

Coaching the board

HR leaders need to be the change they want to see in their organisations, says **John Blakey**

I recently chaired a breakfast briefing for senior HR leaders alongside Carole Gaskell, our co-founder and CEO of Full Potential Group. Our starting premise was that they are in a privileged position when it comes to their role in the management team. While the frustrations of the role in terms of its decision-making authority are often highlighted, it is easy to forget the upside opportunities that come with it. In particular, the HR leader is the only member of the management team who has a focus on the people issues across the business and has the opportunity to build collaborative relationships across diverse functions to initiate change.

In maximising his impact in the role, the HR leader is faced with the classic challenge of *how do I make things happen when I cannot tell my board-level peers directly what to do?* This is a challenge that is increasingly common across all leadership roles as the breakdown in command-and-control cultures continues apace, driven by the converging trends of technology, globalisation and social change. Coaching has emerged as a leadership style that is well suited to meeting this challenge since coaching skills do not rely upon the manager having direct authority over a situation in order to influence it proactively.

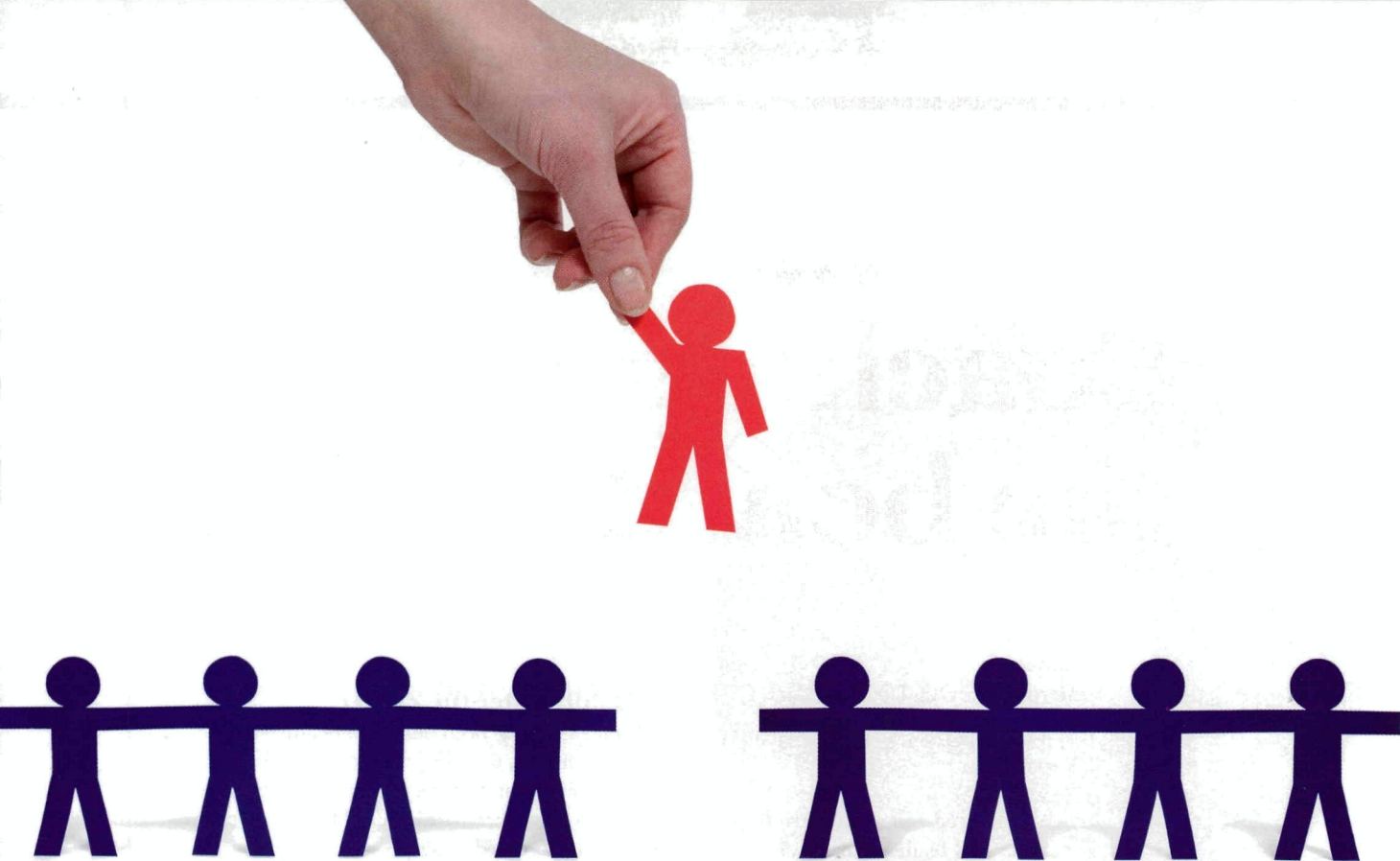
Ironically, in recent years, many HR leaders have introduced coaching skills training for their organisation's managers yet how many of them have embraced the potential of coaching skills to transform the impact of their own role? How many have grasped the opportunity to become coaches to their board colleagues and the board team as a whole? Is it now the time for HR leaders to courageously step into this role and to 'role-model' the organisational change they wish to achieve?

In focusing upon this opportunity, it may help to reflect on how change really happens in the 21st century organisation. Many of us have been brought up with a model of organisational change that suggests that strategic initiatives are only effective if sponsored from the 'top down' by the CEO himself. In my experience, it certainly helps if the CEO is on board but to make this a 'de rigueur' prerequisite for change risks letting us all off the hook of our real potential.

In the political world, we have all been given a powerful reminder in recent times that profound change can happen from the 'bottom up' if the people involved are sufficiently passionate, persistent and visionary. Of course, I am referring to the Arab Spring, which was triggered by the catalytic behaviour of one lowly Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi. When he set fire to himself in front of the governor's house on 17th December 2010, he had no inkling that, 12 months later, this act would have sparked an uprising that brought to an end a whole leadership epoch in the Arab world.

Science also validates this model of change through the modern discipline of chaos theory. In the 1960s, mathematician Edward Lorenz discovered that very minor changes in the world's weather system triggered major outcomes and he termed this phenomenon the "butterfly effect", citing the metaphor that a butterfly flapping its wings in South America could cause a tornado in Japan several days later, due to the complex inter-relationships of the global weather system.

If we buy into this view of the world, the challenge for the HR leader is *could you trigger the "butterfly effect" in your organisation by acting as the coach to the board and using coaching skills to catalyse far-reaching change?* I hope this is an exciting possibility for you, yet, if true, it is also a serious



responsibility. For, if HR leaders do not step up to this challenge, they risk letting down the potential of their own profession and consigning themselves to a tactical role on the margins of boardroom discussions.

For those brave souls who would like to embrace this opportunity, here are the top tips that, in our experience, enable HR leaders to act effectively in the role as coach to the board.

Adopt the mindset of an interim because you probably are!

Many business leaders that I coach comment that they hire interim staff because they can rely upon them not to get caught up in the politics of the organisation – hence they keep an objective, independent mindset that is valuable to the wider leadership team.

What impact would there be if all HR leaders adopted the same mindset? After all, in this dynamic, uncertain world, we are all probably interim appointments of one sort or another. The illusion of a 'permanent' role sometimes lures us into a fearful attitude in which we focus upon protecting our own jobs rather than providing genuine, honest advice. We get caught up in the 'group think' of the leadership team and slowly but surely become part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

A good rule of thumb would be to ask yourself *what would I be saying or doing now if I knew that I was not going to be in this organisation in 12 months' time?* Often the answer to this question will liberate new perspectives.

Alternatively, search within your LinkedIn network and I am sure you will quickly find an

experienced interim HR leader. A lot can be learned from talking to such professionals and exploring with them the difference between their mindset as an interim compared to their time in a permanent role.

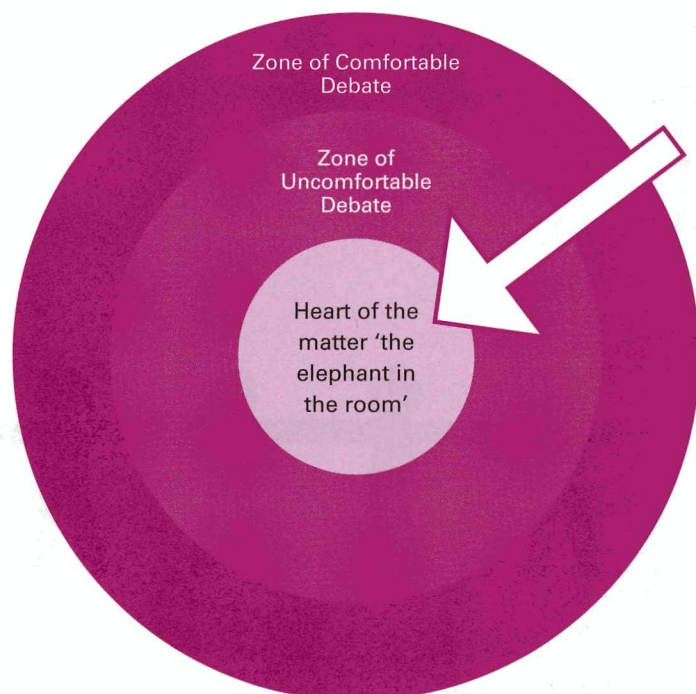
In NLP terms, this is an exercise in modelling – seeking out great examples of people who do this well already and asking them how they do it. It is almost inevitable that, after such conversations, you will have unconsciously picked up some shifts in outlook that will start you on a different path.

Make building trust your number one priority

The traditional coaching skills of active listening, asking powerful questions and adopting a non-judgmental stance are vital tools for building trust with your board-level peers. In a business environment – where most dialogues involve pushing a parochial point of view, competing for scarce resources and jumping to confident



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conclusions – it can be very refreshing to have a coach-like conversation with the HR leader. Similarly, if your peers learn over time that such conversations are never used against them in the organisation, gradually they grow to trust you, confide in you and seek your counsel.

One of the HR leaders in our roundtable discussion had developed this reputation sufficiently well over a period of 12 months that his board peers were now booking monthly one-to-one conversations with him. What's more, they were turning up for the meetings religiously rather than cancelling them at the last minute due to an urgent conference call. This is the real measure – if busy directors give up time for this informal coaching, you know that what you are offering is of unique value to them. However, it may often start with a much more informal chat over a cup of coffee.

Where would you start if you wished to upgrade and boost your coaching skills? Booking yourself

onto one of the many excellent 'introduction to coaching' style courses would arm the HR leader with the basic coaching skills, all of which focus upon the trust-building challenge. For those who learn from a good book, Sir John Whitmore's classic text *Coaching for Performance* remains the gold standard in coaching literature. One of the spin-off benefits of engaging an external coach is often that the coachee absorbs coaching skills by experiencing the value of them first-hand, and this is another way that an HR leader can embark on the coaching path.

Boldly enter the ZOUD

Once trust has been built into board-level relationships, the HR leader then needs to change gear and courageously enter the "zone of uncomfortable debate" (ZOUD). This term was originally coined by Professor Cliff Bowman of Cranfield Business School and is best summarised in the diagram left.

If a conversation between the HR leader and his board-level peers is to be more than a social chat, there is usually a matter at the heart of it. The parties have come together for a purpose – to agree action, to make a decision, to resolve a problem etc. To achieve this, a socially comfortable conversation is not sufficient and to get to the heart of the issue – the 'elephant in the room' – the conversation may need to move to a ZOUD.

In this zone, there is a feeling of increased tension and the pressure starts to build as the parties may disagree and not see 'eye-to-eye'. What often happens is that the individuals feel the tension, find it uncomfortable and, fearing the pressure will permanently damage the relationship, move back out to the zone of comfortable debate. The core issue is still the same and no movement has taken place.

To avoid this risk, the conversation must stay in the ZOUD and the parties work through it to uncover differences in understanding, assumptions, motives etc. By sustaining the ZOUD, people can move to the heart of the issue and resolve it permanently before moving on to a new topic.

Align your goals with the 'big picture' not the little silos

To effectively coach the board, the HR leader needs to become the guardian of the 'big picture' goals of the organisation – it is at this level that board members are most likely to find a common vision and a shared sense of purpose. In contrast, most functional directors are still operating in silos in which narrow measures of success are optimised at the expense of the wider good. If the HR leader

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chooses to promote his own HR 'silo-level' goals, most likely he will fail due to the formal authority that more operational directors exercise around the boardroom table.

What are examples of these 'big picture' goals? In a recent interview with the HR leader of a utility company in the North West of the UK, a good example emerged regarding HR being the driving force behind a company-wide customer care programme. The CEO had declared a vision to be the "best service company in the North West region" and the HR leader concerned had seized the opportunity to pick up this baton and create a culture change programme to support its achievement.

In this case, the change was driven from the 'top down' but I have also seen examples where, due to the HR leader's intimate grasp of the organisation's cultural 'temperature', initiatives have been launched from within the HR function itself and these have succeeded because they were the right solution at the right time to meeting the 'big picture' challenges facing the company.

An example of this occurred following the merger of two large multinationals in the IT services sector. This merger coincided with the imminent retirement of four board members and the issue of succession planning was about to shoot to the top of the agenda. Sensing this, the group HR director proposed a new leadership development programme that had many benefits, one of which was establishing a succession pipeline for the board.

Because it was the right 'big picture' initiative at the right time, the board approved a significant investment and the resultant programme was a great success.

Mind the gap

I recall being on a course some years ago when the facilitator asked the group: "What is the biggest gap in the world?" One of the more literal participants piped up with the answer: "The Niagara Falls." We soon learned, however, that the biggest gap in the world was between the human head and the human heart. It was an analogy that has stuck with me ever since.

If this is the biggest gap in the world, what we need are great bridge-builders to span it and bring the best of both 'head' and 'heart' resources to the boardroom table.

Typically, it is the 'head' that rules the boardroom – lengthy, analytical, linear conversations among very bright people in which the numbers lead and the people follow. If the HR leader can 'mind' this gap, he often fulfils a unique coaching role. By 'minding' the gap, I mean being aware of it

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and making sure it does not become a 'blind spot' in the team's decision-making. This sounds like a very grand role, requiring advanced emotional intelligence skills, but in practice the first step can be a simple one.

In this case, the first step in bridging the gap between the 'head' and the 'heart' in the boardroom is simply to ask: "How do we feel about this issue?" What typically happens at this point is that your peers will tell you what they think, not what they feel. At which point, you can persist with a simple: "No, you just told me how you think but I really want to know how you feel."

I went round this loop four times with a managing director coachee of mine before he finally slumped back in his chair, let out a sigh and exclaimed: "I feel insecure!" At last we had bridged the gap and the conversation took a very different path from that point on.

Conclusion

Armed with the above tips and starting points, I hope this article has given you a practical way forward to meet the challenges of acting as a coach to the board from an internal HR leadership role.

That such a role is in great demand is demonstrated by the dramatic rise in external coaching at board level over the past ten years. Clearly, many board-level directors are looking for help!

Sometimes it is exactly right that an external coach is best placed to make a difference to the team or individuals involved. However, in our experience, there are also many situations in which the HR function underestimates its own resources, skills and experience that enable it to play a similar role.

With all the challenges that boards face today from globalisation, new technology, social shifts, bottom-line performance and relentless pressure, now is a good time for the assertive HR leader to seize the opportunity and claim the role of coach to the board, and so position HR as a genuinely strategic force for positive change. **TJ**

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