# USING DESIGN THINKING TO BUILD A SUSTAINABLE COACHING CULTURE

Coaching is needed now more than ever, with Covid-19 showing us that the world will not be the same as before. Coaches Gillian Stevens and Dorothy Foote explore what is needed next.

As we enter 2021, some of the challenges organisations now face include: balancing a desire for people to continue working from home with returning to the workplace; staff feeling excluded and isolated as a result of working from home and dealing with the effect on their wellbeing; and closure or downsizing of some sectors along with the need for organisations to review products and service offerings as a result of 'business not returning to usual.'

Some people may mourn the loss of what existed pre-Covid, whilst others see the new world as an opportunity to re-shape the way we live and work. Either way, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for organisations to reflect on how to transform and innovate. One such innovation may focus on how to transform pre-lockdown corporate culture into a coaching culture that will benefit everyone.

We work within two professional domains, coaching and design thinking, and are interested in how the intersection of these two domains can produce something new and innovative. Design thinking is usually focused on the development of products and services offered externally. However, we propose that design thinking can take an inward focus to look at how structures, functions and processes can be transformed within. Informed by our work as university tutors and practising coaches, we have synthesised concepts and principles drawn from coaching and design thinking. We set out here the conceptual landscape of a tangible process model which OD professionals can use to transform their corporate culture into a coaching one, and the steps to be taken to achieve this.

## A CULTURE OF COACHING

Students who sign up for our university qualification programme generally fall into two camps: those who work or want to work as an external coach and see the qualification as a way of developing their professionalism; and internal coaches who, in addition to developing their professionalism, want to promote a culture of coaching within

their organisation. It is this second area that we are particularly interested in.

Coaching is, by its very nature, a relational process, often conducted in a one-to-one setting. However, team coaching is becoming both more popular and more desirable. Coaching at a team level makes sense for a number of reasons. The benefits of coaching are not limited to just one person. The benefits can be experienced and demonstrated collectively by the team, thus improving performance, productivity and team potential. If more than one team receives coaching, then the wider organisation benefits as a coaching culture starts to permeate more widely.

The question that is often asked by our students is how can we help to create a coaching culture that is attuned to the needs of both the organisation and the wider world. In this post-Covid-19 world, that question has even stronger resonance and reflects Peter Hawkins question: 'who or what does coaching serve?'[i]. This points to a systemic approach to working with that wider society.

Paul Lawrence suggests that building a coaching culture is in itself akin to an organisation-wide change programme, and proposes that building such a culture should be viewed through the lens of complexity or systems thinking rather than 'cause' and 'effect' linear thinking.[ii] Hawkins advocates 'more emphasis on how the team collectively engages with its commissioners and its multiple stakeholders'.[iii]

We believe a design thinking approach to team coaching can support the achievement of that coaching culture – one that supports the 'new world' of stakeholder and societal collaboration.

## THE LANDSCAPE OF DESIGN THINKING

Design thinking is an iterative problem-solving process which is used to solve complex problems that arise within any complex adaptive

system or organisation. Design thinking's origins go back to David Kelley and the University of Stanford's School of Design (d-school) and their product development work of the 1960s.[iv] Since then, design thinking has found its way into all areas of organisational functionality, from marketing to engineering, from product innovation to process improvement. With the emergence of the digital age, IT specialists have embraced the world of design thinking with concepts such as 'Agile' and 'Lean' now mainstream.

Phases of the design thinking process are outlined as follows: empathise, define, ideate, prototype and test. Design thinking clearly puts the consumer at the heart of the process and begins with understanding how they currently engage with the organisation. This empathic understanding of the consumer's experience allows the designer to define the problem or opportunity based on what the data shows is important and of value to the consumer.

The next phase of the design thinking process is to generate ideas and then to build a prototype of a potential solution or solutions. Prototypes are tangible artefacts that can be tested with the consumer, and should be low-cost enough to allow for failure and learning. Valuable feedback is gained and acted on for the next iteration of the solution. Prototyping is the precursor to scaling up to mass production or implementation, or one can pivot back to the empathy stage to gather more data.

## CONNECTING COACHING, DESIGN THINKING AND CULTURE CHANGE

In line with the systemic approaches proposed by Lawrence and Hawkins[v], by integrating design thinking principles we propose an approach to building a coaching culture that is human-centred, inclusive and iterative (see Figure 1). Our model identifies what needs to be done and how it can be achieved incorporating individuals' needs, motivations and feelings as well as including the wider perspectives of the multiple stakeholders involved in and benefiting from the coaching process.

**Figure 1: A design thinking approach to building a sustainable coaching culture**
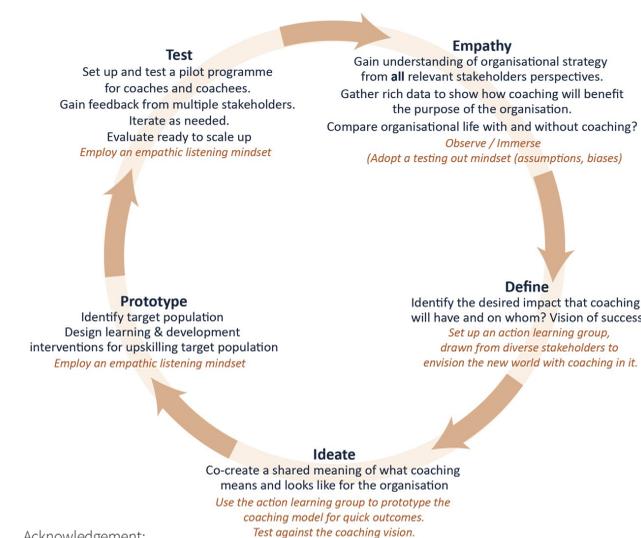


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Our model integrates the iterative nature of design-thinking principles. We hypothesise that this conceptual model can be implemented in organisations of any size. As such, we invite connection with interested parties who may be willing to participate in the process of testing this hypothesis.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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