

Coaching has become a way of nurturing talent and helping individuals reach their true potential. Now the public sector is looking at this methodology to help build capacity for service delivery.

BY KATHARINE MCKENZIE



Coaching for the public sector

When Shanaaz Majiet was appointed head of the Department of Local Government and Housing in the Western Cape she inherited two different departments to be merged into a single one. With big challenges facing both the local government and housing portfolios, delivery could not be put on hold while restructuring took place.

Recognising that there were tremendous challenges ahead in the five-year contract period that she had signed up for, Majiet lost little time developing a plan to shape a resilient team. Her vision was to ensure that departmental staff would be able to develop both personally and professionally. For the province the return on investment would be skilled and committed public servants able to deliver in a dynamic and challenging environment.

Majiet has always been passionate about the power and the impact that quality leadership can make in a government department or any other organisation. 'By leadership I am not referring to the conventional forms of leadership – people in organisations with authority – as one can be in a position of authority but very seldom act out leadership.'

'It's about knowing how to build a strong organisation. The Department of Local Government and Housing is a very challenging portfolio, but one where you can make a tremendous impact in people's lives.'

'The President has recently reflected on the capacity of the state to deliver and the weaknesses and challenges within this. Fundamental to this is the quality of leadership and management that you have in an institution and it's the quality of leadership and management that turns a bureaucracy around.'

At the same time there was a recognition that, 'it's not about the leaders at the top of the institution, because leaders come and go, it's about the state of the institution. Particularly in a political environment where political office bearers have their terms of office and so do heads of department.'

Working closely with the department's management team, and recognising that there were a number of weaknesses in the organisation, coaching was identified as an important tool to address these.

This was strongly encouraged by Majiet who is a practising coach with many years experience and a strong belief in the power of coaching to enhance career development.

'I've seen too many up-and-coming achievers derail themselves in an organisation, either by getting stuck or lost in the system, and what is sad is that often they don't know what has derailed them and what it is about their own behaviour, skills sets and attitudes.'

'I've often seen how people with brilliant prospects derail their own careers because they don't take care of the leadership dimension, their self-awareness and their emotional intelligence. Because it's not just IQ, people with greater emotional intelligence will go further than people with a high IQ.'

The departmental leadership team agreed to an 'all in' approach to coaching with all 23 senior managers agreeing to participate. Although there was initially some scepticism (Majiet says scepticism is not always bad), everyone agreed to give it a try and entered the coaching programme with a positive spirit. At the end many of the initial sceptics were the biggest champions of the method.

Individuals worked with their coaches to develop a coaching programme, identifying their areas of weakness and meeting once a week to work on coaching goals for between six and nine months. 'Remember,' says Majiet, 'this is outcomes based work – the organisation wants a return on investment.' An evaluation of the process and its outcomes has helped to quantify this, this has included interviews with clients and supervisors of those who participated in the coaching to determine the impacts.

'In a six month process we don't expect magic – it's a journey,' says Majiet, 'but we have identified what was achieved and what still needs to be done.'

This has given the team a greater awareness of its strengths and weaknesses, and the weaknesses that could



Western Cape's Shanaaz Majiet is enthusiastic about the benefits of coaching.

set it up for failure.

This was complemented with a three-day emotional intelligence programme also completed by all senior managers together with the Stephen Covey programme dealing with the seven habits of highly effective people. Middle management also had the opportunity to go on these courses and a coaching programme is now being rolled out for middle managers, with 'huge excitement for this 250-strong team'.

This has meant that in the past two years one day a month has been dedicated to personal leadership investment for middle and senior management. This has not been perceived as time wasting, but an investment in doing a difficult job better, and has been strongly supported by the MEC, Richard Dyanti.

Achieving a balance between 'work'

and 'life' is another strong theme for Shanaaz Majiet. There is a recognition that getting this balance right is an important requirement for organisational resilience. This has led to some innovative human resource practices such as two vouchers each month that managers can trade for two days in which they can work from home. This has provided managers an opportunity to do things they are not all able to do, such as taking children to school and other family activities they would not normally be able to fit into a working day. This has generated real goodwill from team members.

For Majiet these things are not about making the public service more like business, as the state is fundamentally different, and needs to remain so. 'It's about becoming more conscious and deliberate about how we work.'

What is coaching?

In the last five years, coaching and mentoring have sprung to prominence in South Africa. These methods are being used more and more by private and public institutions to facilitate change and enable self directed learning, says Dr Sunny Stout Rostron, President of Comensa, the professional body for coaches and mentors in South Africa.

'Coaching and mentoring have developed the one-on-one relationship between practitioner and client as one based on trust and shared values. Both coaches and mentors use an experiential conversational approach in a powerful developmental process for the client,' she says.

While coaching is developing into a profession in its own right mentoring is also becoming an important activity aligned to coaching.

'One of the key questions emerging today amongst buyers, providers and trainers of coaching is whether behaviour change is truly sustainable as a result of coaching,' says Dr Rostron.

'Based on research currently available, there are certain guidelines that can help ensure that behaviour change is indeed sustainable. These are to link the coaching effort to an organisational or institutional result; measure the outcomes of coaching from a variety of perspectives; and to make certain that the client's changes in thinking, feeling and behaviour show up "visibly" in the workplace. While we wait for further, definitive research, direct experience persuasively suggests that behaviour change as a result of coaching is both possible and sustainable.'

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