

Sustainability Inside-Out

Investigating coaching's role in sustainability

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About Article 13

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Executive Summary

Sustainability initiatives in leading organisations are increasingly focusing on transformational and systemic change, rather than incremental improvements. It is this link between transformation, and the shift to new levels of individual and organisational leadership and development that highlight how can coaching is critical for innovation and sustainability.

In essence, this research identifies that:

- 'Inner' (personal development, organisational values and culture development) and 'outer' (organisational, business, market, sustainable) development are linked;
- That real innovation and transformation, and the biggest leverage points for integrating sustainability, occur in the 'interior' individuals mindsets and values, and organisation's cultures; and
- Inter-subjective, dialogic processes, like coaching, are the most powerful and effective way to accelerate leadership development and adoption of new values and culture. These methods foster innovation and adoption of behaviours and systems that can accelerate 'outer' development of sustainable organisations and society.

What we have shown through this research is, with all other external factors being equal, the capability, culture and leadership development of individuals and teams in the organisations can be the difference that makes a difference to an organisation's integration of sustainability. We cited several examples where coaching can play a role in shifting the identity and culture of an organisation such that incremental changes in processes and systems (the 'what' of technologies) are overtaken by more fundamental and innovative changes in the value that is created, for whom, why and how.



Figure 1 Phases of transformation in an organisation's attitudes to sustainability

Leading transformational change towards sustainability is not about engineering and efficiency. While technologies are important, the ability to widely apply them, or even create them depends on organisations looking for opportunities for innovation in the changing external context. The capability to think in this way, to question the assumptions prevalent in a sector, take new perspectives, think long-term and ‘change the game’ are characteristics that leaders and leading organisations can develop. They are characteristics that are identified in the later phases of both the individual and organisational development models we introduce, and they are shifts that are both most effectively driven through engagement in inter-subjective, reflective, developmental processes like coaching.

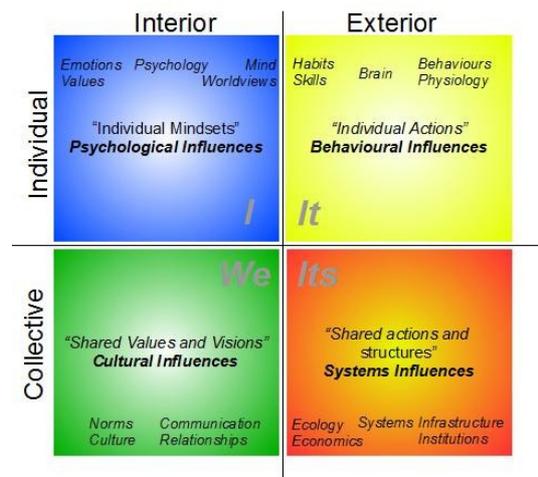


Figure 2 The Integral Quadrants model makes distinctions between the factors affecting, in this context, innovation and transformation towards sustainability.

There are a variety of factors that can constrain how fast an organisation can move towards sustainability. Amongst them, there is a limited, but increasing focus on the internal barriers to change – the mindsets and worldviews of individuals, and the values and habits of cultures. These are as real as technical challenges. Our research supports the assertion that inner (e.g. mental) and outer (e.g. behavioural), individual (e.g. ‘My’) and collective (e.g. ‘Our’) development and growth towards more complexity and competency are linked. We hypothesised that stronger recognition of that link and how organisations can support development in both areas would lead to changes in what activities organisations prioritised when moving towards sustainability.

Through this research we have shown why and how coaching could be used more effectively to support development in both areas, and that doing so would result in increased innovation and faster movement towards integrating sustainability in organisations. Coaching an appropriate tool for dealing with the challenges organisations will face in the next decade: It has the flexibility of form and content to suit diverse organisations, while having an orientation towards positivity, development, increasing awareness and responsibility, and focus on impact in the real world.

Coaching is most frequently used to support senior and emerging leaders in organisations, but increasingly popular and effective are team and group approaches. Respondents to the survey and interviewees described the benefits of coaching overlapped strongly with the broader organisational and societal needs for innovation and change in the face of sustainability challenges.



Figure 3 Reported benefits of coaching at different levels

Some of the surveyed organisations were already, actively using coaching for sustainability. Of those that were, most were doing so because both coaching and sustainability were already part of their culture, and the integration of the two was a natural fit. Compared to the responses to coaching in general, peer and group coaching were more common forms of coaching for sustainability. This is at least partially because collaborative methods are more aligned with the collective and transcendent values associated with sustainability.

Looking at the potential for coaching as a means of facilitating the values, behaviour, cultural and systems change in organisations, we identified drivers at three levels:

- ▶▶ At the organisational level, organisations will be using coaching to: support emergence of a new sense of who they are and what they do, encourage new values to be prioritised, and support a radical shift in thinking towards ethical innovation as a competitive advantage. Culture is now being identified as a major constraint to integration and implementation of sustainability, and coaching can support this change.
- ▶▶ At the team level, coaching enhances team's abilities to maximise the contribution of people of diverse expertise and cultures. It also helps individuals develop collaborative leadership styles appropriate to the increasingly complex challenges and new opportunities. The importance of a supportive network of peers was emphasised by many champions.
- ▶▶ At the individual level, coaching is one of the most popular and effective tools for leadership development. All change in organisations must involve individuals – whether they be as senior leaders or those engaged in practical actions. Coaching can also support individuals broadening their knowledge, skills and competencies and increasing the flexibility of their perspectives. Coaching is also used to increase awareness and support development to later stages of the development, leading to increased capability lead through complex transformations.

We also identified barriers to integration of coaching and sustainability, which included: if technical issues or general awareness are the main constraints, if coaching is not valued within the existing culture, or when no technical expertise or systems of support for coaches are in place. These barriers can guide the choice the exact type of coaching that is most appropriate for the organisational context, or even if coaching is appropriate at all.

The fundamental inter-subjective, positive, inquiring dynamics of coaching are common to all the things we, and participants in the research, defined as 'coaching'. And we identified many different practices that can be used to provide the same experience or achieve the same aim.

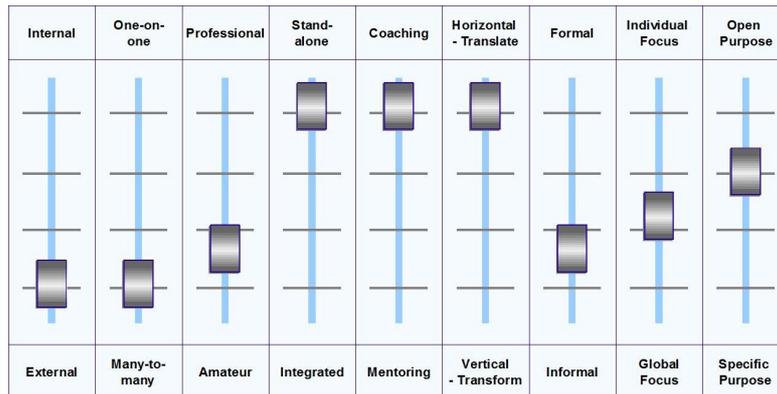


Figure 4 A 'slider' depicting the different characteristics of coaching approaches that can be adapted for different contexts and purposes.

We identified a dozen characteristics of coaching that help fine tune the form that is most appropriate to the purpose. Most coaching approaches can be characterised by the emphasis they place on each of these characteristics. We focused on some specific forms of coaching we thought could be commonly used for sustainability:

- Coaching for leadership development and personal transformation. This form of coaching integrates the personal and professional, often supporting a major change in performance, values and even identity. This is most common with senior executives, emerging leaders and sustainability champions, and includes forms such as executive coaching;
- Groups formally and informally coaching each other around personal, organisational and systemic challenges, or about skills development in a particular area e.g. breakfast clubs, action-learning groups, or carbon clubs;
- Coaching teams, communities or the organisation itself, through individuals but not focused on the individuals. In this case, individual's development and enhanced performance is contextualised as a means to higher-performing or transformed teams or organisations. Examples include team coaching, whole-of-business coaching, or hosting communities of practice;
- Amateurs coaching each other one-on-one using toolkits. This may focus on leadership development, but is more commonly about skills and knowledge in a particular area. This method costs less, is able to be distributed more widely. Examples include "we-coach", and social entrepreneurs and sustainability practitioners coaching each other;
- Integrating sustainability into performance management. This means adding social and ecological goals to the development plans for individuals.

The most important factor to consider when choosing a form or type of coaching is the context and purpose. As a bigger context for coaching, sustainability shifts attention from a particular method or particular benefit for an individual, towards doing whatever is appropriate to having the greatest impact in the external world. This wider, sustainability context expands the work of coaching beyond just supporting the happiness and success of individuals, and shifts the focus towards how those individuals can be more effective in their contribution to a more social and global definition of success (i.e. a sustainable society). Coaches, coachees and organisations can now begin to take advantage of the synergies between leadership development, innovation and sustainability.

We conclude with recommendations about how organisations can use the insights and information we have generated, and advocated for widening the dialogue around this in the field, and this research.