

What Is Coaching?

Coaching focuses on future possibilities, not past mistakes

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the verb to coach as to “tutor, train, give hints to, prime with facts.” This does not help us much, for those things can be done in many ways, some of which bear no relationship to coaching. Coaching is as much about the way these things are done as about what is done. Coaching delivers results in large measure because of the supportive relationship between the coach and the coachee, and the means and style of communication used. The coachee does acquire the facts, not from the coach but from within himself, stimulated by the coach. Of course, the objective of improving performance is paramount, but how that is best achieved is what is in question.

THE SPORTING ORIGINS OF COACHING

The concept of coaching originated in sport, and for some reason we have tennis coaches but ski instructors. Both for the most part, in my experience, are instructors. In recent years tennis instruction has become somewhat less dogmatic and technique based, but it still has a very long way to go. Ski instruction has moved too, but less by choice than by circumstances. Snow boarding, and variations on that theme, was “owned” by young people who taught themselves in part because few traditional skiing adults could do it. Aside from that, young people today have had enough of being told by

adults and they are remarkably adept at picking up new physical skills. Shorter carver skis are also far easier to learn on, so ski schools have had to adapt their methods to suit the client rather than themselves.

THE INNER GAME

A coach recognizes that the internal obstacles are often more daunting than the external ones

The teaching of tennis, skiing, and golf was tackled over two decades ago by Harvard educationalist and tennis expert Timothy Gallwey, who threw down the gauntlet with a book entitled *The Inner Game of Tennis*, quickly followed by *Inner Skiing* and *The Inner Game of Golf*. The word “inner” was used to indicate the player’s internal state or, to use Gallwey’s words, “the opponent within one’s own head is more formidable than the one the other side of the net.” Anyone who has had one of those days on the court when you can’t do anything right will recognize what he is referring to. Gallwey went on to claim that if a coach can help a player to remove or reduce the internal obstacles to his performance, an unexpected natural ability to learn and to perform will occur without the need for much technical input from the coach.

At the time his books first appeared, few coaches, instructors, or pros could believe his ideas, let alone embrace them, although players devoured them eagerly in bestseller-list quantities. The professionals’ ground of being was under threat. They thought that Gallwey was trying to turn the teaching of sport on its head and that he was undermining their egos, their authority, and the principles in which they had invested so much. In a way he was, but their fear exaggerated their fantasies about his intentions. He was not threatening them with redundancy, merely proposing that they would be more effective if they changed their approach.

THE ESSENCE OF COACHING

And Gallwey *had* put his finger on the essence of coaching. **Coaching is unlocking people’s potential to maximize their own performance.** It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them. After all, how did you learn to walk? Did your mother instruct you? We all have a built-in, natural learning capability that is actually disrupted by instruction.

This idea was not new: Socrates had voiced the same concept some 2,000 years earlier, but somehow his philosophy

got lost in the rush to materialistic reductionism of the last two centuries. The pendulum has swung back and coaching, if not Socrates, is here to stay for a century or three yet! Gallwey's books coincided with the emergence of a more optimistic psychological model of humankind than the old behaviorist view that we are little more than empty vessels into which everything has to be poured. The new model suggested we are more like acorns, each of which contains within it all the potential to be a magnificent oak tree. We need nourishment, encouragement, and the light to reach toward, but the oakreeness is already within us.

If we accept this model, and it is only contested by some aging flat earthers, the way we learn, and more importantly the way we teach and instruct, must be called into question. Unfortunately, habits die hard and old methods persist even though most of us know their limitations.

Let me extend the acorn analogy a step further. You may not be aware that oak saplings, growing from acorns in the wild, quickly develop a single, hair-thin tap root to seek out water. This may extend downwards as far as a meter while the sapling is still only 30cm tall. When grown commercially in a nursery, the tap root tends to coil in the bottom of the pot and is broken off when the sapling is transplanted, setting back its development severely while a replacement grows. Insufficient time is taken to preserve the tap root and most growers do not even know of its existence or purpose.

The wise gardener, when transplanting a sapling, will uncoil the tender tap root, weight its tip, and carefully thread it down a long, vertical hole driven deep into the earth with a metal bar. The small amount of time invested in this process so early in the tree's life ensures its survival and allows it to develop faster and become stronger than its commercially grown siblings. Wise business leaders use coaching to emulate the good gardener.

Universal proof of the success of new coaching methods has been hard to demonstrate because few have understood and used them fully, and many others have been unwilling to set aside old, proven ways for long enough to reap the rewards of new ones. Recently, however, as much through

It may be harder to give up
instructing than it is to learn to
coach

necessity as progress, employee participation, delegation, accountability, and coaching have found their way into business language, and sometimes into behavior too.

INNER BUSINESS

Tim Gallwey was perhaps the first to demonstrate a simple but comprehensive method of coaching that could be readily applied to almost any situation, particularly in his book *The Inner Game of Work*.

Many years ago I sought out Gallwey, was trained by him, and founded the Inner Game in Britain. We soon formed a small team of Inner Game coaches. At first all were trained by Gallwey, but later we trained our own. We ran Inner Tennis courses and Inner Skiing holidays and many golfers freed up their swings with Inner Golf. It was not long before our sporting clients began to ask us if we could apply the same methods to prevailing issues in their companies. We did, and all the leading exponents of business coaching today graduated from or have been profoundly influenced by the Gallwey school of coaching.

Through years of experience in the business field, we have built and elaborated on those first methods and adapted them to the issues and conditions of today's business environment. Some of us have specialized in teaching managers to coach, others have acted as independent coaches for executives and for business teams. Although coaches compete with one another in the market, they tend to be friends and not infrequently work together. This in itself speaks highly of the method, for it was Tim Gallwey who suggested that your opponent in tennis is really your friend if he makes you stretch and run. He is not a friend if he just pats the ball back to you, as that will not help you to improve your game, and isn't that what we are all trying to do in our different fields?

Although Tim Gallwey, my colleagues in Performance Consultants International, and many others who now practice coaching in the business arena cut our teeth in sport, coaching in sport itself has changed little overall. It remains at least a decade behind the methodology of coaching that is virtually universal in business today. That is because when we introduced coaching into business 25 years ago, the word

was new in that context and did not bring with it the baggage of a long history of past practice. We were able to introduce new concepts without having to fight old prejudices, and old practitioners, of old coaching.

That is not to say that we met no resistance to coaching in business; we still do at times from people who have remained strangely insulated from or blind to change. Coaching as a practice in business is here to stay, although the word itself might disappear as its associated values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors become the norm for everyone.

Finally, since I am defining coaching, I should perhaps mention mentoring, another word that has crept into business parlance. The word originates from Greek mythology, in which it is reported that Odysseus, when setting out for Troy, entrusted his house and the education of his son Telemachus to his friend, Mentor. "Tell him all you know," Odysseus said, and thus unwittingly set some limits to mentoring.

Mike Sprecklen was the coach and mentor to the famous all-conquering rowing pair Andy Holmes and Steve Redgrave. "I was stuck, I had taught them all I knew technically," Sprecklen said on completion of a Performance Coaching course many years ago, "but this opens up the possibility of going further, for they can feel things that I can't even see." He had discovered a new way forward with them, working from their experience and perceptions rather than from his own. Good coaching, and good mentoring for that matter, can and should take a performer beyond the limitations of the coach or mentor's own knowledge.

Some people use the term mentoring interchangeably with coaching. I quote from David Clutterbuck's book *Everyone Needs a Mentor*:

In spite of the variety of definitions of mentoring (and the variety of names it is given, from coaching or counselling to sponsorship) all the experts and communicators appear to agree that it has its origins in the concept of apprenticeship, when an older, more experienced individual passed down his knowledge of how the task was done and how to operate in the commercial world.

MENTORING

I'm afraid I disagree. The effect of coaching is not dependent on "an older, more experienced individual passing down his knowledge." Coaching requires expertise in coaching but not in the subject at hand. That is one of its great strengths.

POTENTIAL

Whether we coach, advise, counsel, facilitate, or mentor, the effectiveness of what we do depends in large measure on our beliefs about human potential. The expressions "to get the best out of someone" and "your hidden potential" imply that more lies within the person waiting to be released. Unless the manager or coach believes that people possess more capability than they are currently expressing, he will not be able to help them express it. **He must think of his people in terms of their potential, not their performance.** The majority of appraisal systems are seriously flawed for this reason. People are put in performance boxes from which it is hard for them to escape, either in their own eyes or their manager's.

To get the best out of people, we have to believe the best is in there – but how do we know it is, how much is there, and how do we get it out? I believe it is there, not because of any scientific proof but simply from having had to find reserves I did not know I had while competing in professional sport, and from observing how people exceed all their own and others' expectations when a crisis occurs. Ordinary people like you and I will do extraordinary things when we have to. For example, who would not produce superhuman strength and courage to save their child? The capacity is there, the crisis is the catalyst. But is crisis the only catalyst? And how long are we able to sustain extraordinary levels of performance? Some of this potential can be accessed by coaching, and performance can be sustainable, perhaps not at superhuman levels but certainly at levels far higher than we generally accept.

EXPERIMENT

That our beliefs about the capability of others have a direct impact on their performance has been adequately demonstrated in a number of experiments from the field of education. In these tests teachers are told, wrongly, that a group of average pupils are either scholarship candidates or have

learning difficulties. They teach a set curriculum to the group for a period of time. Subsequent academic tests show that the pupils' results invariably reflect the false beliefs of their teachers about their ability. It is equally true that the performance of employees will reflect the beliefs of their managers.

For example, Fred sees himself as having limited potential. He feels safe only when he operates well within his prescribed limit. This is like his shell. His manager will only trust him with tasks within that shell. The manager will give him task A, because he trusts Fred to do it and Fred is able to do it. The manager will not give him task B, because he sees this as beyond Fred's capability. He sees only Fred's performance, not his potential. If he gives the task to the more experienced Jane instead, which is expedient and understandable, the manager reinforces or validates Fred's shell and increases its strength and thickness. He needs to do the opposite, to help Fred venture outside his shell, to support or coach him to success with task B.

To use coaching successfully we have to adopt a far more optimistic view than usual of the dormant capability of all people. Pretending we are optimistic is insufficient because our genuine beliefs are conveyed in many subtle ways of which we are not aware.

When and where do we use coaching and for what? Here are some of the more obvious opportunities to apply coaching at work:

Motivating staff	Appraisals and assessments
Delegating	Task performance
Problem solving	Planning and reviewing
Relationship issues	Staff development
Team building	Team working

APPLICATION

Coaching can be used proactively, during performance or in review

The list is endless, and the opportunities can be tackled by using a highly structured approach, the formal coaching session. The coach/manager can equally choose to retain a degree of structure but be less formal – superficially the discussion might sound like a normal conversation and the

Coaching can occur spontaneously in a minute or an hour-long session

term coaching might not be used. Far more pervasive than either of these uses, and perhaps more important, are the continuous awareness and employment of the underlying principles of coaching during the many brief daily interactions that occur between manager and staff. In these cases we would not describe the interaction as coaching, and it might consist of no more than a single sentence – probably a question. However, the wording, the intention, and the effect of that sentence would be different. Here is an example:

EXAMPLE

An employee, Sue, is working on a task that had been discussed and agreed with her manager the previous week. She has a problem and goes to find her manager:

SUE I did what we agreed but it isn't working.

MANAGER You must have done something wrong! Do it this way instead...

No coaching there, but here is an alternative based on coaching principles:

SUE I did what we agreed but it isn't working.

MANAGER I just have to go and see George for a minute. See if you can find out exactly where and when the blockage occurs, and I'll be back to help you find a solution.

Ten minutes later when the manager returns:

SUE I've got the solution, it's working fine now.

MANAGER Great. What did you do? Did it affect anything else?

SUE This was the problem, and I got round it like this... There are no other effects, I checked that out.

MANAGER Sounds fine to me. See what you can do when you try!

The manager's sentence, not even a question this time although an implied one – 'See if you can find out exactly

where and when the blockage occurs' – embraces the two key principles of coaching identified in Chapter 4, **awareness** and **responsibility**. Also in this brief interaction the manager showed no blame or irritation, presented himself as a partner in the cause, and at the end reminded Sue that she had solved the problem herself and that she is more capable than she thinks.

I have argued the importance of managers recognizing the potential that lies within everyone they manage and of treating them accordingly. It is, however, even more important for people to recognize their own hidden potential. We all believe we could do better to some extent, but do we really know what we are capable of? How often do we hear or make comments such as: "Yes, she is far more capable than she thinks"?

In bold below are three revealing questions that I invite you to ask and answer, before you read the answers underneath.

We must see people in terms of their future potential, not their past performance

What percentage of people's potential manifests itself in the workplace on average?

Individual answers given by delegates on Performance Coaching programs range from single figures to over 80 percent, but the average for any group turns out remarkably often to be about 40 percent.

What evidence do you have to support your figure?

The three most consistent answers are:

- ◆ The things that people do so well outside the workplace.
- ◆ How well people respond in a crisis.
- ◆ I just know I could be much more productive.

What external and internal blocks obstruct the manifestation of the rest of that potential?

The external ones most frequently cited are:

- ◆ My company's restrictive structures and practices.
- ◆ The lack of encouragement and opportunity.
- ◆ The prevailing management style of the company/my boss.

The single universal internal block is unfailingly the same, variously described as fear of failure, lack of confidence, self-doubt, and lack of self-belief.

I have every reason to suspect that this last block is true. It is certainly true for me. In a safe environment people tend to tell the truth about themselves. If lack of confidence and so on is perceived to be true, then in effect it becomes the case anyway. The logical response would be to put every effort into building employees' self-belief, and coaching is tailor-made for that, but many business people are anything but logical when the need for a change in management behavior is raised. They far prefer to hope for, look for, pay for, or even wait for a technical or structural fix, rather than adopting a human or psychological performance improvement, however straightforward it may be. There is another reason as well.

Building awareness, responsibility, and self-belief is the goal of a coach

Building others' self-belief demands that we release the desire to control them or to maintain their belief in our superior abilities. One of the best things we can do for them is to assist them in surpassing us. Children's most memorable and exciting moments are often the first occasions on which they beat a parent at a game of skill. That is why in the early days we sometimes allow them to win. We want our children to overtake us and we are proud when they do – would that we could be so proud when our staff do the same! We can only gain, through their greater performance and from the satisfaction of watching them and helping them grow. However, all too often we are afraid of losing our job, our authority, our credibility, or our self-belief.

SELF-BELIEF

We build self-belief when we make decisions, take successful actions, and recognize our full responsibility for both our successes and our failures. However, nothing succeeds like success. In coaching it is paramount that the coachee produces the desired results from the coaching session, without fail. It is incumbent on coaches to understand this and ensure that they have helped the coachee to optimal clarity and commitment to action, including pre-empting all obstacles. Coaches are often afraid to pursue a coachee to certain success because they fear being seen as aggressive.

Nevertheless, coaching that does not result in success – and the coachee’s own recognition of that success – will only cause a reduction in self-belief and undermine the primary objective of the coaching.

For people to build their self-belief, in addition to accumulating successes they need to know that their success is due to their own efforts. They must also know that other people believe in them, which means being trusted, allowed, encouraged, and supported to make their own choices and decisions. It means being treated as an equal, even if their job has a lesser label. It means not being patronised, instructed, ignored, blamed, threatened, or denigrated by word or deed. Unfortunately, much generally expected and accepted management behavior embodies many of these negatives and effectively lowers the self-belief of those being managed.

The underlying and ever-present goal of coaching is building the self-belief of others, regardless of the content of the task or issue. If managers bear this principle in mind and act on it persistently and authentically, they will be staggered by the improvements in relationships and in performance that result. You can find out more about coaching for self-belief in Chapter 13.

Coaching is not merely a technique to be wheeled out and rigidly applied in certain prescribed circumstances. It is a way of managing, a way of treating people, a way of thinking, a way of being. Roll on the day when the word coaching disappears from our lexicon altogether and it just becomes the way we relate to one another at work, and elsewhere too.

However, to help understand the fundamental principles of coaching, we will in the next few chapters be examining the more structured end of the spectrum. I hope that you will destructure the concept as you become more familiar with and practiced in the principles, and they become your own.

The underlying intent of every coaching interaction is to build the coachee’s self-belief

COACHING IS A WAY
OF BEING

2

The Manager as Coach

A manager must be experienced as a support, not as a threat

Here lies a paradox, because the manager traditionally holds the pay check, the key to promotion, and also the axe. This is fine so long as you believe that the only way to motivate is through the judicious application of the carrot and the stick. However, for coaching to work at its best the relationship between the coach and the coachee must be one of partnership in the endeavor, of trust, of safety, and of minimal pressure. The check, the key, and the axe have no place here, as they can serve only to inhibit such a relationship.

CAN A MANAGER BE A COACH?

Can a manager, therefore, be a coach at all? Yes, but coaching demands the highest qualities of that manager: empathy, integrity, and detachment, as well as a willingness, in most cases, to adopt a fundamentally different approach to his staff. He will also have to find his own way, for there are few role models for him to follow, and he may even have to cope with initial resistance from some of his staff, suspicious of any departure from traditional management. They may fear the additional personal responsibility implicit in a coaching style of management. These problems can be anticipated and generally are easily coached away.

There is another problem with the dictating end of the traditional management spectrum: recall. Quite simply, we do not remember very well something we are told. The matrix below is an oft-used part of training folklore, but it is so relevant that it warrants being repeated here. It was a piece of research first carried out some time ago by IBM, but it was repeated, and the results confirmed, by the UK Post Office more recently. A group of people were divided randomly into three subgroups, each of which was taught something quite simple, the same thing, using three different approaches. The results speak for themselves. One issue they demonstrate that particularly concerns us, however, is how dramatically recall declines when people are only told something.

	Told	Told and shown	Told, shown and experienced
Recall after 3 weeks	70%	72%	85%
Recall after 3 months	10%	32%	65%

I well remember showing this to a couple of parachute-jumping trainers who became very concerned that they taught emergency procedures only by telling. They hurried to change their system before they were faced with a terminal freefall!

PERSUADES

If we move along the traditional management spectrum to the right we come to selling or persuading. Here the boss lays out his good idea and attempts to convince us how great it is. We know better than to challenge him, so we smile demurely and carry out his instructions. Nicer maybe, if a bit phoney, and it

gives the appearance of being more democratic. But is it really? We still end up doing exactly what the boss wants and he gets little input from us. Nothing much has changed.

When we get further along the line to discussing, resources are genuinely pooled and the good boss may be willing to follow a path other than his own option, provided it is going in the right direction. The late Sir John Harvey-Jones, interviewed about team leadership for David Hemery's book *Sporting Excellence*, said:

If the direction everyone else wants is not where I thought we should go, I'll go... once the thing is rolling, you can change direction anyway. I may see they were right or they may realize it isn't the right place to be and head towards my preferred course, or we may both come to realize that we would rather be in a third alternative. In industry, you can only move with the hearts and minds.

Attractive as democratic discussion may be, it can be time consuming and result in indecision.

The far end of the scale, just leaving the subordinate to get on with it, frees the manager for other duties and gives the subordinate freedom of choice. It is, however, risky for both. The manager has abdicated his responsibility, although the buck still stops with him, and the subordinate may perform poorly due to a lack of awareness of many aspects of the task. Managers sometimes withdraw with good intent, wishing to force subordinates to learn to cope with more responsibility. This strategy seldom serves its purpose, because if the subordinate feels obliged to take responsibility, rather than choosing to do so, his personal ownership remains low and his performance will not reflect the benefit of the self-motivation that the manager hopes to generate.

The majority of managers will position themselves somewhere between these extremes, but coaching lies on a different plane altogether and combines the benefits of both ends of the scale with the risks of neither.

DISCUSSES

ABDICATES

COACHING

devote the time to growing their people, to staff development. They send them on a training course or two and kid themselves that that will do it. They seldom get their money's worth.

So how can managers find the time to coach their staff? It is so much quicker to dictate. The paradoxical answer is that if a manager does coach his staff, the developing staff shoulder much greater responsibility, freeing the manager from fire-fighting not only to coach more but to attend to those overarching issues that only he can address. So the activity of growing people represents enlightened self-interest rather than idealism that offers no added value. Sure, at times it will be all hands to the pumps and to hell with the niceties, but that is acceptable and accepted in a culture in which people feel cared for.

Managers often ask me when they should coach, or at least how they should decide whether to coach or tell. The answer is quite simple:

- ♦ If **time** is the predominant criterion in a situation (e.g., in an immediate crisis), doing the job yourself or telling someone else exactly what to do will probably be the fastest way.
- ♦ If the **quality** of the result matters most (e.g., an artist painting a masterpiece), coaching for high awareness and responsibility is likely to deliver the most.
- ♦ If maximizing the **learning** is predominant (e.g., a child doing homework), clearly coaching will optimize learning and its retention.

In most situations in the workplace, time, quality, and learning all have some relevance all of the time. The sad truth is that in most businesses, time takes precedence over quality and learning is relegated to a poor third. Is it surprising that managers have such a hard time giving up telling and that business performance falls far short of what it could and should be?

If managers manage by the principles of coaching, they both get the job done to a higher standard and develop their people simultaneously. It sounds too good to be true to have

A manager's task is simple – to get the job done and to grow his staff. Time and cost pressures limit the latter. Coaching is one process with both effects.

A coaching management style/culture results in getting the job done well for 250 days a year, developing people for 250 days a year, and a lot of self-belief

250 days a year of getting the job done and 250 days a year of staff development per person, but that is precisely what the manager/coach does get.

The Nature of Change

If we do not change direction, we are liable to end up where we are headed

The demand for change in business practice has never been greater than it is today. That the traditional culture of businesses has to change has been gaining acceptance intellectually for some years, but more recently the phrase “if they are to survive” has been added without much dissent. How has this come about? Why does what was good practice in the past not still hold good? Are we rushing into change for change’s sake? How do we know it is going to be any better? And for how long?

There are plenty of cynical responses: “We have made all these grand changes in the past and they did not make any difference.” “No sooner will we have made this change than we will have to change again.” “Let’s do nothing, it’s just another new flavor of the month.” These are the anxieties of many who are threatened by the inevitable plethora of uncertainties, but the questions and concerns are valid and we need to address them if we are going to manage change well.

There are also pragmatic reasons for change, such as increasing global competition forcing the pace toward leaner, more efficient, flexible, and responsive units. The pace of technological innovation frequently leads to managers finding

that they have never learned the skills of the teams they employ. Globalization, demographic changes, the further integration of Europe, immigration, and the multiple effects of the internet and instant communication oblige businesses to change their ways.

However, by far the biggest challenge to hit business recently comes from the legal and social responsibility demands that follow the universal acceptance that climate change is both real and manmade. In future we can expect changes to come thick and fast and the economic downturn is only the beginning of worse to come. The conduct and the success of business are inextricably bound to the global social and psychological, environmental and economic factors to a far greater extent today than ever before. In addition, the commercial and financial demands made by businesses, and their power, mean that they also profoundly influence the surrounding culture, and those cultures are increasingly exercising their consumer power and hitting back.

FROM WHAT TO WHAT?

So the culture of business has to change – but from what and to what? The answers to this, and most of the questions above, depend more on perspective than on consensus. Any new culture will have to deliver higher levels of performance, but also be far more socially responsible than ever before. No corporation is going to take the risks and suffer the upheavals involved in major change just for the sake of it, or merely to be nicer to employees, although perhaps it should. Culture change will be, and needs to be, performance driven, but the definition of performance is much broader today. Competition and growth are both losing their currency; stability, sustainability, and collaboration are gaining traction. Those companies and individuals who don't change their ways from what has been acceptable in the past to what will be acceptable in the future won't survive in our oversubscribed, fractured, and unstable markets. When the opportunities for promotion and pay increases are shrinking in most sectors, how does a business maintain, manage, and motivate its staff?

Expressions such as “our people are our greatest resource,” “we must empower all our staff,” “releasing latent

potential,” “downsizing and devolving responsibility,” and “getting the best out of our people” have become clichés in recent years. Their true meaning remains as valid today as when they were first coined, but all too often they are hollow words. They are talked about far more than acted on. Coaching for performance is just what it says – a means of obtaining optimum performance – but one that demands fundamental changes in attitude, in managerial behavior, and in organizational structure. Coaching gives the clichés substance.

Most of the businesses we work with approach us because they are embarked on a process of fundamental change – or at least would like to be. They have recognized that if they are to achieve real performance improvement, their managers must adopt a coaching-based management style. These companies have already identified that coaching is the management style of a transformed culture, and that as the style changes from directing to coaching, the culture of the organization will begin to change. Hierarchy gives way to support, blame gives way to honest evaluation, external motivators are replaced by self-motivation, protective barriers fall as teams build, change is no longer feared but welcomed, satisfying the boss becomes pleasing the customer. Secrecy and censorship are replaced by openness and honesty, pressure of work becomes challenging work, and short-term fire-fighting reactions give way to longer-term strategic thinking. These are some of the characteristics of the emerging business culture, but each business will have its own unique mix and priorities.

However, there is another factor, more subtle perhaps but so pervasive that some find it hard to put their finger on. There is a growing awareness in ordinary people that is leading them to demand more involvement in the decisions that affect them, at work, at play, locally, nationally, and even globally. Decisions made by traditional authorities, governments, and other institutions, previously immune to challenge, are being called into question and sometimes brought to book by the media, pressure groups, and concerned individuals. Is this not

NEW STYLE

INVOLVEMENT

what was happening within the former Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc that led to the collapse of communism? In today's society it is easier to get a hearing than ever before, and cracks are appearing in impregnable citadels' dubious respectability. Those that have something to hide may hunker down and snarl, but the majority of thinking people welcome the changes, even if those changes do generate some feelings of insecurity. It matters not whether one sees this awareness as some evolutionary development or merely the result of a world shrinking because of its immersion in a sea of instant communication. It is happening either way.

PUSH TO PULL

This demand for involvement and choice is a broad-based change in society as a whole and is often described as the shift from push to pull. What we mean by this is perhaps best illustrated by an example.

We all receive commercial and charitable junk mail that we don't want, resent, and regard as an intrusion. Some of us are on more mailing lists than others and some resent the deluge more than others. As you may have guessed, I am one of the latter! The advent of the internet gave us access to what we want when we want it. We have more choice. We download from the internet what we want, instead of continually having to bin what is pushed into our mailbox. Would it were that simple, of course. When I retrieve my emails or go on to the internet, I often find that the pushers have got there first and up pops some wretched dancing advertisement before I can grab the mouse.

I can recall when we only had two television channels in the UK; now we are spoilt for choice. We can select among hundreds of channels and even in some cases choose which camera to follow in a sports event. This again reflects the shift from push to pull. It is a result of the demand for choice in viewing, but we still have to put up with pushy commercials.

A similar shift is occurring in managing people. You used to be able to tell or push people to do what you want, but now they expect and demand to be treated differently. This is not a retrograde step, as some diehard pushers would have us believe. It is the evolving consciousness of our collective

society, for which we should be grateful as it holds the promise of higher performance possibilities. Deep down people want choice and responsibility, and in many cases they are getting just that. Nevertheless, although executives talk about empowering people all the time, they still have plenty of push left in them.

Responsibility demands choice. Choice implies freedom.

People, ordinary people, are beginning to recognize not only that this is what they want, but that it can be had to a far greater extent than previously understood even within our complex variety of social structures. Instead of feeling threatened, managers should realize that they can capitalize on this and give people responsibility, and that those people in turn will give of their best. This way everyone wins.

Companies often talk about getting rid of the “blame culture” – but they just as often take no action. Blame is endemic to business and endemic to a dictating philosophy. Blame is about history, fear, and the past. We need to refocus on aspiration, hope, and the future. Not only does the fear of blame inhibit even the most calculated risk taking, it blocks honest recognition, identification, and acknowledgment of the inefficiencies in a system. Appropriate corrections cannot be put in place without accurate feedback. Fundamental culture change will not happen if blame comes along too. But most businesses, and most people, will have great difficulty leaving it behind.

There is another good reason for increasing responsibility at work. Work-related stress is said to be reaching epidemic levels. A survey conducted by an independent research company in Minneapolis revealed that the leading cause of burnout was “little personal control allowed” in doing one’s job and that this was prevalent irrespective of the state of the economy. This in itself suggests an urgent need for change toward working practices that encourage personal responsibility.

But what is the reason for this correlation between stress and lack of personal control? Self-esteem is the life force of the

BLAME CULTURE

Blame evokes defensiveness –
defensiveness reduces
awareness

STRESS

personality, and if that is suppressed or diminished so is the person. Stress results from long periods of suppression. Offering someone choice and control wherever possible in the workplace acknowledges and validates their capability and their self-esteem. Stress is thereby eliminated.

FEAR OF CHANGE

However, for many people the fear of change, any change, looms large. This is not surprising when you consider that there is little we can do to prepare our children for the world they are going to live in. It certainly won't be as we have known it, but we don't know how it will be. Perhaps all we can hope to teach them is flexibility and adaptability to cope with whatever will be.

CHANGE AS THE NORM

Most of what our great-grandparents taught their children would hold good throughout their lives. By and large they lived in a stable state, or at least stability was the accepted norm even if that was beginning to change! Most of us were brought up with that stable state mentality, but we are having to adapt to conditions that seem anything but stable. Our grandchildren will have grown up with change as their norm, so all they will have to cope with is the varying pace of that change. We are the generation struggling to adjust to the fact that change is now the norm because our teeth were cut on the illusion of stability. When much of what we know and love is in flux, full acceptance of personal responsibility becomes a physical and psychological necessity for survival.