

**The Link between the Process of Change and Coaching in an  
Organization – A Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this case study was to highlight coaching in the process of change using a real life information technology and operational change project in an institution. It demonstrates the critical importance of coaching in change management, for successful change to occur. Any sustaining change requires ongoing coaching as an integral part of the process. The study heeds a call for adopting coaching to support organizational learning and change. It also attempts to open further research interests in the link between the process of change and coaching, and the benefits of coaching in change management today.

**Keywords:** organizational learning and change; change management; coaching for change; empowerment.

## Introduction

Today's dynamic world is causing organizations, groups and individuals to reframe their view of what 'normal' is: 'Change is the new normal', or 'the new normal is continuous change' (Jorgensen, Owens, & Neus, 2008). Drivers of change can be positive or negative. They can be environmental or personal. They can be of external or internal environments. Changes of external environment can be due to factors like markets, legislation, competition and economy and all these will have consequences for organizations, such as its strategy development. Changes in strategy can lead to changes in the way the organization is structured, which can impact relationships, responsibilities and ways of working. The way in which change is implemented and accepted through the organization will be largely influenced by its leaders, their attitudes and behaviors as perceived by their subordinates. When there are changes in the work carried out, skills of the employees would have to be assessed. Usually, training is needed in order to cope with new skill requirements and coaching is also necessary to facilitate mobility (Gallwey, 2000) (Burke & Litwin, 1992). Changes of internal environment can include immediate working environment, such as a change in job, a new organization, a change in personnel, or a change in terms of conditions of service, which are likely to invoke a range of emotional and political responses from relevant stakeholders. Every organization has its unique culture, and culture change only evolves over time as a result of many other changes.

In the Executive Overview of the Best Practices in Change Management – 2014 Edition, the report suggests that two of the greatest contributors to success are: employee engagement and participation; engagement with and support from middle management (Creasey & Hiatt, 2014). The study reported that the main obstacles when implementing change projects were: changing mindsets and attitudes; lack of motivation of involved employees. The "soft stuff" was the hardest to get right (Jorgensen, et al., 2008). Therefore, the most significant challenges are people oriented, motivation is the key to effective change, and to maintain motivation in the pursuit of change is a real challenge (Burke & Litwin, 1992). Regarding motivation, a coach can play a pivotal role in facilitating the change process (Downey, 2003).

The premise of this research was that change coaching supports effective change, among other valid supports (Bennett & Bush, 2014). The study aimed to establish the link between the process of change and coaching in an organization. The organizations is one of the leading institutions in professional and continuing education and where coaching is not a common practice in the workplace. Using a real-life project example to demonstrate how a coach facilitated the change process, maintained motivation throughout changing events, the study examines change process related factors pre- and post-coaching.

### Coaching for Change and its Assessment

Coaching is an effective skill for helping individuals and groups change, and coaching for change can have an impact on the organization or system (Bennett & Bush, 2014). While the efficacy of coaching is still not well understood, the AMA/Institute for Corporate Productivity Coaching Survey 2008 reported that two of the main reasons behind the termination of coaching assignments were: the inability of certain employees to change and the difficulty of measuring return on investment (ROI) (American Management Association, 2008). 'Coaching engages with people, the essentially human nature of coaching is what makes it work – and also what makes it nearly impossible to quantify' (Sherman & Freas, 2004).

One way to track the benefits associated with coaching is through the use of assessments. The critical lesson for coaches is to administer these assessments in a pre- and post-test format (American Management Association, 2008). Though there are several different ways

organization can use coaching, the most commonly used method of coaching is to make it an integral part of a supporting program.

## **Background of the Case Study**

### **Introduction of a new Student and Course Record System**

This case study involved a tertiary education institution in Hong Kong (called the Institution hereunder). The Institution was experiencing rapid growth, therefore to support the academic development and operation of the Institution, the Academic and Management Board had decided to partner with Cloud Business Services to implement a new Student and Course Record System in 2013. The author was a member of the Steering Committee participating in the strategic planning of the project. Several rounds of discussion were held with the Institution management to analyze the situation, plan the change process and to advise the management on anticipated hurdles in the process of change.

Understandings from the discussions were: when introducing an initiative – a new information technology system, it required staff to change the way they think and do things within the Institution. These disturbances to their behavior or thinking were likely to be met with resistance in some form (Prochaska, Norcross, & Diclemente, 2006) to bring about changes in behavior, a pervading change in context was required (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008); and to change behavior at the individual and organization level, the expectations, individual roles, behaviors, hierarchies and coalitions that existed within the systems of the organization needed to be examined and made more flexible (Peltier, 2001). According to Peltier (Peltier, 2001), below are opportunities or ways that coaches can help:

- a. When big things in the organization change
- b. Skill development for individual/group transitions
- c. Specific skill development
- d. Resolving specific problems

The Institution management, as the change sponsor, recognized the new system would be important in the Institution, the staff would have to go through stages of learning and skill development, and finally, they would benefit from an improved work flow with greater ease in administration, record keeping and retrieving, and enhanced technological skills. This is a directed change project driven from the top of the organization and relies on authority, persuasion, and compliance (Kerber & Buono, 2010, Spring).

For this project, the Institution management had established a change team infrastructure (Galpin, 1996) – Figure 1, to manage the process of change in order to make the implementation of the new system a success.

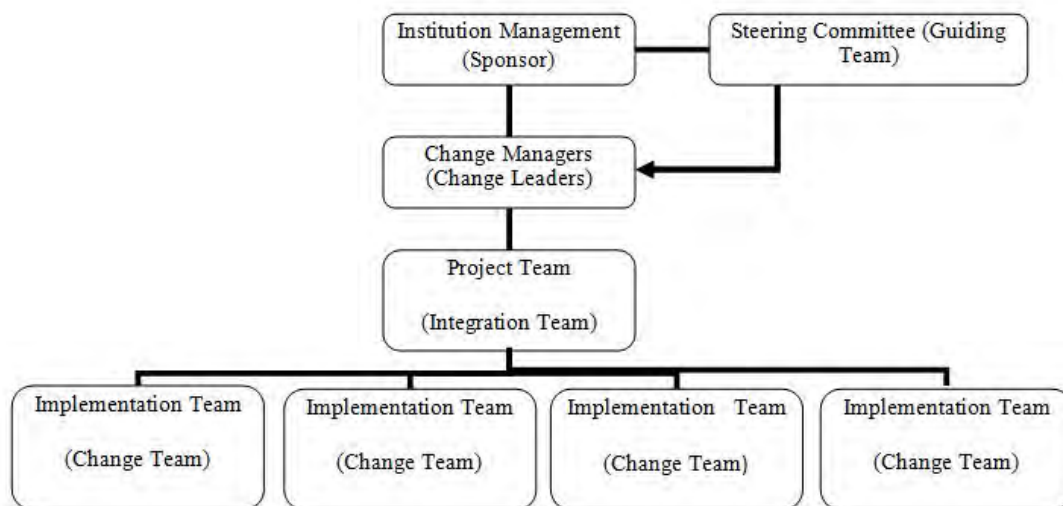


Figure 1. The Change Team Infrastructure (Galpin, 1996)

The author was in the Steering Committee which was guiding the coalition roles. The change sponsor appointed two Change Managers. A Project Team was also appointed since the project was for large-scale change. The Project Team coordinated across the Implementation Teams, identifying and resolving issues. Its members were the leaders of the Implementation Teams. The Project Team provided a coordination function, offering a regular forum for communication and learning among all the teams (Bennett & Bush, 2014).

The Change Managers had conducted a few change agent engagement sessions, followed by a series of fundamental change briefing sessions and system live demo to the change agents, whereby the concepts of the new system were explained, and upcoming changes on the operation processes were highlighted. In this change project, the Change Managers focused on several critical areas: communication, employee involvement, teamwork and change management (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008), and managing the transitions (Bridges, 2009).

During change, the Change Managers advised the Institution management to repeat the message again and again—emphasizing the need to change and the benefits of the new system. A website was established to introduce the background of the project and the newsystem, the change sponsor, the change agents and the system partner, the go-live schedule of the system and the project status. Newsletters were distributed to all stakeholders regularly to update them on the progress of the project, and to announce interim victories and the ultimate success.

Employee participation in the system design workshops and meetings were highly encouraged during the core system design stages because the Change Managers believed that participation gave substantive benefits for both individuals and the school. It was believed that when the staff saw that their input was valued, they would increase their commitment, involvement, and take greater personal responsibility for the new system outcomes (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008).

During change, people went through a series of stages and emotions (Kubler-Ross, 1973):

Pre-contemplation /Denial

The Project Team at the Institution faced a lot of changes in work load and project priorities and they did not believe in the urgency of the new Information Technology system. Program

administration teams in the Institution did not want to accept the new system and expose themselves to the new and long journey ahead.

Emotional arousal – anger, bargaining, upset

After acknowledgment, some project team members asked questions such as “Why now?” “Why me?” “Why not employing somebody else to do the additional work?” When they came to meetings, they revealed that they did not want to accept the changes in work arrangements and of wanted to do anything but get involved in the project. This caused frustration for those members who had already been convinced of the benefits of the project – the change sponsor, which included everyone in the management team and the change agents had the responsibility to implement the change.

Due to insufficient manpower for redeployment, some program teams started to bargain and requested to extend the duration of the project. This could have been due to panic, low confidence, or desperation. After many rounds of meetings on the project, project implementers were convinced of the need and were not going to escape from the situation. Nonetheless, they were still upset by the new arrangement of workload, which meant they would have to compromise some of their routines and were grieving for the loss that they were about to endure. This upset could take the form of sadness and emotions.

Contemplation /Acceptance

The Change Managers saw many team members move out of their denial, anger, bargaining and upset to a stage of acceptance. They were prepared to accept the reality of the situation, and the new and long journey ahead, but they were still uncertain about the impact of change and were in a state of anxiety.

### **A Discovery Journey of Preparation, Action, Maintenance and Termination**

The end of the contemplation stage is signalled by a change in problem behaviors (Prochaska, et al., 2006). Helping relationships between partners, peers, team-mates, and subordinates played an important role during the preparation stage. The buisiest period of change was during the action stage, requiring helping relationships.

In this project, the Change Managers guided the project team to communicate and relate in a way that engendered commitment, responsibility and accountability.

Resistance was part of the territory of change (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008). It occurred when people experienced the discomfort and ambiguity associated with change. The Change Managers listened to all the resistance and addressed them in order to assist the staff to develop new behaviors and thinking. The strategies and techniques they adopted were repeating the communication; acknowledging and legitimizing feelings; raising awareness; supporting individual learning and development; building confidence and providing feedback; rewarding and acknowledging progress to provide support that utilized resistance and enabled people to change (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008). It was understood that resistance exists and and it is important to embrace it and use its energy to build support for change. (Maurer, 1996)

The Change Managers were leading the change by applying critical skills such as communication, presence, engagement, listening, showing empathy, understanding the change curve and negotiating resistance. They also consistently used sound change management strategies and techniques to move people through the change cycle (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008). They listened and agreed with the request that the change agents would need some

coaching in order to do their job well. They sought approval from the Institution management to hire an external coach to conduct a workshop – ‘Team Building with Focus on Change Management’ for the change agents. The objective was to equip participants with knowledge and skills in managing change in the teams through coaching. As the change sponsor, the Institution management had been pleased with the progress of the changing events, and had been very supportive in approving the recommendations made by the Change Managers.

### **Methodology and Findings**

This article reflects on a change project in a tertiary education institution in Hong Kong from 2013 to present (it was on-going at the time of writing ). The project covered changes in the process of a system revamp caused by drivers in the internal environment. Values and benefits of coaching for change reflected were a collection of feedback from relevant stake holders via formal surveys in pre- and post-workshop settings and informal sharing sessions. In this survey, multiple questions used the well-accepted Likert-type scale, with a 1 rating designated as “lowest/least” and a 5 rating designated as “highest/most.” There were 9 questions in all, with a 10<sup>th</sup> question in the post-workshop survey. The questionnaires (Appendix I) had been designed to include below factors related to the change process described by Prochaska et al., (2009).

- clarification on the change process
- degree of emotion aroused in you
- degree of your resistance to the change process
- allowance to give feedback
- helping relations with your peer in the change team
- commitment to implement the change process
- sufficient knowledge and training on implementing the change process
- ability to manage the change implementation process
- confidence in implementing the change process
- enhancing the assertiveness in implementing the change process (only in post-workshop survey)

The questionnaires were distributed face-to-face before and after the one-day coaching session, and were to be completed by all participants in anonymity. The pre-workshop questionnaire was collected before the session started and the post-workshop questionnaire was collected immediately after the session finished. The scores for each question were organized in table and graphic presentation with focus on the differences in the pre- and post-workshop ratings. There were a total of 40 participants, including 14 who attended the first workshop and the other 26 who attended the second workshop. Participants were of various positions in the organizations: among them 13% were directors, 17% were managers, 17% were senior executive officers, 20% were executive officer, 13% were executive secretaries and 20% were executive assistants (Table 1). 20% were male and 80% were female (Table 2). With 36 questionnaires returned from a base of 40 participants, the response rate was 90% (Table 3). Differences in the score ratings of each question at pre- and post-workshop settings were presented in table 4 and graphic formats (Figure 2). And were calculated and expressed as percentage variance (Table 4).

Table 1. Background of Participants (Base: 40)

Position in the organization	
Director	13%
Manager	17%
Senior Executive Officer	17%
Executive Officer	20%
Executive Secretary	13%
Executive/Assistant	20%

Table 2. Gender of Participants (Base: 40)

Male	20%
Female	80%

Table 3. Response Rate (Base: 40)

No. of respondents	36
Response rate	90%



Table 4. Survey Results: Difference in Pre- and Post-Workshop Average Score and Percentage of Difference in Average Score

	Factors related to the change process	Average Score*		Percentage increase/ decrease
		Pre-workshop	Post-workshop	
Q1	Clarification on the change process	3.80	4.45	+17.1%
Q2	Degree of emotion aroused in you	3.06	3.21	+4.9%
Q3	Degree of your resistance to the change process	2.89	2.61	-9.7%
Q4	Allowance to give feedback	3.92	3.76	-4.1%
Q5	Helping relations with your peer in the change team	3.86	4.09	+6%
Q6	Commitment to implement the change process	4.44	4.39	-1.1%
Q7	Sufficient knowledge and training on implementing the change process	3.61	4.18	+15.8%
Q8	Ability to manage the change implementation process	3.64	4.30	+18.1%
Q9	Confidence in implementing the change process	3.67	4.15	+13.1%
Q10	Enhancing the assertiveness in implementing the change process (only in post-workshop survey)	-	4.73	-

\* Likert-type scale, with a 1 rating designated as “lowest/least” and a 5 rating designated as “highest/most”

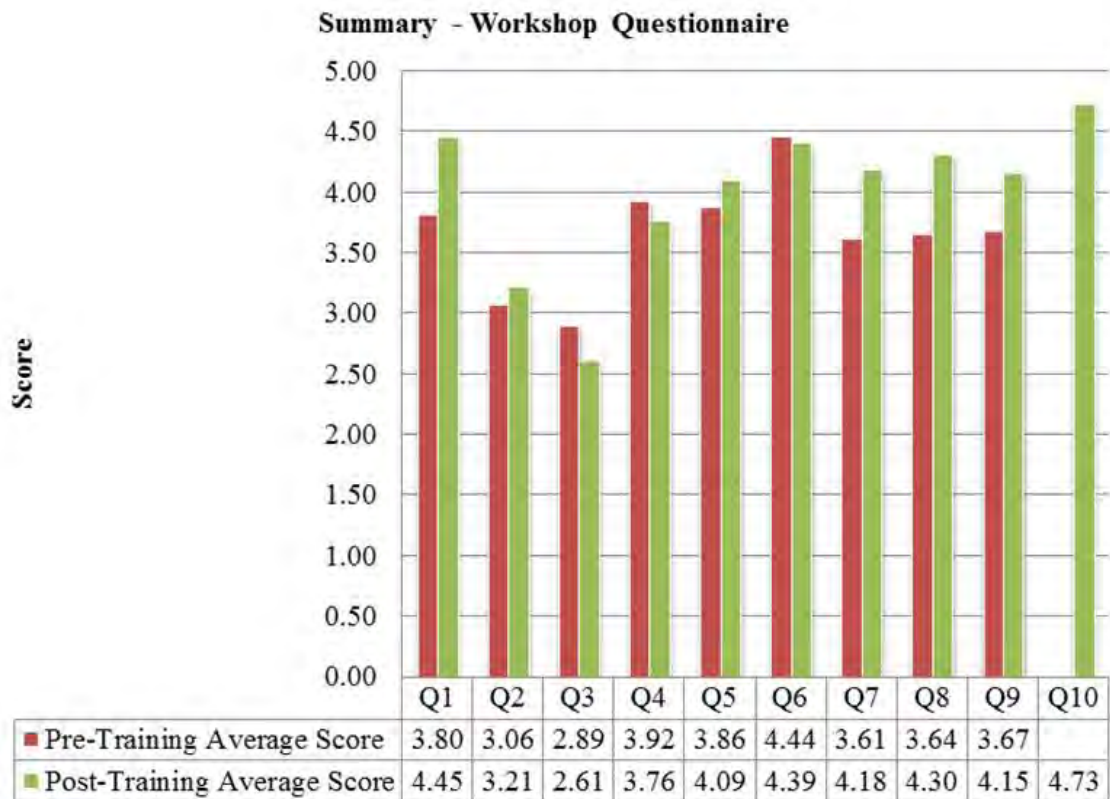


Figure 2. Survey Results: Difference in Pre- and Post-Workshop Average Score (Base: 40)

Remarks:	
Q1 – clarification on the change process	Q6 – commitment to implement the change process
Q2 – degree of emotions aroused in you	Q7 – sufficient knowledge and training on implementing the change process
Q3 – degree of resistance to the change process	Q8 – ability to manage the change implementation process
Q4 – allowance to give feedback	Q9 – confidence in implementing the change process
Q5 – helping relationships with peer in the change team	Q10 – enhancing the assertiveness in implementing the change process (only in post-workshop survey)

Upon administering the assessments in the pre- and post-workshop setting, the findings were as below. After the coaching workshop:

1. There was a 17.1% increase in the average score on “clarification on the change process” – the 2nd top benefit;
2. There was a 4.9% increase in the degree of emotion aroused in participants;
3. There was a 9.7% decrease in the average score on “degree of resistance to the change process” – the 5th top benefit;
4. There were only slight differences in the average score on “allowance to give feedback” (4%);
5. There was a 6% increase in the average score on “helping relationships with peer in the change team” – the 6th top benefit;
6. There were only slight differences in the average score on “commitment to implement the change process” (-1%);
7. There was a 15.8% increase in the average score on “sufficient knowledge and training on implementing the change process” – the 3rd top benefit;
8. There was an 18.1% increase in the average score on “ability to manage the change implementation process” – the 1<sup>st</sup> top benefit;
9. There was a 13.1% increase in the average score on “confidence in implementing the change process” – the 4<sup>th</sup> top benefit;
10. The overall average score on “enhancing the assertiveness in implementing the change process” after the workshop was high at 4.73, against a scale with a 1 rating designated as “lowest” and a 5 rating designated as “highest”;

Examples of feedback from informal sharing session with randomly selected participants:

*“I am happy being able to participate in the project from its design stage. As I have been with the Institution for more than 15 years, I am fully aware of the downsides of the current student record system and I do not wish to see the new system not meeting my practical needs in future. I have always been committed in implementing the change process and help my team-mates as much as I can. This workshop gave me extra opportunities to share my view with peers in the change team.” – by A. Chan (See note)*

*“I appreciate the continuous communication and transparency of the change events so that I could brief new staff on the prospect of the new system, as they are complaining about the time they have to spend on working with the current system which has been obsolete for a long time! This workshop gave me an insight into coaching and equipped me with useful tools – listening and questioning skills, which would help me in dealing with my colleagues during the implementation process in future.” – by B. Lee*

*“As change agents, we would have to guide and train other programme staff in the Institution on the new system when it is ready. We do not have any experience in handling changing project and the resistance to change which we may encounter. We hoped to receive some training and this workshop has given me extras strengths. And it has enhanced my understanding on a change process in an organization.” – by C Cheung*

## Discussion

Coaching had been applied in the change processes in the above project with very positive feedback and appreciation from the Change Team. However, it only served as an integral part of the support program in the change process. The Change Managers recommended hiring an external change coach because they believed an external coach would have an independent perspective, credibility and experience to support and facilitate effective change. In addition, an external coach has greater financial motivation to succeed with their clients than does an internal coach (Bennett & Bush, 2014), and after all, senior leadership have already been heavily loaded with change work and related activities. However, the combined roles of project leader and coach, and change manager and coach in project examples of other organizations is not uncommon, it is common to see executives wearing more than one hat and performing multiple functions in parallel in this fast-moving working environment.

Since the number of participants of the workshop was 40, they were divided into two groups to attend the workshop in two separate days. Team coaching was selected due to budget reasons and also due to its anticipated benefits as described by Clutterbuck (2007), ‘helping the team improve performance, and the process by which performance is achieved through reflection and dialogue’ (Clutterbuck, 2007).

According to the survey in *Best Practices in Change Management* – 2014 Edition, two of the top five obstacles to success in change management in organizations are: resistance to change from employees; and middle management resistance (Creasey & Hiatt, 2014). The project example is a directed change project driven from the top of the organization and relies on authority at the top, persuasion in the middle, and compliance at the bottom (Kerber & Buono, 2010). In the pre-workshop survey, the resistance from staff was moderate at an average score of 2.89 against a scale with a 1 rating designated as “lowest” and a 5 rating designated as “highest”; and after the workshop, there was a 9.7% decrease in the average score of this factor, to 2.61, which exceeded the medium level. It indicates that more work has to be done in regard to persuasion in the middle. However, other supporting activities such as communication, employee involvement and managing the transitions may attain synergy benefits as a whole.

In this change project, coaching had been made as an integral part of a supporting programme. Change Managers listened and agreed with the request that the change agents would need some coaching in order to do their job well. Despite it was only a one-day workshop for each of the participants, the benefits for the group speak for themselves through the differences in the score rating on the factors related to the change process at pre- and post-workshop setting.

### Suggestions for the Future

Further coaching intervention in future may be necessary to the processes of reinforcement and sustainment, as soft and people-related factors typically present great challenges in these processes. The development of the Change Managers to become internal coaches may add value in this situation, and using more cost-effective internal coaches would be useful for managers and supervisors. However, when training internal coaches, using externally based development programs or bringing in external talent as trainers may lead to higher coaching success (American Management Association, 2008).

Combining coaching and change management could be very powerful in facilitating changes in an organization. ‘Dealing with organizational change and dilemmas is not for the faint-hearted’ (O’Neill, 2007, p.19). Just as sailors learn to read the wind in order to tack and open their sails, the Change Manager must read a few of the signs: key players, support change

agents, timing, go for understanding and keep moving. Only experience and a willingness to act as a coach of change is needed to be instrumental in change. The Change Manager also needs to have his or her own ongoing reflective space, in which to reflect on practice (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). And the Change Manager may expand this practice to include a blend of education and coaching, which would be a very powerful tool in facilitating a change process.

### **Conclusion**

The results of the survey in the case study demonstrated the link between the process of change and coaching in an organization, and these linkages were as below:

- enhance the clarification on the change process
- increase in the degree of emotion aroused in participants
- decrease in the degree of participants' resistance to the change process
- enhance the helping relations with participants' peer in the change team
- increase in the level of knowledge and training on implementing the change process
- increase in the ability to manage the change implementation process
- enhance the confidence in implementing the change process
- achieving a high score in enhancing the assertiveness in implementing the change process after the coaching workshop

However, any sustaining change may require ongoing coaching as an integral part of the process.

Change becomes more important as an organization ages, because it keeps the organization and its management team updated, contemporary and risk sensitive. The business environment is changing rapidly and it is important for an organization and its people to be ahead of the changes, or at least excited to move along with them. Coaching is extremely helpful when an organization is aware of its needs to change, no matter whether the changes are being driven by an external or internal environment. In situations where people are trying to make changes at the emotional level, there may be push back, panic, a lack of confidence, avoidance or insecurity (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). A coach is a professional who has the skills to help others effect personal change.

Organizations are using a variety of methods to measure the success of their coaching initiatives. However, some observers believe 'coaching is not well suited to metrics' (Americian Management Association, 2008). The observations and processes described and the reflections made in this article were based on a real life project in a sizable organization. Quantitative and qualitative reflections on practical cases can truly demonstrate the link between the process of change and coaching in an organization, and it is evident in this study that the link creates positive energy in the change process, especially in raising ability and confidence.

### **Limitations and the Need for Further Studies**

The limitations of the study were: it was case study base; the sample size was small; the questionnaires had not been validated and the data collected had not been analyzed statistically. Nonetheless the premise of this research has been validated – change coaching is an optimal support to facilitate effective change (Bennett & Bush, 2014). The benefit of coaching in sustaining change in the case study is to be ascertained (the project was on-going at the time of writing). The article heeds a call on adopting coaching to support organizational learning and change, especially in education institutions where coaching is not yet a common practice in the

workplace. Further reflections, studies and or empirical research are warranted to foster the value of coaching in change management today.

### **Note**

All names in the assignment have been changed to preserve anonymity.

### **Appreciation**

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