

Coaching a handy but pricey tool

The bespoke approach comes at a cost, which could exclude the resource-starved public sector, writes **Margaret Harris**

WHEN we learn to drive a car, we know we need to spend a fair amount of time behind the wheel, getting a feel for how the car handles in different conditions as well as getting to grips with what not to do.

Acquiring management skills is the same, yet people are still expected to learn the intricacies of management from a book or by watching how others do it.

This is the reason coaching can be such an effective tool. Cynthia Schoeman, external lecturer at Wits Business School,

Line managers often don't have the time to take on the task of training

says coaching works because it is aimed at the individual's specific needs. If the boss wants to improve an individual's capability, then coaching is a good way to do it because it is tailored specifically to someone's individual requirements and is not a generic course, says Schoeman.

But the bespoke approach comes at a cost, which means the resource-starved public sector might not be in a position to enjoy its benefits.

Janine Everson, academic director at the Centre for Coaching at UCT's Graduate School of Business (GSB), says coaching is taking place in the public sector and a number of public servants have attended the centre's coach training courses.

Independent Counselling and Advisory Services Southern Africa, which is a service provider to the Western Cape department of health, has facilitated a partnership through



TIP OF THE ICEBERG: The benefits of coaching are slowly trickling down to doctors via health department officials, who have been trained as coaches

which the Centre for Coaching is providing coaching to the department. The partnership aims to build leadership and managerial capacity in the health-care sector. At present, eight coaches who have qualified at the centre are coaching 26 doctors in the Department of Health.

But Everson says this still represents the tip of the iceberg. The cost of coaching might be

part of the problem, though she says the work the centre is doing with the Department of Health is being done at a fraction of the cost that a private-sector firm would be charged. This is because the coaches involved see the need for the work and are willing to do it for less.

But widespread coaching in the public sector faces other obstacles. "It takes time; you don't just write a cheque. If you

need 20 people to run an organisation and have only 15, you are already pressurised," says Schoeman.

Internal coaching is usually done by a line manager, but Schoeman says in the under-resourced public sector most managers don't have the time to take on the added responsibilities of coaching.

Simon Davies, principal at Partners in Performance Inter-

national SA, says the high staff turnover in organisations has made coaching more of an imperative than it was before.

When people were in their jobs for about five years, there was time for juniors to learn about management by paying attention to their bosses.

With this time being reduced to about two years, sometimes the manager himself has not had time to understand his po-

sition before moving on — and is therefore not a suitable coach for his second-in-command. If this continues to happen for many years, the organisation can find itself in a bad way, says Davies.

Coaching is especially important when someone moves from being one of the troops to becoming one of the managers, says Davies. "There is much coaching aimed at executive level, but the big cultural jump from worker to front-line manager is often ignored."

This means people are often set up to fail. They might have proved themselves to be good workers and are rewarded by being promoted to management. But the two jobs require vastly different skills.

According to Davies, whatever the aims, a coaching model must incorporate:

- Objective and appropriate measures based on a particular position. It is impossible to succeed in an organisation that is "ruled by the smile of the king". Nobody knows whether they are doing well, though some people seem to be liked by the boss, so it is assumed they are doing the right thing; and

- Dialogue, insofar as the assessment from each coaching session must be fed back to the person being mentored. Coaching is dialogue based on facts. The process must be a supportive one.

Once a framework is in place the question of who will do the coaching must be addressed. This depends very much on what needs to be taught, says Schoeman. She says functional coaching is ideally done by one's line manager because it involves a certain type of work.

However, coaching around the culture of the organisation, doesn't need to be done by your line manager. An experienced manager from elsewhere in the organisation can provide the necessary socialisation.

For example, they can tell you that if you come dressed up on casual Fridays, you will alienate your staff.

But it is crucial, says Schoeman, that internal coaching is conducted with clear goals in mind — and not relegated to "a throwaway comment in the corridor".