

The rise of the listening guru

By Stefan Stern

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When Phil Mickelson tees off today in the first round of the British Open golf tournament in Carnoustie, on the east coast of Scotland, he will do so happy in the knowledge that he has had the best possible help in preparing for the competition.

At his side since April has been the formidable coach Butch Harmon, who previously spent several years working with the world's number one golfer Tiger Woods. Mickelson has been striving to achieve that extra 5 per cent of performance that could make the difference between success and failure come Sunday night.

Some people get to the top in business and feel they have no further need of advice or personal development of any kind. But, as elite performers such as Woods and Mickelson demonstrate, everyone has room for improvement. Coaches, whether in the context of work or sport, have something to contribute.

As a discipline, coaching has come a long way in the past 20 years. From a standing start in the 1980s, the number of people describing themselves as coaches has risen sharply. The International Coaching Federation, a trade body, estimates conservatively that there may be as many as 30,000 coaches working worldwide, generating revenues of about \$1.5bn. The US accounts for half this market.

In the past, executives tended to maintain a level of secrecy about any coaching they may have been receiving. As the story goes, they would put the word "haircut" in the diary to conceal visits to the coach. Coaching has also had to overcome the misguided perception that it was a kind of remedial treatment, offered only to people with big problems.

But as an unregulated industry coaching has remained something of an unknown quantity. Anyone can set up shop and call himself a coach. It has often been hard for potential clients to know who might be a legitimate and effective coach and who is simply trying their luck.

Myles Downey, managing director of the School of Coaching, a London-based consultancy, has seen the evolution of this industry at first hand and says the market has become more orderly in recent years.

"Five years ago you would have found large organisations having many, many different coaches, all with their own different approaches," he says. "They would have all been working differently, with nobody really knowing who was doing what and what the value was - and frequently not even knowing how much they were spending on it.

"Now you see a lot of businesses appointing a head of coaching, and that person has typically identified a bench of coaches. The head of coaching will say to the organisation: if you want coaching, go to one of these people, because they have been vetted by us and we like what they do."

Organisations such as the European Mentoring and Coaching Council, the Association for Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision, as well as the ICF, have produced guidelines and codes of ethics, helping to define what it is coaches should be doing. Accreditation from at least one of these organisations is increasingly being required by companies buying coaching services.

But what is coaching like in practice? This correspondent recently found out after submitting himself to a short coaching session at the offices of the School of Coaching.

First, let us clear away some of the mystique. The discussion took place in an ordinary room. We sat on chairs behind desks; there was no requirement to lie on a couch.

And what followed in the next 40 minutes or so was a businesslike, constructive conversation. The essential tools of coaching seem relatively simple: they involve the coach asking good, clear questions and listening carefully to the answers.

The skill lies, in the first instance, in putting the "coachee" at ease. Then it is time to establish what the client wishes to work on or improve and assess his or her current situation. In most instances coaching involves helping an individual to raise his or her own performance (or impact) at work. But the big prize is the knock-on effect for teams and organisations suddenly enjoying reinvigorated leadership.

The central challenge for coaches is to make sure their questions are answered fully and accurately and that the coach understands what those answers mean. That is why good coaches often use the technique of playing back answers: "So, if I am hearing this correctly . . .", "Can I make sure I have got that right?", "So, what you are telling me is . . ."

Experienced coaches will develop a sense of when they have to dig deeper, be more challenging or step out of questioning mode altogether to offer observations and even, very occasionally, direction. But the core skill is listening.

When you consider it in these terms, it is clear why organisations often talk about developing a "coaching culture" in their senior management teams. The ability to listen sensitively is depressingly rare. On the positive side, a coaching culture can prove contagious. When one team is seen as performing better on account of the coaching being provided by its leader, soon other colleagues will want to replicate that.

"My job is to cause the other person to think," says Mr Downey. He certainly achieved that with this coachee. The experience felt like a mental "spring clean", in which vague and semiconscious concerns were brought into sharp relief. But, crucially, the coach is also there to get the subject to commit to specific actions. This is not therapy: coaching is about raising people's performance.

"Ultimately if you are coaching it is not for you to do the next step," Mr Downey adds. "I may help the chief executive consider a great new approach, or assist this person in working out how they are going to build their global sales team, but it is still down to them to do the job." For this reason it will always be hard for businesses to come up with a sensible "return on investment" figure for any outlay on coaches - much to the chagrin of finance and HR directors.

All the same, the appetite for coaching appears to be growing. Marshall Goldsmith, a highly rated US coach, saw his recent book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* soar to the top of the New York Times best-seller lists.

The fluff that has long swirled around coaching is being swept away. A new professionalism and seriousness are at hand. Kay Cannon, president of the ICF, says good coaches have to understand the context for the work they are doing and understand the business their client is working in. "Coaching needs to be based on the client, not the coach," she says. "It should be driven by the client. Fire the coach who tells you what to do."

What a coach can - and can't - do for you

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Good coaches will:

- * Listen carefully to what you say, without preconceptions, and play back to you what they think you have just said
- * Ask good, open questions that invite you to think harder about the situation you find yourself in and how you might improve it
- * Review the situation after six or 12 months rather than seek an open-ended arrangement
- * Hold you accountable for making progress and working on the things you have discussed together, measuring your progress against agreed criteria

Good coaches will not:

- * Intimidate, bully or tell you what to do. They will not seek to become your friend
- * Quickly decide that they know exactly what needs to be done, without knowing anything else about your circumstances
- * Try to induce dependency or seek a long-term relationship
- * Let you off the hook on steps you have committed to taking
- * Betray any confidences or reveal what is discussed with the person being coached