- ▶ Secondly, what is the context and purpose of the initiative and the coaching? A critical question in this context is: *"Are the most valued outcomes of the coaching process at the individual, team, organisational, societal or global level?"*

There is a large range of initiatives under the banner of sustainability. There are commonalities in the process associated with most of these initiatives around learning, change, and transformation. Coaching can be a very powerful tool for the two linked dimensions of sustainability: 'inner' (personal development, organisational values and culture development) and 'outer' (organisational, business, market, sustainable) development. Based on this work, organisations are now in a better position to choose the right tool for the job.