

# CHANNEL CHANGER

In two years, Sky has overhauled its coaching to such an extent that it's now woven into all its leadership programmes. It's been a huge leap forward, discovers **Liz Hall**



**C**oaching psychology is now well-established, but business people still joke about psychologists wearing sandals and being overly thoughtful when a thrifty business response is required.

Certainly in a buzzy, fast-paced organisation like Sky, there has been less of an opportunity to match leaders and managers with coaches who have a strong psychological learning, says Rebecca Grace, talent development consultant with responsibility for coaching and mentoring at Sky.

Recently, Sky has focused on encouraging leaders and managers to spend more time developing their employees and to consider a coaching approach to line management. Since overhauling its coaching strategy in 2009, Sky has made huge leaps forward with this.

"We're trying to change and improve the quality of conversations across the business, and there is now a growing awareness and understanding of what performance coaching means at Sky," says Grace.

Sky reviewed its existing coaching strategy in 2009, partnering with the School of Coaching (SoC) to help identify its needs and coaching objectives. The

“Sky’s aim with coaching is to sustain, nourish, grow and retain good performance”

new strategy focused on developing its internal capability and leaders' coaching skills, and also assessing, auditing and regulating its external coaches, to establish a preferred supplier list (PSL).

#### **Building connections**

Over the past two years, Sky has built on an existing connection with Myles Downey, founder of the SoC, formalising the relationship and defining what it wanted to do with coaching. "It was vital to explore exactly what the organisation needed from coaching," she says.

Sky realised its approach had to be weighted heavily around performance, not just learning and development. Its aim with coaching is to "sustain, nourish, grow and retain good performance". The SoC's definition of coaching is one that resonates with the business: "Coaching is the art of facilitating the development, learning and performance of another.

"We're starting to get some traction. We're getting key

executives not only to experience coaching but also talk about it openly."

Over the past 18 months, 33 leaders have worked or are working with an external coach, while 90 leaders have been coached or are currently being coached, by an internal coach. Coaching is also woven into each of Sky's key leadership development programmes.

Feedback from leaders who've been on coaching skills workshops has been very positive (see box, page 33).

One said: "The key learning for me from the day's workshop was learning how to listen and stop providing answers/solutions to the team, but rather to let them find the solutions themselves," says Dave Dee, contact centre leader, Sky Bet and Gaming.

Grace says: "This is a real success for us. Feedback shows leaders are beginning to understand and commit to engaging their staff. They are more aware of 'the how', not just 'the what'.

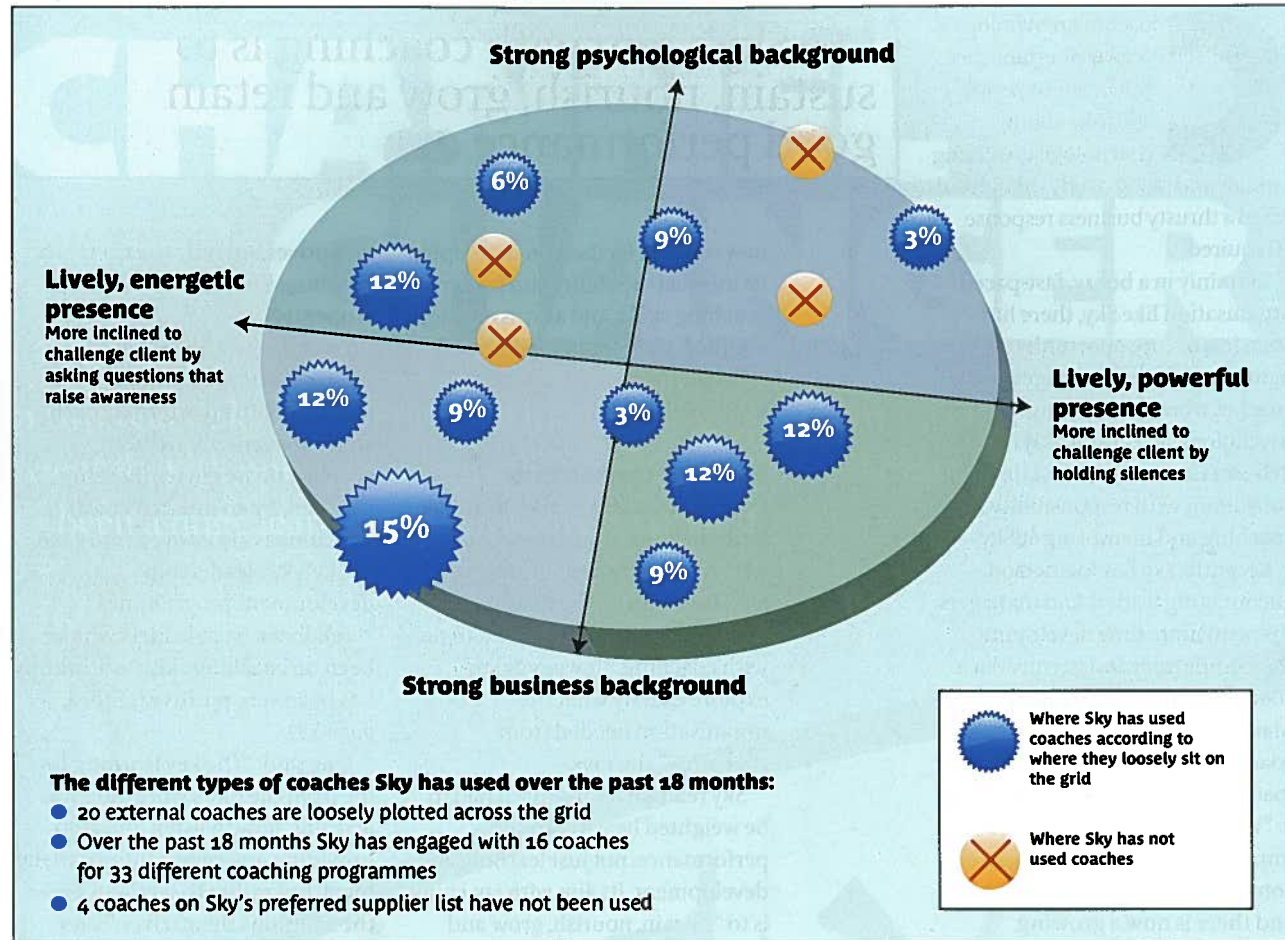
"Sky is so fast-paced and when you understand its culture, this feedback demonstrates critical evidence of the incremental change that is slowly growing as a result of raising coaching awareness and improving the conversations people have at work."

#### **Preferred suppliers**

However, since drawing up a PSL with coaches who have a wide range of styles and backgrounds, a pattern seems to be emerging regarding one-to-one

#### **Learning points**

- At the beginning, explore why coaching, how, what for and who for
- Contract with client, coach and line manager. Look at context, intention, purpose and expectations
- Ensure these are aligned with the business strategy
- Enlist managers/leaders to champion coaching and take responsibility for advocating coaching strategy
- Honesty and transparency with external coaches is key when managing a preferred supplier list
- Work with business HR to manage position of coaching but avoid an "outside in" (eg, HR in charge of coaching) approach



programmes. Over time, Sky has frequently used coaches with either strong business backgrounds or experience and a more directive, challenging style for one-to-one coaching.

Conversely, Sky has engaged with coaches who have strong psychological processes and a 'hold-the-silence' style more for leadership programmes.

"We're learning about why we haven't used all of our preferred coaches; where it's really taking off and where we're experiencing lesser demand... We haven't used those with stronger psychology backgrounds as much as we thought we would. We've got very reputable and experienced coaches but we've not had the need

[to use all of them]," says Grace.

One reason for this is that it's proved much easier to promote coaches with an understanding, interest and experience in business. Leaders tend to be sceptical of coaches with 'only' a strong psychological background, while a business background tends to build trust and credibility, she explains.

"We know that a coach's background won't come to the surface at all, but for our leaders, it's about their initial buy-in," she says.

The SoC advised and assisted Sky on its external coach assessment and audit process in 2009. Sky received around 50 applications for its PSL, met with 27 coaches and now has 20 confirmed on Sky's PSL for coaching.

Out of its current 20 external coaches, it has used 16 of them for one-to-one coaching.

Sky's assessment process included a thorough application form, face to face meetings and filming coaching demonstrations.

"We did get lots of pushback from people who didn't want to jump through hoops, but we're very proud of our rigorous assessment process," says Grace.

Sky works at maintaining good relationships with its external coaches:

"We tell them where we're at, and why we have or haven't been able to use them. We try to keep them really close to the business context, giving updates and keeping in touch."

Through the assessment process, Sky realised its own internal coaches are of a high standard. All are required to have ongoing CPD, plus one group and one individual supervision session every quarter.

Sky currently has nine internal coaches – three from a business background and the rest from a talent management/L&D/HR background. They have gone through the SoC's Coaches Programme (accredited by both the International Coach Federation and the European Mentoring & Coaching Council and certified by Strathclyde University). Although Grace had already trained with Barefoot Coaching (accredited by Chester University), she also trained and got certification with the SoC: "We all speak the same language."

The organisation is thinking about refreshing its coaching supplier list later this year, though it is likely to keep the same matching process when one-to-one requests come through, which Grace believes to be unique. Sky loosely plots coaches on a quadrant with "strong psychological background" and "strong business background" as

the vertical axis, and "louder presence – likely to challenge through questions" and "quieter presence – likely to hold silences", as the horizontal axis (see Figure 1, which plots the external coaches used in the past 18 months).

"When we get a business request, we collect lots of context (conversations with line manager, HR and the leader), and although this is a really rough guide, the quadrant contributes to our decision on which coaches to consider," says Grace.

"We've never had anyone come back after meeting a coach saying we've made the wrong recommendation.

"It's our goal to have individual

### What leaders said...

● "...One tangible outcome for me was improved cross-department relationships resulting in improved project solutions... Coaching provided the opportunity to explore workplace challenges in a completely confidential environment"

**Tom Scott, director of business transformation**

● "Initially, I was sceptical about the value of coaching but would now recommend the experience as essential for everyone who has a team to manage and a large and complex role. The results are quick and the benefits huge. It is a very beneficial experience"

**Barbara Gibbon, director of production, Sky Entertainment Channels**

● "Coaching has allowed me real periods of reflection in a very busy job to really focus on how I can better help Sky achieve its goals"

**Stuart Murphy, director of programmes, Sky 1HD and Sky Atlantic HD**

● "I'm now more aware of the importance of managing my reputation with senior stakeholders, I have increased my networking and targeted key influencers. I have also realised Sky believe in me sometimes more than I believe in myself"

**Mark Anderson, director, sales and marketing**

*Source: Sky online reactionnaire, October 2010*

coaching available for senior high performing and high potential leaders, usually following talent review and succession planning conversations."

At the outset, three-way meetings with the coach, client and line manager look at context, intention, purpose and expectations, ensuring these are aligned with the business strategy. The contract or coaching plan makes clear that although the content is 100 per cent confidential, the 'public' outcomes are to be transparent. Each programme includes initial, interim and end review conversations about progress and end of programme evaluation questionnaires.

"This is one of the biggest areas for us. We spend a lot of time at the beginning understanding exactly where the flag is on the green, where we are headed. We understand the coach and client

may go all over the course but the expectation is that they will end up on the green in the timeframe."

#### What next?

Sky will continue to develop internal coaches. It is currently piloting maternity coaching and plans to carry on aligning coaching with business strategy: "Sky is all about projects and we're thinking about how coaching can get closer to supporting this, especially around team coaching."

Sky also plans to strengthen its ability to demonstrate ROI. "Our intention is to increase the number of Sky employees who can associate a coaching experience as one they have had through conversations with colleagues and leaders.

"Ultimately, if you take out the word coaching, it's about having good conversations that lead to increased engagement." ■