

Coach the best for most impact

Just a little better at the top end of performance can mean so much

Andrew Gibbons

This blog is inspired by watching more than once a remarkable TED Talk by Atul Gawande.

He is a Surgeon, and by all accounts an extremely capable one. His excellent presentation explains how he felt his performance had levelled, that as with so many other professionals in other contexts, he recognised he was no longer getting better at that for which he was trained, and had worked hard to attain a standard of performance that was entirely acceptable.

His answer to this was to find a coach. This person understood his work, and was credible as a constructive critic who watched him intently at work, giving feedback on observations he could not make of himself.

He goes on to explain the tangible improved performance outcomes, which in his case means saving lives.

Time to redirect coaching?

This got me thinking, and specifically of the pros and cons of focusing scarce coaching resource and investment on the *most* competent, who in my experience are those least likely to be given priority, with greater attention typically given to for instance aspiring high performers.

My thoughts so far lead me to a view that even a small sustained improvement in the very best performers will usually have greater worth than more significant movements lower down the performance spectrum.

In other words, making the very best better will bring a greater value of outcomes than the conventional focus on others more obvious, numerous and accessible.

Maybe there is a linear logic suggesting that value from coaching is a function of the existing performance level of those with whom we work. Thus, give me a new graduate and I can, given the right circumstances, seriously enhance that person's knowledge and capability. Trouble is they haven't been in the organisation long enough to become sufficiently established to make that movement in capability worth anything like as much as a far smaller positive movement in a highest performer.

Seeking to work with the truly most capable brings its own issues, and these challenges may mean it is an impossible aspiration.

The best know they are just that, and like it or not, too many people see coaching as a criticism – 'Are you saying I can't do my job?'. The joy of Atul Gawande's video is that he made it clear that he parked his ego, and positively engaged in a process he needn't have in order to gain exceptionally high value from even marginally improved performance.

Any repositioning of coaching towards best performers needs careful, sensitive management; the use of coaches that are credible to your best people, and that have the rare skills of technical contextual knowledge combined with the ability help high performers apply new learning.

Coaches acceptable and sufficiently challenging to highest performers are high value, and come at a cost that organisations that have not established a genuine culture of measured return over cost will find hard to justify.

One way to help this is for the most, and I do mean *most* senior person to model the way and show that no-one is too senior or too good at what they do that s/he could not be made better still by a successful coaching intervention.

The more I write, the more convinced I become of targeting the best, not to the exclusion of others, simply as a priority to get optimal value from the effort and cost. It would of course be naïve to expect total buy in from such people. The prize that results from working with any number committed to seeking small steps forward from a high point is worth a lot of time and trouble in recruiting willing learners of this type.

This blog started with a Surgeon's story, I see coaching as a generic catalyst relevant to any best-performing professional that has a desire to seek that marginal, yet precious increase in an already high level of attainment.

I am interested in the views of my fellow coaches. Who do you feel should be prioritised in order to maximise the tangible return on coaching investment?

andrew@andrewgibbons.co.uk

07904 201 474