CENTER FOR CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

IMPACT STUDY

GROWING FUTURE LEADERS THROUGH AN INNOVATIVE COACHING PROCESS
The Challenge

Sonoco, a global provider of packaging solutions, has long attributed its success to the people who have worked for the company over its 106-year history and helped turn it into a $3.2 billion business with more than 300 operations in 35 countries. A symbol of Sonoco’s people-oriented tradition of respect and appreciation is a bronze statue titled “People Build Businesses” that stands at the entrance to its corporate headquarters in Hartsville, South Carolina, USA.

With a strong belief that long-term investment in people is important to sustain the company’s historical success, Sonoco’s challenge was how best to develop future leaders from within.

The Solution

Sonoco and the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL)® worked together to create multiple leadership development initiatives in 2000 that targeted high-potential managers across its business units and corporate staff groups. One of these initiatives was the Coaching for Development (CFD) programme. To assess the impact of this innovative and ambitious programme, we followed up with a formal evaluation.

Sonoco’s primary objective for CFD was to improve the leadership skills of mid-level and senior managers. A secondary goal was to develop and improve the coaching skills of HR managers. In addition, Sonoco wanted to place more emphasis on coaching and developing, one of its core competencies.

Sonoco chose CCL as its partner for several reasons, notably the Center’s flexibility in customising a programme to meet Sonoco’s needs internationally. Sonoco had sent executives through open-enrolment programmes at CCL in the past and viewed the Center as experts and leaders in the field.

A WORKING PARTNERSHIP

From the beginning, the design and evaluation of the initiative were made easier because the partners held the same assumptions about how leaders are developed. Sonoco felt that HR could take a more proactive role to improve the leadership skills of managers, and that ultimately this would have a positive impact on business since effective leaders result in effective operations. The team at Sonoco recognised that new capabilities take time to develop and that many cohorts of HR managers would need to learn and practice fundamental concepts related to coaching in order to make a difference. They were willing to devote both time and resources to achieve their outcomes.

The Sonoco team initially included HR managers who were closely tied into the business units. This group functioned as a steering committee and actively worked with CCL to design the initiative and develop coaching scenarios that were later embedded in the curriculum. Open-ended, but focused, conversations between CCL faculty member Sharon Ting and the Sonoco team resulted in a careful interweaving of classroom and coaching sessions, individual consultations between participants and CCL facilitators, and Booster Day programmes for ongoing learning and reinforcement.

The agenda they created called for:

- Three days of classroom work (didactic, dialogue, videotaping)
- Two days of coaching sessions
- Two follow-on coaching sessions
- Two days of classroom work six months later
- Ongoing Booster Day programmes once a year
- Quarterly conference calls with CCL coaches

SOME FINE-TUNING

The coaching programme has evolved over the years as additional cohorts have gone through it. HR managers from the industrial sector were the first to participate, followed by HR managers in the consumer sector. Shortly thereafter, a group of Sonoco executives participated in an abbreviated version of the programme. Most recently, two cohorts of HR managers outside the United States were trained as coaches.

To reinforce coaching as a core competency for HR, Sonoco implemented other changes. For example, the HR managers’ performance management plans now include coaching as a key business...
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Outcomes

After the first two programme runs, an evaluation of the coaching programme was undertaken involving nearly two dozen individuals who had completed their formal training. The objective was to assess the results of the programme and determine what improvements might be needed. The evaluation included a brief online survey, followed by a 30-minute telephone interview.

The surveys were administered to HR managers, managers they coached, and the bosses of the people who were coached. Twenty-one of the 22 HR participating managers, 14 managers they coached, and eight bosses of the coached managers participated in the survey. These data were then brought to life by comments offered during the phone interviews. A random sample of HR managers, at least one individual coached by them, and the individual's boss were invited to participate in the calls. Fifteen HR managers and eight people they coached participated.

Several significant outcomes were achieved. These outcomes show:

1. The top three coaching skills demonstrated by the coaches, as perceived by the coachees (See Fig. 1.)
2. The impact on managers coached in five competency areas, as reported by the coachees, their coaches and their bosses (See Fig. 2.)

An integration of these findings underscores that, from the point of view of the coach, the central topic of the coaching sessions was learning how to develop effective working relationships with others. From the perspective of the manager being coached, however, what was most appreciated about these sessions was the ability of the coach to establish a supportive relationship and assist the manager with goal-setting, developmental planning and identifying future challenges and opportunities. Overall, when bosses, coaches and coachees rated...
the changes observed in managers, “improved relationships with others” was the positive change most frequently mentioned by all three groups.

Evaluations help fine-tune innovative interventions. Not surprisingly, one insight was that programme impact could be enhanced through greater involvement of the bosses of managers being coached. A second insight was that clear statements — about the level of coaching competence HR managers were expected to achieve — would be helpful. The third insight related to the importance of communicating and refining the criteria used to select those who were coached. The absence of such information can confuse those being coached about whether there is a subtle message being sent to him or her by a boss. Finally, developmental progress is often reinforced when programme coaches meet at a follow-up meeting or learning event to discuss how they are applying what they learned and receive ideas and support from others.

Many success stories have been reported anecdotally, including that of a new female plant manager whose coach provided a support system while she got her feet on the ground and helped her focus on the impact she was making. (See “A CCL-Trained Coach Goes to Work.”)

Conclusions

CCL’s customised Coaching for Development programme has been in place for more than five years as part of Sonoco’s comprehensive leadership development process. The programme has been judged very successful in its foundational work of embedding a coaching culture in the organisation, with HR coaches practicing new skills and techniques to support the development of high-potential managers internationally.

Sonoco’s high-level of commitment to leadership development was recognised in 2005 when the company was named to the list of the Top 20 U.S. Companies for Leaders, a study sponsored by Hewitt Associates and The Human Resource Planning Society.

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