

# COUNTER PRODUCTIVE

Selfridges is training senior managers to become coaches – and empowering employees and improving customer service as a result. **Sarah-Jane North** reports

**C**hanging the way you manage after a decade may seem like a Herculean task, but that's what Chris

Mitchell recently had to do.

Having worked for the Selfridges department store for nearly 13 years, Mitchell, area manager for services, was used to telling his employees what to do when a problem arose. Not any longer. Instead, managers must coach their teams on a day-to-day basis to help them reach their potential.

This new management style was installed by Selfridges' learning and development team with the help of coaching consultants Starr Consulting. Starr has been running a two-day "manager as coach" workshop for Selfridges' managers, with a one-day follow-up session six months later to check on progress. The workshop,

says Julie Starr, director of Starr Consulting, equips managers with two tools to help them apply coaching to their everyday working lives.

## 1. Formal conversation

The first and more structured tool is the formal coaching conversation – in other words, a performance review. Managers are provided with a "coaching path", a five-step process to help them navigate through a conversation driven by the employee.

## 2. Coaching 'on the hoof'

The second tool is crucial to the style of management Selfridges wants. This three-step response coaching model helps managers to have coaching conversations "on the hoof". It requires them to throw off any traditional styles of managing they use. (See also Julie Starr's column in *Toolbox*, page 50.)

"It all sounds very simple," concedes Starr, "but the beauty of it is that it wakes you up from the normal 'fix-it' mode of managing. We tell managers that their job is not about knowing it all and doing it all, but about creating the conditions that allow others to learn and grow. And it is those bite-sized conversations that present the real opportunities to coach."

Indeed, it is the everyday nature of this coaching style that holds the most appeal for Selfridges, operating as it does in the highly competitive, ever-changing world of retail.

Mitchell does not have time to hold umpteen meetings in his office each day, with 120 employees, including nine direct reports, and five departments to manage. There is no such thing as a typical working day here either, so varied are his responsibilities. Within his remit



at the flagship London store are the information desk, car parking, the safe deposit department, alterations, customer services, payroll and expenses, suppliers and two franchise outlets.

Although the start of each day may be the same, what follows is anyone's guess. So, says Mitchell, being equipped to coach his managers on the spot has proved

to be a revelation. "I did question why I should change my style after 10 years and I found it difficult at first," he admits. "But my old line manager told me that eventually it would become second nature, and he was right."

Mitchell says switching to the new coaching style was made easier by having a new team unfamiliar with his old ways.

On his first day back at the store after the workshop, he gathered them all together and asked for their support.

"I told them not to let me give them the answers," he recalls. "People do sometimes appreciate you being direct and giving them the solution, but more often they want the chance to come up with their own and in doing so develop their own skills."

Leading the drive to overhaul management practices was learning and development manager Caroline Darker. Charged with embedding the chain's new values into the business practices and management behaviours of employees, Darker saw a chance for store managers to reinvent themselves, and turned to Starr Consulting.

Selfridges' new values, launched two years ago, include

## Learning points

- Don't expect managers to find time for lots of formal coaching sessions with employees.
- Help managers to coach "on the hoof" by putting them through workshops of at least two days.
- Help them to stay with the process by giving them simple step-by-step models such as Starr's response coaching model.
- Be patient – it takes time for managers to switch management style but it will eventually become second nature.
- Encourage managers to get their employees on board, reminding them when they drift back to being overly directive.
- Managing with a coaching style can help people to feel more valued and develop more quickly.

showing respect, being customer-focused, adopting a positive stance and taking ownership of issues. For Darker, coaching offered a natural way to ensure these values were upheld by all who worked in the company's four stores – in London, Birmingham and two in Manchester – and its shared services centre in Leicestershire.

“We had been consolidating bad behaviours in the past and we needed something strong and compelling to move away from that,” she says.

“Across the business we needed people to get away from functional expertise being their sole driver and instead make management expertise more a part of their role.”

High staff turnover rates are not uncommon in the retail sector and an employee's relationship with their manager is often the central factor in any decision to leave. Added to the mix is the highly pressured, unpredictable environment.

Managers need to be seen on the shopfloor, not locked away in meetings all day, asserts Darker. They should be accessible to their teams and up to date with the issues of the day. Therefore, they need the appropriate skills to interact with and manage their employees, which is what made this coaching style ideal.

“I think it makes people feel more valued, develops them more quickly, enables them to take more on, engages them, gets them to take ownership of their own issues and ultimately makes for a more pleasant working environment,” she says.

“Coaching is not always nice – it can be very tough – but as a coach you need to know how to end it in a good place, with



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people knowing what they need to do.”

So far 45 managers have attended the workshop, which brings managers from all four stores and the shared services centre together and requires them to interact through role-playing to acquire the coaching skills they need. Another 50 are due to attend this year. All are at area or sales manager level with responsibility for five or more departments – the theory being, says Darker, that “if you can get them to have coaching conversations the others will follow”.

Launched as a learning and development initiative, the workshop and the skills it teaches have quickly become a business priority. A recent survey of employees showed they were now more positive about their relationships with their managers.

The intention is to train another 100 senior managers over the next two years, followed by 200 or so junior managers. The workshops are currently delivered in London but as the programme extends its reach, regional workshops may become necessary.

“We are still at the early stages of this journey but the initial signs are good,” Darker says. She admits, however, to pockets of resistance to the new management style.

“There are people who have found it a real struggle but that is among those who just don't get it. We are not saying that managers cannot be directional, simply that they need to have a more flexible approach.

“I'd like to think we will eventually get to the point where it has become the Selfridges' way of managing, but we've only just started the journey.”

Back on the shopfloor at the London store, Mitchell is seeing results. He reports improvements in customer service and customer satisfaction levels and more empowered teams.

“It took some time to get into the new way of managing but I no longer think I have all the answers,” he says. ■

## Further information

- The CIPD's two-day course, The Manager as Coach, which can be run in-house, helps managers to adopt a coaching management style and maximise the potential of the individual. [www.cipd.co.uk/training/mgt/mac](http://www.cipd.co.uk/training/mgt/mac) 020 8612 6202

- Caroline Darker is speaking at the “Developing coaching skills for line managers” session, chaired by Julie Starr, at the CIPD's HRD 2008 learning and development event on 14-17 April at London's ExCeL. [www.cipd.co.uk/hrd](http://www.cipd.co.uk/hrd) 020 8612 6248

