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A positive focus to lessen the stigma: How to increase engagement in coaching

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A positive focus to lessen the stigma

How to increase engagement in coaching

Coaching as a development tool

It is often stated that the workforce is a company's most important asset. Many organizations seem to recognize this. That is perhaps why finding effective ways to develop employees occupies a prominent place on growth agendas.

Various options are available where training and development is concerned. Coaching is among those growing in popularity both within firms and business education courses such as Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs. It typically involves a one-to-one relationship whereby a professional coach seeks to enhance the capabilities of key personnel to benefit both individual and organizational performance. Firms clearly reap the rewards when the experience is able to help top-performers reach even greater heights.

Close associations are assumed to exist between coaching and psychotherapy. As a result, the difference between the two disciplines frequently becomes blurred. Observers similarly remark how some of the techniques used by coaches mirror those of mental health professionals. For instance, coaching has parallels with therapy and counseling in its aims to shape the attitudes and behaviors of program participants.

Therapy and stigma

But such beliefs in its resemblance to psychotherapy do coaching few favors. There is a marked reluctance among many people to openly acknowledge psychological problems they are suffering from. Society tends to focus on the supposed otherness of individuals with mental health issues and views those afflicted in pejorative terms. It is common for them to be regarded as second-rate citizens who are unbalanced and therefore pose a threat to the well-being and safety of others. Consequently, only around a third of those diagnosed as needing treatment follow the advice given by professionals and actually seek some form of psychotherapy. In most cases, it is the stigma felt that deters them from taking steps to find a cure. Given the prevailing negativity toward them, their decision to suffer in silence is hardly surprising.

A strong body of research exists to show that gender can impact on the willingness to engage in mental health treatments like therapy. When it comes to obtaining help for psychological problems, enthusiasm for doing so is consistently higher among women than men. This gender bias is attributed to the tendency for females to feel more comfortable in being open about their feelings relative to their male counterparts. For their part, men generally feel that exposing their emotions means that they are relinquishing control. Engaging in such as counseling would additionally represent an affront to the masculinity, power and other stereotypical characteristics traditionally ascribed to them.

The likelihood of individuals feeling stigmatized seemingly exists across different dimensions of mental health. It is therefore reasonable to speculate that similar barriers might be evident when it comes to consideration of coaching as a viable support mechanism.

Why coaching is different

As coaching is essentially a combination of consulting and therapy, such fears are justified. But there are grounds for believing that coaching might well be regarded as a somewhat different animal. Conventional therapies generally address what might be perceived as shortcomings or weaknesses. Coaching effectively adopts an opposing approach. The emphasis is firmly placed on a person's strengths and the objective is to exploit them as a means of enhancing their overall competence.

By utilizing positive psychology, what coaches offer is arguably differentiated from other therapies in the field of mental health. So instead of feeling self-conscious about being associated with coaching, it is highly possible that some executives see it as a means of boosting their credibility. Stigma is thus usurped by feelings of pride.

There is evidence to suggest that men are more positive toward therapy sessions that are framed using other terms. Emphasizing that personal counseling is on offer would be a mistake. Discussion which involves the sharing of emotions is a feminine thing to most males. Classing the services as seminars or workshops where learning takes place is therefore much likelier to elicit a favorable response. On that basis, it would be fair to suggest that the male perception of coaching might be similar. Its future-orientation and focus on performance and results should appeal to the competitiveness trait that is supposedly an inherent part of masculinity.

Empirical research provides support for most propositions. One survey of MBA students confirmed the influential role of stigmatization on how mental health issues are perceived. The impact is especially strong where readiness to embark on therapy is concerned. But the fact that high levels of stigma can sometimes prompt negative perceptions of coaching shows that it has not totally shaken off its mental health roots. Practitioners should remain aware of this.

On a more positive note, men's attitude toward coaching is not markedly different to that of women. This would suggest it is no longer widely seen as therapy in the workplace. Such an indication takes on added significance because males do remain skeptical toward conventional therapies. Educators, employers and those delivering coaching programs can use this knowledge to market provision in ways that resonate with both men and women. Position coaching appropriately and enthusiasm towards both the program and the coach involved could well be heightened.

Despite the encouraging signs, those responsible for coaching in both business and education contexts need to be alert to the possibility of stigma and its potential impact on overall program effectiveness.

Comment

The review is based on: "Do mental health stigma and gender influence MBAs' willingness to engage in coaching?" by [Millard and Korotov \(2014\)](#). Coaching's value as a development tool is examined in this interesting piece. The authors note its similarities to

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conventional therapy and how the stigma attached to mental health treatments can negatively impact on attitudes toward coaching. It is suggested that framing coaching in positive terms can increase the willingness to engage in such programs among both genders.

Reference

Millard, J.A. and Korotov, K. (2014), "Do mental health stigma and gender influence MBAs' willingness to engage in coaching?", *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, Vol. 3 No. 3, pp. 277-292.

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