

Coaching queen

With so many bodies claiming to be umbrella organisations for best practice in coaching, HR professionals are confused. All that will change, under the new chair of the AFC (right). By PETER CRUSH

Gladeana McMahon, the coaching grandee ranked by two national newspapers as one of the UK's top 10, (she is credited with co-founding cognitive behavioural coaching), is probably less well recognised in HR as GMTV's resident online life-coach. Recently she was asked: 'Help! My partner can't make me orgasm'. But this side career may be no bad thing. Right now, McMahon's guiding hand needs to calm an entire coaching community – one at very real risk of whipping itself into a frenzy about accreditation. For recently she became the new chair of the Association for Coaching (AFC) and, in her own words: "We [the discipline] are at a very delicate time."

This "delicate time" refers to being quizzed on why HRDs still remain confused about what coaches offer. For despite being a comparatively fledgling profession, coaching is already crowded with competing bodies each proclaiming to be umbrella organisations for best practice and accreditation, giving HRDs an almost overwhelming choice. As well as AFC, suppliers can now pin their flags to the Association for Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision (APECS), the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), the International

Coach Federation (ICF), the Behavioural Coaching Institute, the International Institute of Coaching and the Coaches Training Institute to name just a few.

"HR directors are rightly asking 'what's the difference between EMCC or APECS coaches?'" says McMahon. "How do they know if one or the other guarantees the appropriate type of coaching, better professional standards or gives them value for money?"

The groups reflect different coaching philosophies. "Just like in clinical counselling," she says, "where there are more than 450 'models' of therapy, there is more than one way of coaching." She adds: "Unlike sciences like psychology, which has already been through a long period of evidence-based academic rigour, coaching has yet to catch up, hence bodies are supporting certain models. It's catch 22. We need new models, we need to innovate, and to give coaching the evidence it needs; the downside is it gives the HRD yet another model/body to think about."

To tackle this, McMahon is about to create a stir not all coaches will like. Under her stewardship, the UK's original coaching body (since 2003) is launching a set of new accreditations that she argues will finally help buyers understand coaching standards better. By the end of this year three new accreditation schemes will be launched: basic, master and executive (specialist) accreditation. Existing coaches will have to upgrade to it and re-qualify every five years. Also in the works is a coaching supervisors' accreditation, an internal coaching standard (to reflect how more employers are training their own internal coaches) and a coaching kite mark.

These will, she hopes, force the approximately three-quarters of coaches with no accreditation to become accredited or face the prospect of no work. But the changes will be controversial for two reasons. First, McMahon says they are designed to remove the emphasis some providers place on their own 'model': "What we're saying is any good coaching approach will



Gladeana McMahon, chair of the Association for Coaching

have commonality. Instead of accreditation based on models it should be about coaches' competence to solve a problem. Coaching is simply a contract to achieve a task, so in this sense it's similar to training. The trick is having a framework."

But this is what irks Keith Hatter, founder of K2 Performance. It has a specific coaching model based on goal-setting using the principles of high-performance athletes. He says his "explicit decision" is not to be accredited and believes he shouldn't feel under pressure. "Neither we nor HRDs know what the AFC or any other association stands for," he says. "None of them represents our approach, and why would I want to associate myself with other coaches that are not like us? A kite mark won't help either. There is no 'excellence' in coaching. It's still impossible to say coaching caused this or that. The HR sector needs to be bolder in accepting this."

Hatter instead insists his coaches hold British Psychological Society accreditation or have achieved British Association for Sports and Exercise Scientists standards. He believes these are more appropriate to his modus operandi. He says coaching is more bespoke, and fears rather than providers being proud of their mark, they will be forced into it.

But it is on a second point that McMahon may also upset coaches and HRDs alike. AFC's planned executive coaching standard would seriously step on the toes of APECS whose own – "scarily thorough" accreditation, according to Helen Pitcher, CEO, IDDAS Executive

Coaching – is predicated on executive coaching. She says: "There's an unwritten rule coaches go through AFC first but then step up to APECS because it's more rigorous, more psychological and business-focused, and has more senior [by level and age] members. HR directors 'get' the distinction between the two bodies, but if AFC moves into the exec-level arena, it will make it harder to understand the difference."

The topic raises the thorny issue of inter-body relationships, one that McMahon is more reserved about. "Bodies will never come together; they're too different. If we started from scratch, things would be different."

But there is more HRDs need to take note of. For years, the ICF was where coaches went to gain international accreditation. Now, AFC is 'international' too. "We have 26 other countries in the process of applying to be members," says McMahon. "Global accreditations could follow." It is AFC domination, but is it too much at once? "It was pragmatism that stopped us doing everything at once," McMahon says. "We feel we're at the right stage in our development."

Arguably it had to do something. The Health Professions Council, which already regulates 14 professions, is moving towards regulating psychotherapists and counsellors. It is thought coaching could be next. Other bodies, such as the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), are also muscling in and have launched their own coaching courses, often accrediting them to themselves. "Our view

Who are you with?

Name Myles Downey, founder, The School of Coaching

Preferred coaching body EMCC

Why? EMCC has an advantage in that it has European coverage, and you can tap into common coaching techniques. Its main draw is less from unity of approaches than from unity of standards. We only regard EMCC as a minimum, and our courses go much deeper. The bodies have devalued coaching by saying very little about the performance improvements it can make. At least EMCC is doing a job, and you can only have a voice if you have membership.

is that coaching has to have a management purpose," says CMI head of business development Richard Sewell. "We looked around, didn't see much, so designed our own." Rather than accredit them to AFC, though, he decided to have them accredited by the Qualifications & Curriculum Authority. "We support the national credit-based qualifications standard," he says. So far, 643 people are taking this – a sizeable number so quickly.

"I'm not saying this is a good or bad thing," says McMahon coyly, "just as long as quality is assured. Obviously, we'd prefer to accredit these courses, but we just have to be realistic – that's just the way the market is." **HR**

Who are you with?

Name Gillian Brown, founder, New-U Coaching

Preferred coaching body ICF

Why? As an ex-senior HR business partner, I've seen one-man bands who are really consultants, but call themselves coaches. When I chose suppliers I found ICF-qualified coaches were much better than those who had not got the standard. When I became a coach, it was the qualification of choice. It gives you a set of standards and ethics. ICF insists members have 60 hours' coaching and 10 hours' mentoring each year to stay up to standard. All our courses are ICF-accredited. We've looked into AFC accreditation but we still believe ICF is the leader.

