

## Research Summary

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# How Can Charities Use Coaching to Help Develop Managers and Achieve their Mission?

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### 1. Executive Summary

Many organisations now use coaching as a leadership and management development tool, and there is a growing body of research on coaching. However, there has been very little literature published on the extent and nature of coaching in the charity sector.

This nine-month research project is the first UK study to examine the views and experiences of coaching with charity managers, Learning and Development (L&D) professionals, and coaches. The study firstly involved 10 interviews to scope the research. Taking a case study approach, 10 further semi-structured interviews were then carried out in two large, national charities.

The study was carried out in 2019 as part of the MA in Coaching and Mentoring Practice at Oxford Brookes University.

Main Findings
1. The two case study charities were making a surprisingly substantial, ongoing investment in a range of coaching interventions
2. The importance of the charity context of coaching was evident in an apparent close similarity between the social values of charities and key values and the ethos of coaching
3. Coaching was seen as an important way of charities showing their social values in action and supporting hard-working managers who are committed to the cause
4. Coaching offered many valuable benefits: developing managers, promoting well-being, and improving organisational effectiveness
5. There was a clear desire for a range of further coaching opportunities to be made available - if resources were to allow
6. Coaching and what it can achieve was not always seen as well-understood by everyone
7. There were strong views that coaching has great potential for the charity sector.

The study provides a rare picture of the value of coaching in charities. The findings add to research knowledge by giving evidence of the significance of the organisational context of coaching. The study aids better understanding of coaching in charities. It may lead to further research into this much neglected topic, and ultimately, more coaching interventions in charities to help them in turn improve all our lives and change the world for the better.

## 2. Background

Coaching has become increasingly prevalent in organisations – a recent CIPD (2015) survey found that about three quarters of organisations from various sectors offered coaching/mentoring. The significant growth in research on coaching in the last two decades also provides a body of evidence of its benefits for businesses and executives. However, there is little research that explicitly explores how the charity sector uses or benefits from coaching, or how the context of charities may influence the practice of coaching.

**Coaching in Organisations:**  
A work-related process based on 1:1 conversations between coach and coachee that focus on facilitating learning, development, performance, and well-being.

### Professional Contexts and Coaching

There is growing recognition of the importance of organisational context in management literature generally. But apart from one unique study by van Nieuwerburgh (2016), research has rarely focused explicitly on the professional context in which coaching takes place. Whilst coaching is both different and the same across professional contexts, ultimately, it does not take place in a vacuum. Coaching may be influenced by different contexts (eg financial or legal services in the private sector, or health or education public sector bodies) because of, for example, the nature of a sector and/or the people who choose to work in it.

### The Charity Sector

Charities in the UK*
166,000 registered charitable organisations and groups
Total annual income of over £47 billion
888,000 employees
11.9 million people formally volunteered at least once last year
*NCVO (2018, 2019)

Charities are social values-led, non-profit organisations and groups. Unlike the public sector, they are independent from government and are heavily reliant on fundraising income.

The UK charity sector is sizeable. Almost 80% of households use a charitable service annually (Hudson, 2017). They are a vital part of the fabric of a caring society, and many provide valuable services that help people in need.

Charities face many challenges. These include, limited funding for services where demand outstrips supply, the need to demonstrate impact, increased public scrutiny, governance issues, managing multiple stakeholders, and managing staff with high commitment to their social mission. Such economic, structural-operational and legal features can make leading and managing charities especially difficult. However, there is limited literature on how coaching might help charity managers learn and develop to deal with these demands.

### Research on Coaching in Charities

Only one study has been published specifically on coaching in charities in the UK (Whybrow and Lancaster, 2012), plus a further nine US studies of the non-profit sector (eg Howard, Gislason and Kellogg, 2010). Most of these studies are practitioner-based and small-scale, focusing mainly on executive coaching and self-assessed benefits of coaching. There is little evidence specifically on how the charity context may affect coaching. Neither has research explored the views and experiences of different stakeholders receiving, commissioning or delivering coaching in charities. This research aims to start to address these gaps.

### 3. Method

With few previous studies on coaching in UK charities to inform this study, the first stage involved a scoping research phase of 10 unstructured interviews with professionals from the sector: L&D/HR managers, coaches/management consultants, and professional bodies supporting L&D, coaching and/or the sector. This scoping phase helped provide an initial picture of coaching in charities, inform research questions and methodology, and identify potential charities to be studied.

The study then investigated coaching in two large, national, case study charities: one working on mental health and the other on environmental issues. Ten semi-structured interviews gathered the views and experiences of three stakeholder groups:

- Managers who had received coaching
- L&D/HR professionals who oversee and/or commission coaching initiatives
- Coaches.

Thematic analysis drew out themes from interviews to address research questions such as how charities configure coaching initiatives, how the charity context might influence coaching, and the potential benefits of coaching.

### 4. Findings

#### 4.1 Substantial Investment in Coaching

Previous research has suggested that those charities that do offer coaching may tend to provide it in a somewhat ad hoc or sporadic way as needs arise. However, this study found that despite the pressure of limited resources, both charities were making a remarkable, substantial, planned investment in various forms of coaching interventions, as summarised below.

	CASE STUDY CHARITY 1	CASE STUDY CHARITY 2
<b>Field</b>	Mental health	Environment
<b>No. of Staff (approx.)</b>	500	160
<b>Coaching Provided</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Development of coaching culture as part of HR strategy</li> <li>2. Leadership Development Programme includes: internal coaching; peer coaching; and executive coaching</li> <li>3. Peer coaching as part of internal project management training</li> <li>4. Internal coaching</li> <li>5. Coaching with external coaches</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Three coaching sessions follow-up to internal management training</li> <li>2. Coaching for those returning to work eg from parental or long-term sick leave</li> <li>3. Up to 6 sessions for those with specific workplace challenges</li> </ol>
<b>Coaches</b>	Internal L&D coaches, peer coaches, and external coaches	External coaches
<b>Coaching Skills Training</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Coaching skills part of Leadership Development Programme</li> <li>2. Coaching skills part of project management training course</li> <li>3. Coaching skills workshops for managers</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Coaching skills as part of management training</li> <li>2. Coaching skills course for managers and staff</li> </ol>

## 4.2 Similarity in the Values of Coaching and Charities

A significant finding is an apparent close fit between the ethos of coaching and the social values of charities. The values and principles of coaching were perceived as being distinctly similar to many of those relating to services for clients, management of staff, ways of working, and organisational culture of the case study charities. These similarities, such as those shown in the table below, indicate that coaching as an L&D intervention might be particularly suited to social values-led charities. Coaching initiatives may help charities develop a coherent organisational culture and management approach that ties in with crucial principles of support services delivery.

*“I feel like the nature and ethos of coaching just really matches with the nature and ethos of a charity, especially a mental health charity”*  
L&D/HR Manager, Charity 1

Coaching and charity services both often involve:
<b>Facilitating another person’s development and well-being</b>
<b>Helping others realise their potential</b>
<b>Positive human interaction</b>
<b>Listening and understanding</b>
<b>Supporting exploration of choices</b>
<b>Overcoming challenges</b>
<b>Promoting change, autonomy and independence</b>
<b>Not telling people what to do</b>

*“I think coaching has got a huge potential because there are lots of incredible people working really hard who just don’t have any time for reflection, and it would enable them to be better at delivering their job”*  
Manager Coachee, Charity 2

Interviewees also saw a role for coaching in showing a charity’s values in action and as a gift to hardworking managers who deal with many internal and external demands. Managers were seen as contending with working in environments that are dynamic, busy, fast-paced, and/or involve organisational growth and change.

Managers were also viewed as having limited time to take up coaching or L&D opportunities generally, and tended to de-prioritise their own personal development in favour of a strong emotional commitment to the charity’s mission. Providing coaching was viewed as a recognition of this commitment and showing commitment to supporting them in return. This finding suggests that coaching can help charities show their positive values and be responsible employers by investing in the development and well-being of committed staff.

## 4.3 Coaching has Great Potential for Charities

Another important finding is the perception of coaching having significant potential for the charity sector. Interviewees gave vivid descriptions of how coaching helps develop and support passionate charity managers and their values-led organisations to deal with the many pressures and challenges they face.

## 4.4 Coaching is not Always Well-Understood

*“I still think there’s a lot of misconception around coaching. I think people don’t fully understand the benefit of it”*  
L&D Manager, Charity 1

Whilst coaching was well-established in both charities, there was a sense of it still being seen by some people as new, with limited understanding of what coaching is, how to access it or what it can achieve. Lack of understanding might hinder getting coaching initiatives off the ground in charities, or individuals accessing or getting the most out of coaching. Some interviewees expressed a need for coaching to be better promoted in the charity sector.

## 4.5 Many Benefits of Coaching

Interviewees saw many powerful benefits of coaching for managers, including personal development and enhanced resilience, confidence and well-being. These were seen as greatly benefiting the charities too in terms of effectiveness.

*“Having access to coaching has helped me be better at delivering some of my own objectives in my role, and so I think that that’s been beneficial to the organisation”*  
Manager Coachee, Charity 2

*“For me coaching was crucial because it was quite a transition to being a leader”*  
Manager Coachee, Charity 1

Coaching was also experienced as having a major positive impact in enhancing managers’ leadership capabilities and developing individual leadership style. Coaching may therefore play a key role in promoting effective leadership in charities, with recent research (eg Terry, Rees and Jacklin-

Jarvis, 2018) and government reports (eg Cabinet Office, 2013) indicating a leadership deficit and lack of investment in leadership skills in the sector.

Interviewees described how coaching offers the space and time to explore issues and address problems. Further benefits included helping managers find their own solutions, challenging perceptions, and increasing self-awareness.

*“I do remember finding coaching very helpful and really like a bit of a relief. I felt like I was very lucky to have the space created to actually look in a bit”*  
Manager Coachee, Charity 2

Learning techniques, tools and practical skills (such as workload management) were also seen as benefits of coaching that helped organisational effectiveness too.

Overall, the perceived benefits of coaching summarised in the table below appear generic and not specific only to the charity sector. However, some benefits do seem to be particularly relevant to the leadership and management of charities in supporting them in responding rapidly to fast-changing and uncertain external forces that impact on charities.

<b>Main Benefits of Coaching</b>
<b>Leadership development and skills</b>
<b>Improved management skills and new behaviours</b>
<b>Improved organisational effectiveness</b>
<b>Developing a supportive organisational culture and ways of working</b>
<b>Addressing staff management issues</b>
<b>Improved performance</b>
<b>Improved well-being</b>
<b>Increased confidence and self-awareness</b>
<b>Reduced stress and increased resilience</b>

Finally, there were many positive feelings expressed about the experience of coaching and the coaches themselves, including the value of having access to an external coach who is more independent of the organisation. And there was a strong desire for more coaching to be available if resources were available.

*“You’re so busy, it is incredibly rare to have the opportunity to just sit back and reflect on your behaviour or your management or leadership style. So, having access to coaching is incredibly valuable, and it forces that reflection in a way that is really important”*

*Manager Coachee, Charity 2*

## 5. Conclusion

The findings illustrate strikingly how coaching can support charity managers and their organisations to work effectively towards achieving their mission. Interviewees gave vivid descriptions of coaching helping passionate managers deal with the many pressures and challenges they face. The study has helped bring the charity context centre-stage into the coaching research literature and indicates important similarities in key values between coaching and charities. The findings may act as a springboard for further research where little or no evidence currently exists on topics such as developing a coaching culture, or the use of internal, managerial or team coaching in charities.

*“I just think coaching can now improve on a very fundamental level how happy people are in the workplace, how well people can work together, and how people are able to develop professionally for themselves”*

*Manager Coachee, Charity 2*

With increased knowledge, more charities - limited money and time permitting - may be able to reap the many benefits of coaching. And coaches may understand better the charity context within which coaching can be delivered. Ultimately, this study could play a part in enhancing the ability of those working in charities to provide beneficial services and to create a more equal, caring and healthy world.

## Further Information and References

Peter Watson is a coach and management consultant with over 20 years’ experience as a manager in charities. He is co-founder of Mirador Coaching [www.miradorcoaching.co.uk](http://www.miradorcoaching.co.uk)

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