

Building a Sustainable Coaching Culture: How to move from “command and control” to “ask and inspire”



Pictured left to right:
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Nelson Education Ltd. is Canada’s leading educational publisher providing innovative products for learners of all ages. Three years ago, Kirk Fox, Director of Learning and Development, came to the realization that their Performance Management processes fell short of their intention to increase performance, engagement and foster employee development. He knew that quick fixes wouldn’t last long, and decided to lead a bold shift in leadership style instead.

The Strategy

That bold shift was implementing The Coaching Excellence program at Nelson, which cascaded through the whole company with dramatic impact. Kirk started the process by getting certified as an executive coach, and then by teaming up with Dominic Scaffidi from HR Possibilities to create a successful and sustainable coaching culture within the company.

The design of the coaching program itself drove the success of the program. The strategy was to create an experiential learning approach combined with immediate on-the-job application, to produce better skill development and performance outcomes than by simply attending a workshop. The program began with an initial one-day workshop, which set the foundation for the program and focused on critical coaching skills that follow the ICF Standards. Participants were then put in smaller groups for four follow-up coaching calls over the next five months. That design created a true “learning immersion” that would ensure the sustainability of the coaching skills

and further cement the shift in culture from “command and control” to “ask and inspire.”

To ensure sustainability, the program was fully sponsored and led by the entire Executive Leadership Team at Nelson, with executives fully participating in the program first. Then, they participated in every subsequent workshop, kicking them off and being coached in front of the participants. The impact was to foster quality conversations supporting employee development, which in turn enforced Nelson’s Vision: Fostering an agile organization, enabling individual initiative, leadership and accountability.

Another success factor was the unique partnership of the internal and external coaches, who brought different perspectives to the program. The external coach supported the senior leadership group, while the internal coach supported the next leadership level and below. Due to their differences in exposure and experience with coaching and within Nelson, Kirk and Dominic brought complementary skill sets and

competencies to the initiative, in order to develop, facilitate, support and coach the groups. They both encouraged participants to be more intentional in their application of what they learned in the course, each in his own way.

The Results

The success of the program was evident in anecdotal comments from participants. For example, quite a few managers said that they were ‘having meaningful and effective conversations for the first time’ after participating in the program. Moreover, managers and employees began realizing that significant development can take place when people are made accountable to come up with their own solutions, take on more responsibility, risk, fail, learn and grow.

That bold shift definitely paid off in the end, and the metrics of more employee engagement and better performance were only part of the reward. In February 2015, Nelson’s Coaching Excellence team won the PRISM Award in recognition of their successful efforts to build a sustainable coaching culture.

Well done, Nelson!

ICF-Toronto Coaches was founded in 1999 to promote awareness and public recognition of the value and positive impact of coaching, and cultivates a collaborative, inclusive community for Greater Toronto Area coaches from all schools and traditions. It is one of the five leading international chapters and the home of the PRISM Award, launched in 2001 and then adopted by the ICF Global in 2005.



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