



Ulster University:

Introducing a Coaching Culture

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What is this about?

In 2015 Ulster University Staff Development won an Irish National Training Award for Excellence in Coaching, achieved in recognition of our innovative and organic approach to introducing coaching at Ulster University and the wide-ranging impact that this has had. Commenting on what made Ulster University stand out as winners, the chief executive officer of the Irish Institute for Training and Development, Sinead Heneghan, said that it was for: “their bespoke, integrated and organic introduction of a coaching culture across all stakeholders.”

The overall, and clearly ambitious, aim of our coaching development was to introduce coaching as a skillset which, by focusing on leaders’ day to day behaviours, would effect a wider positive change in organisational culture. Our aims were to develop leaders; improve communication; develop relationships; encourage shared problem solving; engage staff; and ultimately enhance individual and institutional performance. However, we knew that the typical approaches to introducing coaching would not work at Ulster.

Ulster University employs approximately 2,700 staff spread geographically across Northern Ireland over four campuses and has over 26,000 students. The university, in common with the higher education sector, has gone through significant and fast-paced change, with the introduction of student fees, growing competition, increasing regulation and accountability, changing student expectations, funding cuts etc. Institution-wide reorganisations have led to restructuring and redundancies that saw a 16% reduction in staff.

This was, and continues to be, an extremely challenging situation for staff and leaders. At the beginning of this, Ulster University had no real leadership development culture, or even general understanding of it, let alone coaching. Our experience at Ulster and our knowledge of our own culture led us to the conclusion that we had to take a different approach to introducing coaching into the Institution. So, taking a leaf out of Stephen Covey’s book¹ we focused on where we had influence to change and started small. Coaching would be our pebble, released carefully into the university pond to produce institution-wide ripples.

¹ Covey (1990)

What did we do and why?

As two professional development managers, we had over 20 years’ experience each in L&D. We knew that good practice would say that such institution-wide projects succeed when buy in is gained from senior management and a top down approach is taken. However, knowing our culture and our leaders, we knew a different approach was needed. Our experience at Ulster had taught us to seek out champions and influencers and to work with them. If we tell our academics (at all levels, leadership included) that they have to do something then we are inclined to be met with resistance. However, when our academics hear about something from a trusted colleague, or see positive results, it is then that we capture their interest. We therefore deliberately decided to adopt a more organic, grassroots approach – our “virus approach”.

We started small by identifying our possible potential coaching champions over the first few years of our programmes and encouraging them and their staff to attend coaching development programmes. We integrated one-to-one coaching into both our accredited and non-accredited leadership and management development programmes. And we used every possible opportunity to influence and educate staff at levels in the university about the benefits of coaching, while at the same time developing and honing our own coaching skills.

We have continued to refine and develop our coaching provision, all with our initial objective of changing the organisational culture in mind, and with this vision of seeding and growing organically an “Ulster coaching community”.

At Ulster, the virus approach works as our coaching champions encourage and influence others.

Here are some examples of how our virus approach is working:

- The students’ union manager attended a coaching development programme and now one-to-one coaching is an integral part of the development of the students’ union sabbatical officers.
- A head of school signed up for a coaching development programme because their secretary attended a one-day coaching course and they saw a change in their behaviour and the impact that it had.
- Library managers have now attended coaching development programmes and/or engaged in one-to-one coaching which has followed the involvement of one senior librarian.
- A dean is currently taking part in our coaching development programme based on the impact of team coaching within their faculty.

Current coaching programmes

1. OUR COACHING SERVICE

- Along with our head of department, we provide leadership one-to-one coaching for all new leaders, or leaders whose areas of responsibility are going through major change, and as an integral part of all of our leadership and management development programmes. Over 250 staff have engaged in this.
- Team coaching. In our second Leadership Foundation Small Development Project we reviewed models of team coaching and developed our skills in this area. Having found very little available, we developed our own model of team coaching and are currently working with a faculty executive team and a number of departmental teams.

2. OUR COACHING DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

104 members of staff have attended one of our two coaching development programmes:

- One-day Introduction to Coaching which is open to all staff, and provides an overview of coaching using the GROW model and an introduction to the key skills.
- A four-day Coaching for Change programme, spread over four months and supported by one-to-one coaching, which is open to staff in leadership roles and develops the key coaching skills needed to adopt a solution-focused coaching style of leadership.

3. COACH CLUB: OUR SUPERVISORY INFRASTRUCTURE

We believe this is a unique approach. Coach Club is about creating and maintaining a coaching community at Ulster, a place where staff can reflect, practice and develop their skills and that can act as a driver and catalyst for further cultural change. We currently have 62 active members.

It includes:

- An online learning resource and central hub.
- Peer coaching supervision.
- One-to-one coaching supervision.
- Coffee break coaching events.

In September 2014 we ran an inaugural mini coaching conference, a half-day event where we offered our current coaching community members the opportunity to bring a friend with them. This was a huge success, opening coaching to a wider audience, with every attendee in the evaluation asking for it to run on an annual basis.



What impact did it have?

EARLY LEARNING THAT INFORMED OUR COACHING JOURNEY

Since we were focusing so much energy and commitment on our coaching programmes and delivery, we carried out thorough evaluations of our first two programmes using pre- and post-course 360° feedback and interviews with both participants on the programmes and their teams. We have highlighted a selection of the feedback below. But what was most apparent to us was the deep and lasting impact of the behavioural changes. It would not be an exaggeration to say that we saw teams transformed.

Selection of Feedback 2008/09 Evaluation

Programme outcomes:	Comments from coaches/coachees
Communication had improved	"It's different now – she listens"
Managers were holding back and being less directive	"In the past he would have been more direct, do this, but now he makes me think about it"
Empowering staff	"It gave him the confidence to deal with it himself"
More feedback	"She is brilliant at celebrating what we do"
Better relationships	"She used to be more hard-line, now she talks things through and creates a positive impact"
Improved performance	"The team are more proactive – willing to volunteer for jobs" "We are getting more done"

As staff developers, we learned some valuable lessons:

- It confirmed coaching was the right approach but that we needed to take a more agile and holistic approach.
- Participants were not motivated by accreditation.
- Our virus approach worked.
- Coaching had benefits for us too – we no longer felt the need to have all the answers and could trust that our role was to enable and develop leaders.

- We also learned that managers, while they clearly saw the benefits of coaching, found it difficult to make and maintain the behavioural changes needed to make coaching a success:

"I find it difficult – losing control, letting people do it their way, rather than mine"

"Sometimes there is a lot going on and I find myself slipping back into my old ways"

- Ongoing support and development was needed.

Current evaluation

We continue to review and evaluate our coaching provision, especially in the light of major organisational change. We carried out a major evaluation in December 2014 and a selection of the feedback is highlighted below.

Selection of feedback from 2014 evaluation

Statement	Agreed or strongly agreed	Comments
I believe that my engagement with coaching has had a direct beneficial impact on the effectiveness of my work	86%	"We have delivered more than anticipated"
I believe that my engagement with coaching has had a direct beneficial impact on my relationships with others	83%	"I am able to bring explosive situations back to calm and solution-focused encounters"
I would recommend coaching to others	97%	"Brilliant programme and I would thoroughly recommend to others"

Lessons learned

We did it differently. When introducing a project like this, understanding the theory and best practice is important, but it is vital to know your own culture and be prepared to do it differently and to listen, learn and adapt as the project grows. You can think big and holistic, but start small. One targeted pebble (carefully) thrown in a lake, with ongoing support and development, can create a thousand positive ripples.

What can other organisations learn?

It doesn't have to be a top down approach. It can be easy to be deterred when you continually hear this is how you embed a coaching culture, but you know it won't work.

It doesn't take a huge budget. We started with a small pot of seed money and an ongoing budget of less than £2000 per year for the first few years.

Two committed people can make it work. It is about being clear about what you set out to do and thinking big!

Coaching works; your clients are your best advocates.

RESOURCES:

Covey, SR (1990). *The 7 habits of highly effective people: powerful lessons in personal change*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

About the authors

Marie and Clare have over 20 years Learning and Development (L&D) experience each across the public, community and voluntary sectors. Their remit extends to the identification, design and delivery of L&D activities that address organisational, departmental, team and individual requirements.

They have particular expertise in the areas of leadership, management and coaching and have designed and facilitated many leadership and management development programmes (both accredited and non-accredited). Programmes such as these have enabled and supported team leaders, first, middle and senior managers to develop the requisite skills, knowledge and behaviours necessary to achieve the outcomes crucial for success in our challenging environment.

Clare and Marie are both passionate about the benefits of growing, enhancing and sustaining coaching provision and supervision and provide 1:1 coaching, team coaching, coaching skills development programmes, and have established a coaching supervisory infrastructure within the University.

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