Building Internal Coaching Capacity: Key Ingredients for Developing Internal Champions in the Workplace

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Abstract

An ongoing gap in the literature highlights the need to explore and address the essential elements required to build internal coaching capacity and develop effective internal coaches within organisations. This paper contributes to addressing this gap by exploring the essential ingredients critical for building internal coaching capacity. The main objective of this paper is to enhance our understanding of the factors that contribute to building internal coaching capacity, thereby supporting the design and implementation of effective internal coaching programs within organisations. First, an online survey was used to collect quantitative data, offering a general overview of coaching activities across Australia's rail organisations. This was followed by a qualitative phase, which involved semi-structured interviews with participants from two major rail organisations. Results from both the quantitative and qualitative phases indicate that organisations widely utilise both internal and external coaching, with internal coaching primarily occurring in an informal form. The qualitative findings relevant to the objective of this study suggest that (1) formalising internal coaching practices and ensuring accessibility across organisational hierarchies, (2) maintaining synergies between internal and external coaching activities while concurrently engaging in extensive internal coach training, (3) securing leadership commitment and support from upper management, and (4) cultivating a learning culture to support coaching can be considered among key components in building internal coaching capacity, and driving more effective coaching programs within organisations.

Keywords: Workplace coaching, Internal coaching, Capacity building, Learning and development

Introduction

Workplace coaching, sometimes referred to as organisational coaching, emerges as a pivotal strategy for leadership development across various sectors and industries (Ponte et al., 2006; McNally & Lukens, 2006). It serves as a dual-faceted method facilitating change in humans and organisations (Cavanagh et al., 2005; Khalique et al., 2024) and stands out as a valuable tool for workplace learning and professional development (Cantrell et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2016; Rajasinghe & Allen, 2020). Zeus and Skiffington (2001) emphasise that "coaching is about change and transformation—about the human ability to grow, to alter maladaptive behaviours and generate new, adaptive, and successful actions" (p. 3).

Organisations worldwide invest significant time, resources, and financial capital in both in-house and external programs designed for the learning and development of employees, aiming to enhance individual and organisational performance (Šebestová & Popescu, 2022). These programs are tailored for leaders, managers, and employees at all levels, providing them with the requisite knowledge, skills, tools, and abilities needed to improve their performance, work attitude, influence, and overall effectiveness. These efforts contribute to fostering productivity, enhancing personnel satisfaction, and improving wellbeing markers (Theeboom et al., 2014), emotional intelligence (Gavin, 2018), and are generally anticipated to yield improved workplace outcomes (Ozyilmaz, 2020).

At the core of initiatives aimed at fostering positive outcomes lies the construction of capability and the provision of learning and development opportunities that inspire positive change and growth. Organisational coaching, whether provided by external or internal coaches, emerges as a means to facilitate these positive changes and developments (Bickerich et al., 2018; Pousa & Mathieu, 2015). Traditionally, organisations have sought external coaching practitioners for a diverse range of services, including supporting the development of managers and leaders (Judge & Cowell, 1997; Kilburg, 2000).

However, these activities can also be conducted internally if the organisation possesses competent talent, resources, and infrastructure. Internal coaching has often occurred informally and may lack a systematic process and supportive culture for optimal outcomes. There are limited papers published in the literature that explore key ingredients and critical aspects of building internal coaching capacity. To address this issue, crucial for preventing potential harm from poorly executed coaching programs (Berglas, 2002; Schermuly & Graßmann, 2018), it is essential to explore ways in which internal coaching capacity can be effectively built.

Organisational capabilities and the development of underlying capacities are imperative in facilitating strategic activities within organisations (Jiang et al., 2019). By emphasising learning and creating conditions conducive to employee development, organisations can enhance their agility and secure access to proficient internal talent during critical junctures (Hicks & Peterson, 1999). The large majority of published papers in the literature have mostly focused on external form of coaching and scholars have made extensive efforts investigating various aspects of coaching including coaching effectiveness and coaching relationship (Bozer & Jones 2018; De Meuse et al., 2009; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; MacKie, 2007; O'Broin & Palmer, 2010; Jones et al., 2016; Tooth et al., 2013). While the present study cannot cover all facets of the topic of building internal coaching capacity, its objective and the central theme driving this research are to understand some of the key ingredients necessary for achieving internal coaching capacity, an underexplored area in the literature deserving further empirical exploration.

Literature Review

Coaching for Capability Building

A report from the Australian HR Institute (AHRI) in September 2023, based on responses from over 600 senior business and HR decision-makers, indicated that only 25% of respondents considered investments in line management capability as an effective measure of productivity (AHRI Quarterly, Sep 2023). While the AHRI report highlights the limited percentage of respondents who view investments in line management capability as effective for productivity (only 25%), the specific reasons for this sentiment are not explicitly elucidated in the report. The factors influencing this perception remain somewhat opaque. Despite the lack of detailed insight into the reported figures, it is crucial to explore alternative avenues.

Coaching interventions have shown promise in enhancing capability building (Burley & Pomphrey, 2013; Downey, 2003; Seemann et al., 2019; Wang, 2012), performance (Whitmore, 2010), productivity (Baldwin & Cherry, 2019), goal attainment (Grant et al., 2009), and individual and workplace wellbeing (Green et al., 2021). Parsloe (1999, p.8) defines coaching as "a process that enables learning and development to occur and thus performance to improve." Research has shown that investing in the learning and development of managers significantly associates with multiple performance outcomes, including organisational-level performance outcomes (Than et al., 2009). In the relatively recent past, a study conducted by the Institute of Leadership and Management (2011) revealed that 83% of the surveyed organisations were internally acquiring coaching services with the objective of strengthening their coaching capacity.

A case study research by Roscow & Zegar (1992), in the context of the United States, exemplifies the successful implementation of coaching and leadership practices at Procter and Gamble's Newland Plant. Faced with intense competition and rapid technological changes, a new plant manager catalysed a transformative shift, redefining managers' roles to emphasise coaching and leadership over hands-on tasks. Through self-reflection and revamped job descriptions, the organisation experienced notable improvements. Over twenty-four months, the plant progressed from a mid-tier position to a divisional player in the market, underscoring the impactful role of coaching and capability building in elevating organisational performance and improving business outcomes.

Anderson (2013) carried out a research project in the UK and found that the majority of managers and leaders surveyed demonstrated significant engagement in coaching behaviours in the form of providing developmental and performance support to enhance skills and performance (SD= 0.775) of their employees as well as helping their staff to develop themselves as individuals (SD=0.732). Anderson also reported that almost half of the line managers in the

sample (46.3%) didn't have a formal management qualification. While Anderson's (2013) research did not delve into how those coaches in the study gained coaching skills or the provision of capability building programs to gain coaching skills, the author emphasised the importance of recognising coaching as an essential aspect of effective leadership. Interpreting this insight, one can argue that building internal coaching capacity and developing both the leaders and staff members outside line management to become champions of internal coaching may yield positive outcomes for organisations.

Grant (2016) believes that a meticulous approach is required for allocating resources for equipping managers and leaders with coaching skills. Grant asserts that frequently organisations expend substantial time, energy, and resources on cultivating coaching skills among their leaders and managers, only to discover that despite initial enthusiasm, the acquired coaching skills are not consistently applied in the workplace. Instead, individuals often revert to traditional command-and-control leadership behaviours. Ebrahimi and Cameron (2012) note the rising popularity of coaching in the workplace, with many employees actively participating in coaching activities. The authors indicate that it appears that informal internal coaching practices have been embraced by organisations for quite some time. However, the authors reference Parsloe's view that despite well-intentioned efforts, this form of coaching is often characterised as "ad hoc, haphazard, and short-lived" (Parsloe, 1999, p. 11).

Understanding Internal Coaching

The approach "in-house" and "internal coaching" denotes a form of coaching where a member of the organisation serves as the coach for an employee within the same organisation (Frost, 2008). Within the literature, there appears to be a lack of consensus on a universally applicable definition for internal coaching. Several papers on the subject, such as those by Baldwin & Cherry (2019) and Carter (2005), reference the definition of internal coaching put forth by Frisch in 2001 in a paper titled "The Emerging Role of the Internal Coach." According to Frisch (2001) "internal coaching is a one-on-one developmental intervention supported by the organisation and provided by a colleague of those coached who is trusted to shape and deliver a programme yielding individual professional growth" (p. 242).

Another facet to consider is the concept of "managerial coaching" (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2019; McCarthy & Milner, 2013) or "manager as coach," which places emphasis on the managers' role as a coach in facilitating the development of individuals through coaching interventions (Lawrence, 2017). For the purposes of this paper, the term internal coach is broadened to encompass both leaders and managers, and colleagues or peers from outside line management. It is noteworthy that the scope of internal coaching is not confined solely to senior management, diverging from narrower designations such as "manager as coach," and "leader as coach".

Capacity building involves elevating individual expertise or reinforcing the competency of an entity or a group of entities to execute particular responsibilities (Gustafsson et al., 2020). The decision to build internal capacity, engage an internal coach, an external coach, or a blend of both is contingent upon the specific organisational objectives and the organisational capacity (Schalk & Landeta, 2017). External coaches, defined as professional coaching practitioners external to the client organisation (Nicolau et al., 2023), charge fees ranging from $10,000 to $100,000 per coachee for an approximate duration of nine months (Rock & Donde, 2008). In a 2009 study in the United States, a large sample of coaches who participated in an online survey (n=428) reported an average hourly rate of $259 for psychologist coaches and $214 for non-psychologist coaches (Bono et al., 2009). A study in the context of coaching in educational institutions suggested that for in-person coaching to help teachers improve instruction, student achievement, and subsequent long-term economic outcomes "the cost per educator per contact hour was $169.43 for coaching, in 2017–2018 US Dollars" (Barrett & Pas, 2020, p.604).

External coaches are often credited with the significant advantage of objectivity (Machin, 2010; Wasylyshyn, 2003), being less susceptible to internal politics or wielding power to influence coaching relationships (Jones et al., 2016). Their ability to offer a broader range of perspectives is attributed to their extensive experience working with a diverse clientele from various organisations (Tobias, 1996). However, St John-Brooks (2014) notes that even when external coaches immerse themselves deeply in an organisation and its personnel, numerous ethical dilemmas similar to those faced by internal coaches may persist. This underscores the complexity of capacity building for workplace coaching programs, whether facilitated by internal or external coaches, emphasising that it is not a straightforward, one-size-fits-all process.

While some organisations contracting external coaches are increasingly encouraging induction processes that familiarise these coaches with the company's culture and ethos (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006), internal coaches may be preferred due to their profound familiarity with the organisations' culture, internal processes, and various aspects of organisational dynamics (Carter, 2005; Tyler, 2000). Mukherjee (2012) highlights one of the notable advantages of

internal coaches—their deep understanding of internal dynamics and the specific business challenges within the organisations where they are employed. Furthermore, building internal coaching capacity brings practical benefits, including cost-effectiveness (Pandolfi, 2020) and the ready availability of talent within the organisation (Rock & Donde, 2008). The outcome of a meta-analysis by Jones et al. (2016) indicated that internal coaches were more effective than their external counterparts in the studies considered, although they couldn't examine moderation by criterion type. Subsequent research by Jones et al. (2018) suggested that the relative importance of internal and external coaches varies based on the specific coaching objectives and their impact on outcomes.

Some researchers posit that building internal coaching capacity extends beyond simply branding in-house coaching programs (Grant & Hartley, 2013) or assigning leaders and line managers to provide coaching (Frost, 2008). Rather, it appears that building internal coaching capacity is not only a time-intensive initiative to equip leaders, managers and other selected members of the organisation with workplace coaching knowledge and skills (Grant & Hartley, 2013) but also a complex process to foster a culture that supports and promotes internal coaching (McKee et al., 2009).

Theoretical Perspective

The resource-based view (RBV) focuses on how key capabilities play a crucial role in generating competitive advantage and superior performance (Clulow et al., 2007). Scholars in organisational behaviour and human resource development have utilised the resource-based view of the firm to contend that a strong commitment to human resource and personnel development contributes to competitive advantage (Collins, 2022). This is achieved by fostering organisational-level, employee-based resources that are both unique and valuable. Building internal coaching capacity can create a unique organisational resource that enhances employee development and leadership from within.

Human capital theory, developed by Becker (1962) and Rosen (1989), posits that workers possess a range of skills and abilities that can be enhanced or expanded through training and education (Xu & Fletcher, 2017). Building on this, human capital theory also highlights that investing in employee development, such as through internal coaching, can enhance productivity and adds significant value to the organisation.

Maslow's theory of human motivation highlights that addressing fundamental needs, such as safety, is essential before individuals can strive for higher levels like self-actualisation (Maslow, 1954). Thus, formal internal coaching programs, in contrast to ad-hoc and informal coaching conversations, can be crucial in establishing a foundation of trust and confidentiality, creating a safe environment where employees can fully engage in their development journey (Ebrahimi, 2024).

While earlier theories of learning and human behaviour, such as Social Learning Theory and Social Constructivism, highlight the importance of observation, interaction, and collaboration for fostering learning and development, Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) emphasises the critical reflection process, where adults examine their assumptions and perspectives. This process requires a supportive environment and the right resources to encourage individuals to challenge and change their thinking. In the context of developing internal coaching capacity, it is not merely about teaching techniques but equipping aspiring internal coaches with the range of competencies to facilitate transformational learning in others, which can be considered an outcome of effective coaching (Mbokota & Myres, 2024). Those who are trained in internal coaching should be skilled and competent to guide employees through this reflective process, supporting them in shifting their perspectives and overcoming barriers to development. This, in turn, contributes to both individual growth and broader organisational development. In this study, I therefore focus on exploring whether moving beyond informal, ad-hoc coaching to provide structured internal coaching is a key factor in building internal coaching capacity and developing effective internal coaching champions.

Methods

The research question guiding this study is: What are the characteristics of an effective internal coaching program? This article presents a subset of results that emerged while addressing this question as part of a larger project (Ebrahimi, 2016). Hence, the findings presented herein constitute a segment of the comprehensive insights gained from the larger study. To explore this question, a mixed methods design was utilised in the current research project. According to Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2009), "mixed methods research represents research that involves collecting, analysing, and interpreting quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or in a series of studies that investigate the same underlying phenomenon" (p. 265). In the quantitative phase (Phase 1) an online survey instrument was utilised to collect quantitative data, conducting a general scan across Australia's rail organisations to understand the

level of coaching activities. The survey questionnaire was piloted internally to assess the clarity and structure of the questions and to identify any errors or issues that might influence the quality of the responses. This process helped refine the instrument before the final distribution.

The results of Phase 1 informed the design of the qualitative phase (Phase 2), which involved semi-structured interviews with two of the largest rail organisations in Australia. The subset of results and findings presented in this article primarily originates from the data collected during Phase 1, while also relying significantly on the results from Phase 2 of the research project.

In adherence to research ethics, ethical approval was obtained through the Institutional Review Board and Institutional Ethics Committee. In the context of internet-based, telephone, and in-person data collection, it is imperative to address ethical considerations like obtaining informed consent and ensuring data security, as highlighted by Hewson et al. (2003) and Rothwell et al. (2021). Therefore, an informed consent form was developed for the participant population in both phases, holding particular significance in the qualitative phase of data collection.

Miles and Huberman (1994) posit that "no study, whether qualitative, quantitative, or both, can include everything; you cannot study everyone everywhere doing everything" (p.27). In the present study, the sample population for the quantitative phase comprised both public and private rail organisations based on a list provided by the Australian Railway Association. In terms of the sampling method, a simple random sampling technique was employed in this phase. The qualitative phase, conducted through semi-structured interviews, employed purposive sampling to gather qualitative data from two of the largest rail organisations in Australia. Purposive sampling, also known as purposeful sampling, involves selecting individuals or groups with relevant knowledge or experience regarding the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Key factors include not only expertise and experience, but also availability, willingness to participate, and the ability to effectively communicate their thoughts and experiences (Bakkalbasioglu, 2020). Interview participants included (1) internal coaches, (2) external coaches, (3) coachees, and (4) managers from the two rail organisations who voluntarily participated in the qualitative phase. This approach provided a comprehensive view of different perspectives from internal and external coaches, as well as coachees and managers.

Quantitative data were exported into SPSS for analysis, while qualitative data were analysed using NVivo, widely recognised software for qualitative data analysis, particularly effective for analysing large amounts of textual data in the form of transcripts (Zamawe, 2015). Subsequently, the reading, coding, and interpretation of qualitative data, considered starting points for meaningful analysis (Bazeley, 2009), were followed by a thematic analysis (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019) that led to the emergence of key themes in relation to this study, as reported below. While Phase One primarily sought to conduct a general scan to understand coaching activities across rail organisations and did not delve into in-depth statistical analysis, it yielded crucial results.

Results

Quantitative (An Online Survey in the form of a General Scan)

The survey questionnaire, administered during Phase One, was distributed to 129 rail organisations, both public and private, through email invitations facilitated by the Australian Railway Association (ARA). The responses yielded a total of 65 completed surveys, resulting in an overall response rate of 50.3%. Demographic data indicated a predominance of male respondents, constituting 75.4% of the survey participants (n=49), while female respondents accounted for 24.6% (n=16). Age distribution revealed that 30% of participants fell within the 45-54 years bracket, and an additional 28% were within the 35-44 years range. Notably, 10% of respondents fell within the 25-34 years age range.

As shown in Table 1, results revealed that over 90% of respondents acknowledged the occurrence of informal coaching within their organisations. This high percentage underscores the widespread recognition of informal coaching internally within participating organisations.

Table 1: Does informal coaching occur in your organisation?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	53	81.5	93.0	93.0
	No	4	6.2	7.0	100.0
	Total	57	87.7	100.0	
Skipped	System	8	12.3		
Total		**65**	**100.0**		

The majority of survey respondents (n=46), as depicted in Table 2, disclosed that coaching activities had taken place within their organisations over the past five years. When asked about the likelihood of their organisations incorporating coaching within the next three years, 70.8% of respondents (n=46) affirmed this possibility, while over 23% indicated a negative response (n=8). These findings suggested that internal coaching, potentially informal in nature, has been an ongoing practice within their organisations and is likely to persist. This underscored the significance of further exploration in the next phase concerning the underlying infrastructure and internal coaching capacity.

Table 2: Has your organisation undertaken any coaching in the last 5 years?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	46	70.8	70.8	70.8
No	15	23.1	23.1	93.8
Don't know	4	6.2	6.2	100
Total	**65**	**100**	**100**	

Results, as illustrated in Table 3, indicated varying degrees of integration of coaching within organisational programs. Notably, participants highlighted the use of coaching as a supplementary tool in existing leadership and management development programs, reflected by a mean score of 2.47 (SD = 1.18). Furthermore, coaching was identified as an integral component of training initiatives within organisations, as evidenced by a mean score of 2.62 (SD = 1.30). However, the most pronounced finding was the prevalent use of coaching on an ad-hoc and informal basis, garnering the highest mean score of 2.84 (SD = 1.19).

Table. 3: Distribution of Responses Regarding the Integration of Coaching in Organisational Programs

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Coaching is part of leadership development programs.	44	1.00	4.00	2.0455	.88802
Coaching is part of general management development program.	45	1.00	4.00	2.2444	.88306
Coaching is used on an ad-hoc basis and not as part of a formal program.	45	1.00	6.00	2.8444	1.18620
The use of coaching is written into your organisations' training and development plan.	45	1.00	6.00	3.2000	1.25408
Coaching is part of change programs.	45	1.00	6.00	2.7556	1.22763
Coaching is an integral part of training within your organisation.	45	1.00	6.00	2.6222	1.30190
Coaching is used to supplement existing leadership and management development programs.	45	1.00	5.00	2.4667	1.17937
Valid N (listwise)	44				

In addition, participants were asked about the organisational levels receiving coaching. With multiple response options, the aim was to gauge coaching availability across all employee tiers. As indicated in Table 4, 84.1% noted coaching provision for 'Middle management,' revealing a widespread application of coaching across diverse organisational levels. Notably, the data also highlights that coaching is generally extended to employees across various levels within organisations.

Table 4: Coaching is offered to different levels of seniority in organisations

Which of the following levels of seniority does your organisation offer coaching to?	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Other employees below management	21	17.6	47.7
Senior management and directors	25	21.0	5.68
First line management or supervisors	36	30.3	8.18
Middle management	37	31.1	8.41
Total	**119**	**100**	

In the quantitative results presented in Figure 1, the majority of responses (78.7%) indicated that senior staff provided coaching within their own departments. Notably, there was substantial engagement from other employees, with active

involvement in coaching direct reports and colleagues from different departments. The findings suggest a dual approach involving both internal and external coaching, as highlighted by a significant number of respondents (n=25) reporting the use of external coaching in their organisations.
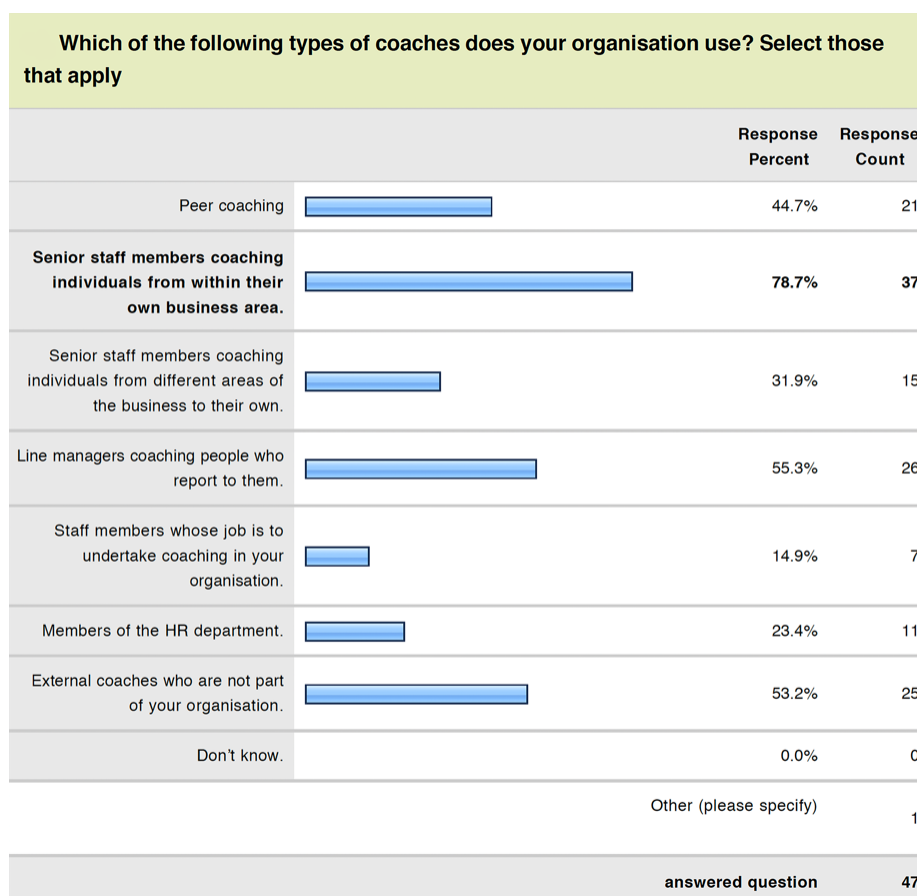
Which of the following types of coaches does your organisation use? Select those that apply		Response Percent	Response Count
Peer coaching		44.7%	21
Senior staff members coaching individuals from within their own business area.		**78.7%**	**37**
Senior staff members coaching individuals from different areas of the business to their own.		31.9%	15
Line managers coaching people who report to them.		55.3%	26
Staff members whose job is to undertake coaching in your organisation.		14.9%	7
Members of the HR department.		23.4%	11
External coaches who are not part of your organisation.		53.2%	25
Don't know.		0.0%	0
Other (please specify)			1
		answered question	47

Figure 1: Coaching Modalities in Surveyed Organisations

Qualitative (Semi-structured Interviews)

The thematic analysis conducted as part of the qualitative data analysis process unveiled three central themes crucial for achieving the objective of this study concerning the development of internal coaching capacity. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of coaching skills, coach credentials, and the associated training as fundamental aspects of building internal coaching capacity. Additionally, nearly all participants underscored the significance of top management support and a culture of learning as critical elements in the process of developing internal coaching capacity. The semi-structured interview participants offered invaluable comments and insightful feedback pertaining to the significance of these themes.

Coach's Skills, Credentials and Training

The qualitative results underscore the collaborative endorsement of external coaches to enhance organisational capability. Results highlighted the positive impact of engaging external coaches, particularly Executive Coaches for Senior Project Managers, in enhancing organisational capability. This approach empowered coachees to promote and offer coaching internally.

> ...With this particular program what we were initially looking for was engaging a mentor for Senior Project Managers, and what I realised once getting involved and getting into what was actually required, it wasn't so much of a mentor, it was more of a coach, and specifically an Executive Coach, so what I went for was to have someone come into the organisation who could executively coach our Senior Project Managers, and then with that the intent is to leave, which is what we have achieved, is to leave a legacy behind where our Senior Project Managers can do that, the coaching, with their people, and so hence came the Leader as Coach Program evolved from that, and so the target audience are the Senior Project Managers [Manager 1].

Introducing external coaches into the organisation to serve as role models and lay the groundwork for additional training could be advantageous for preparing leaders and managers to become proficient internal coaches.

> ...by bringing in expert coaches now, professional coaches, we're establishing role models as part of that initial

foundational development, and consequently, we have a group of leaders and managers prepared for further training and coaching others [Manager 4].

Internal Coach 2 stressed the pivotal importance of training internal coaches. However, the participant asserts that identifying suitable individuals to undergo coach training is important to avoid potential financial resource waste.

...If you're going to do an internal coaching model, finding the right people is very critical. We trained a lot of people up that I simply won't provide the opportunity to, because they don't have the style or the skill set…I think companies often waste a lot of money and therefore don't see the benefit because they've coached the wrong people in coaching [Internal Coach 2].

Some coachees expressed their concern in relation to not being informed of their coach's skills and there was widespread agreement that without knowing coaching skills and credibility of internal coaches it is difficult for coachees to engage in coaching process.

... we don't know whether or not that internal person has the right skills to coach us [Coachee 4].

Similarly, Internal Coach 3 recommended a consistent and standardised coach training program for all internal coaches, highlighting the need for a more formal process in building internal capacity. The prevalence of informal coaching and inconsistent training among internal coaches appears to have resulted in feedback of this nature from both coachees and internal coaches.

We don't have internal coaching program. I am unofficially coaching and its not an official role, so I have been through coaching accreditation and know what are the Dos and Don'ts in coaching but some other internal coaches may not have the right skills and it causes a lot of confusion for our team members since they can't trust in their coaches knowledge and skills [Internal Coach 3].

All internal coaches possessed a formal university education background in either a management discipline or a discipline closely relevant to psychology. According to Internal Coach 1, their previous university-level training played a crucial role in building the confidence needed to support the development of internal coaches and actively participate in internal coaching.

I did my Masters of Management, …well a number of subject offerings through there was one semester it was just on Change Management and then coaching as a result of that, so coaching was one element of that, of the course. So based on my education background I was offered by the organisation to take on the role of an internal coach on the side of my role as a senior HR advisor [Internal Coach 1].

Similarly, another participant proposed that recognising individuals with prior exposure to certain coaching skills and possessing a closely relevant educational background can contribute to establishing an environment conducive to supporting internal coaching programs.

I have a degree in Behavioural Science, and when I finished my degree, I started up a not-for-profit company with another Psychologist… so I had a good understanding of listening and questioning techniques or some models that is used to help people to transform, so I didn't need further training really and when we started to introduce internal coaching programs, I was happy to contribute and support it [Internal Coach 2].

Relevant training and coaching accreditation programs on specific tools developed by external organisations were identified as potential avenues to build internal capacity. These programs were seen as effective in taking initial steps toward enhancing internal coaching capacity and engaging disengaged staff members. However, it is important to note that the specific programs Manager 2 is referring to involve short-term workshops and do not encompass comprehensive coach training and education.

...I looked at all the people who'd said that they'd be coaches and were obviously passionate about that, and I selected them to then become Accredited LSI ["Life Styles Inventory" by Human Synergistics] Coaches, because LSI is the tool of choice in here, and now I'm running my Frontline Leadership Program I want internal coaches because, you know, I feel like at the moment with our organisation we've got least experienced leaders in the business, the Frontline Leaders, who are really like the most remote or the most cut-off from head office, you know, and they're the most cut-off and disengaged [Manager 2].

Another participant, along with several others, emphasised that coach training and accreditation programs can serve as a starting point to build internal coaching capacity, facilitating a gradual transition from informal to formal coaching.

...Some of them we are getting accredited as coaches, so they will sort of provide that informal coaching and be there as a support, but we can also count on them to run more structured coaching programs [Manager 3].

Similar comments from other participants suggested the need for structured and systematically developed coach training beyond coaching skills that may be provided as part of capability building to leadership level employees.

When it comes down to coaching, training on coaches, we haven't really had a structured program on a coach per sae, it's more capitalising on leadership, leadership, rather than coaching as such, so we've kind of used that in the absence of having a proper coaching or mentoring training [Internal Coach 4].

The views of external coaches were in line with the feedback of most other participants in terms suggesting that while short term training and coach accreditations can be effective, regular assessment of organisational needs and providing more comprehensive training to build broader competence in internal coaches is essential to sustain internal programs.

Coaching skills isn't something you can pick up overnight—it's more like becoming a psychologist. You know, the kind of journey that takes years of training, dedication…so, yes, consistent training, exposure to different models, continuous evaluation, and feedback loops...and, of course, as they develop, understanding their limitations and keeping track of progress over time [External Coach 3].

Leadership Buy-In and Support from the Top

The results underscored a unanimous emphasis among participants on the crucial role of top management support in building internal coaching capacity. Participants consistently highlighted the necessity for a culture where managers and leaders recognise the value of coaching and commit to allocating financial resources to sustain coaching programs effectively.

It has to be valued by the leaders, executive. Executive has to value it because that's what's going to continue with the funding, continue with the … because especially in an organisation like this, you will always have some form of sweep [Coachee 10].

The feedback from most participants underscored a shared emphasis on the critical need for top management support in establishing internal coaching development programs that are not only sustainable but also protected from the perception of being short-lived or ad-hoc. Internal Coach 4's perspective, echoed by many, highlighted the necessity for these programs to be communicated as enduring initiatives.

It needs to be not a one-off program, it needs to be positioned at the front with key messages saying You know what, this is going to be a three-year rolling program or It's part of the talent review process, so it's got to be something that they don't just glaze over and think Here we go again, it's another program that's just going to last for a little while. [Internal Coach 4].

Manager 2 emphasised that leaders can play a pivotal role in fostering a coaching culture by demonstrating it in their own actions, supporting coaching initiatives, and serving as role models for their employees.

So I've got all my team through the coaching and I've invested a fair bit with my team going through things, like typical conversations, fierce conversations, what are the behaviours that we want to see, and trying to walk the talk myself and I support coaching in my teams and try to be a good role model for my staff [Manager 2].

External Coach 1 suggested that coaching needs to be supported at the top of organisations.

So, this needs to be supported by executives at the top, and you need to do a bigger cultural piece, and then fit coaching as a really specific targeted tool within it, to really get value, and that would be the sort of culture that would support coaching [External Coach 1].

Manager 3 attributed his support for internal coaching initiatives to his educational background in Organisational Psychology, which included a Master's Degree with a focus on coaching. His qualifications, coupled with a history in Human Resources, positioned him as a qualified and enthusiastic advocate for internal coaching programs.

My background is in psychology, Organisational Psychology – I've done a Masters Degree in that and one of my subjects was on coaching – So when we decided to run internal coaching programs here, I was one of the managers that supported the idea and was qualified and eager to support others through coaching programs [Manager 3].

Learning Culture to Promote Coaching

The majority of participants uniformly emphasised the imperative role of cultivating a learning-oriented culture that recognises and rewards knowledge sharing for the successful implementation of internal coaching.

We need a culture that rewards knowledge sharing, and coaching can fit into leadership, personal and professional development there" [Manager 4].

Participants in general emphasised the prerequisite for a culture centred on learning and continual development as a foundational requirement for effective internal coaching programs.

…you need a culture of learning and on-going development first [Coachee 4].

Consensus among external coaches emphasised the pivotal role of a learning culture in fostering employee motivation for growth. One external coach articulated,

… has to be a learning culture where you get motivated employees who want to improve their career growth and so forth, and they spread that energy [external coach 1].

A foundational aspect of internal coaching, as highlighted by a coachee, involves the necessity of a learning culture promoting collaboration and open communication.

Open conversations, rather than having a command-and-control system in place, to have a culture that people communicate openly, share ideas and knowledge, engage in learning [Coachee 7].

An internal coach emphasised the imperative for a cultural shift from an assertion-based culture to a learning culture to facilitate the occurrence of coaching.

Our company is not a learning culture, it's a knowledge-driven culture, and it's an assertion-based culture, which means because I know or because I've seen it, or because I've been here for a long period of time, I'm right… To move ourselves to a learning culture we've got a very long way to go, and if you're talking about a coaching, that evolves from a learning culture [Internal coach 2].

The consensus among participants was that coaching is centred on development, emphasising the importance of creating an environment that invests in employees' learning and development.

…an environment that invests in individuals, so I've often heard, I've heard things before that We're not a learning environment or We're not here to educate people, or whatever, and I think even though education is not coaching, it follows the same ethos, and it's about individual development, expanding your horizons" [Coachee 12].

The results consistently underscore the imperative of shifting from a blame culture to a culture emphasising learning and encouragement. This notion was echoed by an internal coach who emphasised,

You can't blame them every time, you've got encourage them. They won't be successful every time but they need coaching and support to keep going to get the right result [Internal coach 1].

Discussion

Mapping The Formalisation of Coaching and Accessibility Across Organisational Hierarchies

Many organisations that responded to online survey questions in Phase 1 of the present study have integrated extensive informal coaching activities into their capability-building initiatives and training programs, as revealed by the findings. Furthermore, the findings indicate that both receiving and facilitating internal coaching are not confined solely to leaders, supervisors, or line managers. Findings revealed evidence suggesting that coaching was integral part of training and development within organisations. Moreover, the present study's outcomes corroborate the insights from the 2002 "Coaching at Work Survey," involving 280 leading UK companies, where 93 percent of managers advocated for coaching accessibility to all employees, irrespective of seniority (Rock & Donde, 2008). The current research confirms that coaching activities are prevalent across organisational levels; nevertheless, it seems that such coaching predominantly takes an informal trajectory.

Additionally, the findings of the present study contribute to the existing literature by providing evidence supporting the necessity for consistent internal coach training opportunities accessible to all internal coaches. Moreover, Earlier research had suggested that for managers and leaders to be recognised by their colleagues as internal coaches, a clear job title that represent them as a coach was deemed beneficial (Frisch, 2001). The present study found evidence suggesting that enhancing internal communication about coaching skills, credibility, and the backgrounds of internal coaches is an important factor to consider in coaching practices. These insights underscore the significance of

establishing a formal and structured process for both capability building and internal communication, offering a valuable perspective on capacity-building within organisations.

Previous literature suggests that an informal coaching environment is marked by spontaneous interactions or a lack of deliberate planning (Tompkins, 2018). Studies advocate for a departure from informal and ad-hoc coaching, emphasising the need for a more structured approach (Boak & Crabbe, 2019; Parsloe, 1999). Consequently, recognising the potential prevalence of informal internal coaching activities, the training of suitable internal coaches, along with the strategic integration of internal coaching initiatives into broader learning and development cultures and programs, emerges as a crucial step toward building and sustaining internal coaching capacity.

Strengthening Internal Coaching Capacity through Synergies and Coach Training

From the results it became evident that most of efforts to build internal coaching capacity was limited to utilising external coaches to coach management staff and this was used as a means to introduce coaching skills to managers and prepare them for further training to become competent coaches. This showed the synergy between using both external and internal coaches. Further, external training in form of accreditation programs on specific models and tools, mostly in form of 360-degree feedback tools and leadership development tools with coaching and de-breifing components in it (e.g., Human Synergistics LSI) were utilised widely. However, it seems that coach training and equiping internal coaches with coaching skills stopped at that level and didn't proceed to provide internal coaches with more comprehensive and more extensive long-term training.

The benefits of the synergy and integration of learning and development activities within organisations was previously highlighted in the literature (McNally & Lukens, 2006; Morgan et al., 2015; Pintar et al., 2007; Roša & Lace, 2021). Earlier research had indicated that the synergy between training and coaching initiatives, along with external expertise partnering with internal talent, is effective in enhancing innovation, capability building, and individual and organisational development (McNally & Lukens, 2006; Morgan et al., 2015; Pintar et al., 2007; Roša & Lace, 2021). The findings of the present study reinforce previous research, demonstrating that professional external coaches play a crucial role in the development of managers, leaders, and employees. The skills, knowledge, and competencies gained through external coaching are often transferable internally within the organisation, contributing to the growth of internal coaching capacity.

The findings of the present study resonate with the idea that a crucial facet of developing internal coaching capacity entails the identification and training of well-suited employees. This training aims to equip them with essential coaching skills, knowledge, and competence to engage in in more formal and structured coaching within their respective organisations. The existing literature reinforces this perspective, highlighting the significance of evidence-based practice and underscoring the necessity for coaches to undergo comprehensive training in both coaching skills and professionalism (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Grant & Hartley, 2013; McCarthy & Milner, 2013). An important contribution of the findings of the present study is raising awareness and alerting organisations and coaching practitioners to concerns about the insufficient coaching skills and competency of managers and leaders in providing internal coaching, as also suggested by Milner and Milner (2018) in their Harvard Business Review article, *Most Managers Don't Know How to Coach People. But They Can Learn*. In parallel, Diller et al. (2020) further confirm that "coach training is an essential factor when selecting organisational coaches" (p. 313).

Over the past decade, there has been a concerted effort to fortify coaching practices, focusing explicitly on psychological principles and methodological frameworks grounded in a robust evidence base, as well as on coach training (Linley, 2006). Recent research suggests that coaching clients increasingly demand coaches with appropriate training and credentials (Cannon-Bowers et al., 2023). Therefore, based on existing knowledge in the literature and the findings of the present study, it can be suggested that a critical ingredient and component of capacity-building for internal coaching is laying out identifying suitable talent and planning comprehensive coach training.

Leadership Support and Engagement for Internal Coaching Capacity

The literature is explicit in relation to the significance of visible support from senior management for the success of coaching programs in the workplace (Stewart & Palmer, 2009). The significance of leadership endorsement, role modelling, commitment and dedication in fostering capacity development for successful coaching has been underscored by many scholars (Gormley & van Nieuwerburg, 2014; Milner et al., 2020). The present study's findings provide further evidence suggesting that building internal coaching capacity requires leadership and senior management team's support to not only facilitate the budgetary aspects of this endeavour but also position coaching within the organisation's larger learning and development culture in a structured and sustainable way.

Drawing from the results, it is reasonable to infer that involving leaders and managers in coaching, particularly those who have previous experience as coachees or formal training in coaching and possess a relevant educational background with a coaching component, could prove advantageous. The study indicates that individuals with these backgrounds may exhibit heightened motivation to endorse and propel initiatives aimed at building internal coaching capacity.

Cultivating a Learning and Coaching Culture for Internal Coaching Capacity

Parsloe (1999) defines coaching as "a process that enables learning and development to occur and thus performance to improve" (p.8). Extensive literature underscores that workplace learning and development necessitate cultivating a culture that encourages interaction, experimentation, curiosity, and creativity (Hailey & James, 2002). Within the coaching context, it has been established that fostering coaching conversations requires a culture that promotes dialogue and feedback (Abel & Nair, 2015). Moreover, research indicates that coaching contributes to distancing from a command-and-control culture, fostering collaboration (Ratiu et al., 2017).

Based on the emerged evidence from the present study, it can be suggested that fostering a learning culture, encouraging open communication, facilitating collaboration and coaching dialogues, and nurturing a blame-free environment are crucial ingredients for building internal coaching capacity. In alignment with this, Jones et al. (2002) emphasise the undeniable connection between a coach's effectiveness and the broader internal community, including managers and colleagues acting as coaches within organisational contexts. The findings of this study extend this understanding to internal coaching, suggesting that the organisation's environment, climate, and culture may significantly influence the effectiveness of internal coaching efforts. It can be suggested that in such an environment and culture, trust can be fostered. As asserted by Fritch (2001), the internal coach, being a colleague of those coached, needs to be trusted so that coaching conversations can begin in their most effective fashion. Therefore, building internal coaching capacity requires simultaneous attention to the development of a learning and coaching culture that actively supports and promotes coaching, and coaching behaviours.

Conclusion

While this paper identified some of the key ingredients that could potentially contribute to building internal coaching capacity and the development of effective internal coaching programs, the field of coaching continues to lack substantial empirical and practitioner research on internal coaching. This study delved into the factors constituting effective internal coaching, focusing on building internal coaching capacity as the foundation for developing effective internal coaching initiatives. The findings suggest that (1) formalising internal coaching practices and ensuring accessibility across organisational hierarchies, (2) maintaining synergies between internal and external coaching activities while concurrently engaging in extensive internal coach training, (3) securing leadership commitment and support from upper management, and (4) cultivating a learning culture to support coaching are key ingredients in building internal coaching capacity.

Although the findings shed light on the extensive coaching activities within some organisations, predominantly informal coaching, and indicated the benefits of a mix of internal and external coaching in taking steps toward internal capacity-building, the study couldn't explore all facets of building internal capacity due to certain limitations, a common challenge in research projects.

Limitations

Limitations include a small sample size in the first phase of data collection and a reasonably straightforward interpretation of the quantitative results that eschewed a more thorough statistical analysis. It's important to note that Phase 1 primarily served as a general scan across rail organisations to grasp the existence and level of coaching activities within them. The study also recognises its confined scope in exploring all potential factors contributing to the development of internal coaching capacity. Additionally, the research was focused on a single industry in Australia, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other industries or geographical contexts. Despite these limitations, the study's findings could offer valuable insights applicable to various sectors and diverse geographic contexts.

The study's findings, alongside the ongoing gap in the literature, highlight a compelling need for more comprehensive efforts to investigate not only the components, strengths, and weaknesses of internal coaching capacity development activities but also the barriers to capability building. These barriers include organisational cultures that may conflict with coaching practices, potential budgetary constraints, and specific leadership styles that could influence decision-

making in ways that undermine the value of learning, development, and organisational coaching practices. Additionally, strategies to mitigate these challenges need further exploration. Therefore, ongoing research, incorporating both scientific rigour and practitioner insights, is essential for further examining the complexities of building internal coaching capacity.

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