



## Coaching in Russia – first steps<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The article describes the conditions and characteristics affecting the development of the Russian coaching market since the beginning of its formation from the second half of the 90s of the XX century. The author highlights separate socio-cultural factors that influence the development of the coaching market and that are influencing the perception of coaching by business in Russia. Special attention is paid to the stereotypes regarding the conduct of business, business planning, money, personal and professional development that existed in the community and in the minds of potential customers at the moment of appearance of coaching as a distinct service in the market of training, learning and development. Analyzing who become consumers of coaching services and what kind of requests clients bring to coaches, the author identifies three most common categories of consumers of coaching, and also describes what challenges coaches face in their practice. The article also focuses on the sources of specialists becoming coaches, the development of the coach training market, and on the most popular coaching requests. Giving specific examples of how coaching works for individual as well as how it is implemented in various organizations, and relating that to the development of professional coaching communities, the author refers to potential prospects and challenges for the development of the coaching profession in Russia.

**Keywords:** coaching, coaching market in Russia, socio-cultural factors, typical coaching clients, coaching in organizations.

## Introduction

Until the end of the 1990s hardly anybody in Russia knew what coaching was. The country's experience of the first five years of the market economy and new business owners resulted in recognition of the need for training and people development, if Russian businesses were going to compete. People wanted to gain new skills but the traditional education system was not able to respond. Mentoring tradition in Russian mentality was strong. Short-term skills training, time management or leadership programs became popular. Some of them were brought to Russia from abroad; others were created by Russian businesses that responded to the new era. Psychology as a science was pretty strong in Russia during the Soviet period but its achievements were not much applied to real life and/or business. The shift of the system let applied psychologists use their skills in business, and training and development started to flourish.

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the chapter written for the 'Diversity in Coaching' book published by Jonathan Passmore, Association for Coaching (Kogan Page, 2009).

When coaching was first brought to Russia in mid-nineties, the proponents were mostly NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) practitioners. There were no books on coaching available in Russian and the whole concept was far from being understood. Coaching was often confused with therapy, and as a result some Russian businesspeople avoided it, fearing the potential shame of being seen to need “therapy”. Others suggested that coaching should be treated as consulting, but this brought the expectation that the coach would be an expert in the field in which the manager worked.

In 2002 there were as few as 10 companies in Russia that offered coaching. Nowadays there are scores of consulting and training companies that have coaching amongst other services they offer and thousands of freelancers who call themselves “coaches”. Coaching has become a new fashion and as it looks attractive and there is no profession regulation many psychologists and other specialists just added ‘coach’ to their business cards and PR materials without proper training. So the overall quality of coaching still leaves a lot to be desired and there is a high need for quality coaching skills training programs and the development of professional standards.

## **Russian business and management culture**

Until thunderstorm starts muzhik [a man] will not cross himself (Russian saying). Russian business culture in general can be described as an ad hoc culture. Although the country had experienced a so-called “planned economy” during the Soviet period, the “plan” was seen more in terms of formality than as an action plan with real target setting. The fast changing business environment of the 1990s made planning redundant, as the focus was on responding to a dynamic, even chaotic emerging market. People tend look for a solution only when things start falling apart. Coaching at its first steps in Russia was seen as a tool that can offer a magic effect on performance, nowadays becomes obvious that it can have impact in business results when it is systematically integrated into the business culture.

Although management as a scientific discipline existed in the Soviet Union, there was no entrepreneurial culture. The 1990s have shown a huge gap between knowledge and practice. The belief that anybody can manage economically and that management does not require any specific skills was a costly mistake, which many among the new generation of Russian businesspeople made. The gap between knowledge and practice can also be described as a gap between culture and money. Those who had money hardly paid attention to any culture issues; those who had an understanding of culture had very little access to money and real management.

The process typical of the 1990s in Russia can be perfectly described using the developmental journey (Whitmore, 2002). The gap between those who paid more attention to the spiritual side and those who focused on earning money grew until it became evident that really successful management can hardly develop and grow without both things being integrated. Of course there were businesspeople and companies that were closer to a middle, balanced direction, but unfortunately these were a minority. Those who had good theoretical knowledge had to gain real business experience and practice what they were talking about. Coaching became a good tool to build a bridge between the two groups.

## Typical coaching clients and requests

Typical individual coaching clients in Russia can be described as three major groups.

1. International minds – usually have high-quality education and work experience in international or big Russian companies. Most of them speak foreign languages. Being pretty well informed about what coaching is, they treat it as a service and a tool for boosting their performance.
2. Innovation seekers – they are always ready to try something new to make their life better or to solve their problems. They treat coaching as one of several possible options and tend to try different coaching approaches. Typical coaching school students.
3. Person-oriented clients – they feel they need some tools to help them change their life but have little or no understanding of what can help them. Usually become clients when they meet a coach they like and trust.

Coaching requests vary from presentation or time management skills to personal development and career coaching, and there is a tendency for any initial request to transform into a more complex and personal mission and purpose pretty fast. It is still quite often that from the very beginning the client expects that a coach, as an expert, will tell them what they should do. It looks as if the client expects a miracle. High client expectations mean he or she wants things to be changed fast and expects that the coach can bring this about. Pretty often it becomes a challenge for a coach to stay within the coaching frame and maintain a non-directive approach or not to get into therapy or counseling, and as many coaches have the background in those disciplines, no systematic coaching skills training and no professional supervision, it creates very different expectations from clients. When the difference between coaching and any other approach becomes obvious for a client, the coaching relationship gets stronger and more productive.

The number of requests from companies, business owners and executives significantly grew since 2008-2009 when the companies faced the world crisis. Most of them are related to changing management culture, leadership skills development, executive team coaching and stress management. This requires more integrative and systemic, rather than a purely behavioral approach, which focuses on developing new skills. Sometimes insight and clear vision gained during a coaching session helps the executive client to make a real breakthrough in business and it becomes the first step of integrating coaching into the organization.

### Case Study: Alexander

Alexander is a middle-aged middle manager in a Russian media company. He decided to hire a coach when he felt that his professional life had got stuck. He had applied for several promotions but had been unsuccessful, and was wondering what he should do next to help him move his career forward. He had attended some training over the past two years but few of the sessions he had attended had helped much. He was looking for a new tool to unlock his potential and shape his new targets. He wanted to explore new opportunities, and wanted some clarification about whether he should continue to work hard and serve his current company, or should take the advice of friends and leave. Alexander contracted for four sessions.

During the coaching session the issue of duty and loyalty came up several times. Did Alexander need to suffer more for his company, accepting secondments out of Moscow to other cities, before they would reward him? Did he fit in, even though he was not one of the groups who dominated in the most powerful positions in the company? The session helped Alexander identify that his real passion was photography, and that while he could work in the wider media, he really liked design

and managing the shoots. He decided to become a professional in this sphere, and left the company to set up his own photography business. Making this step, thinking through the barriers and hurdles he might face and making plans for how he might overcome them made good use of the coaching. While the new career went against many of the things that Alexander had been brought up to believe, it allowed him to move forward rather than feel trapped.

During the sessions he made a one-year detailed plan and defined checkpoints for the next five years. To support the move into the new business area, Alexander went back to obtain some further training. He combined this study with building the business during the first year, undertaking work as an event and wedding photo-artist at the weekends.

## **Where do coaches come from?**

The first generation of Russian coaches were trained by Western trainers or coaches and were from a mix of different backgrounds, but mostly psychology, therapy, business or NLP. Some therapy approaches, such as solution-focused therapy, are very close to coaching and as a result some therapists saw coaching as one way to diversify their business and attract more clients. This crossover between areas has also been true for NLP specialists, who have drawn on their NLP training to offer coaching. Both of these groups have struggled to understand the nature of Russian business, the distinctive nature of coaching and the role the Russian psyche plays in influencing the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of coachees.

Coaches from business and mentoring have focused on transmitting their knowledge. Their major weakness has been that they believe in 'right' models and ways to achieve things and pay less attention to the individual profiles of people and the different nature of business in Russia. Since 2009 there is growing tendency to misuse the term 'coaching' in various info-business programs promoted via Internet.

However, a second generation of coaching professionals is growing from the professional business trainers, businesspeople and HR professional environment. They are aware of the latest training and development issues and nowadays form about 60 per cent of a typical coaching school presentation's audience.

The number of coaching training programs in Moscow and in Russia has grown significantly between 2008 and 2014. It applies both to local schools and international schools coming to Russia. Coaching is now established, with coaching on offer as part of MBA programs within universities and through private management companies.

The role of professional communities in building awareness on coaching in the market has also significantly grown since 2007. The active cooperation between local Professional Association of Russian-Speaking Coaches that organizes open weekly coaching events and open conferences and ICF-Russia chapter that became one of the fastest growing chapters in the world in 2011 has generated new wave of interest to obtaining coaching skills among business professionals.

## **Coaching in Russian business**

There are already quite a lot of companies in Russia where coaching has become a core part of their people development work. One example of the pioneers of Russian market is RESO, the insurance company, which has built the best insurance agent training school and has integrated coaching culture into the company management system. Led by the slogan "Here you will be astonished by

your abilities”, they use a value-based and performance-focused coaching programmed that has three levels differentiated by dominating coaching type.

The first level is “executive” – top management coaching. The second one is ‘partner’ coaching for mid-management and business partners. The third level is so-called ‘expert’ coaching for sales staff. To unlock potential and maximize performance, the employees and the company should have common values and vision and coherent aims and targets, as well as efficient resource management and clear interpersonal communication. Each person at managerial level gets proper coaching skills training and each employee has an individual development plan that reflects his/her targets correlated with company targets and common values.

The growing telecom market and banking industry in Russia became the fields where high-level professional teams completely integrate coaching into the system. Beeline, one of three leading telecom providers, has pioneered this process, inviting Russian, British and US coaches to train their managers in coaching skills and integrating it into leadership and HiPo development. Coaching became a part of the high-performing staff retention programmed at Beeline. It includes “an introduction to the key coaching models; the development of core coaching skills; understanding how coaching fits into the workplace; using coaching as a tool to get the best out of others; understanding your impact as a leader; and developing a personal plan for implementing what would be learned on the course” (Sparrow, 2007).

Sberbank, the biggest Russian bank, which consists of 18 territorial banks with more than 20 000 units and 240 thousand employees, started tremendous changes in corporate culture, management and performance management in 2008. Executive coaching became one of the core tools in supporting changes and it gets successfully integrated into the personal development track for executives and upper-middle management and Hi-Po Sberbank employees all over the country.

It can also be seen as a trend that coaching becomes an entry point for organizational changes and strategy building for middle and small business, which is nowadays getting ready to pay for coaching. Owners who gain a clear vision and understanding of unused potential get interested in services that combine coaching, business consulting and training. This quite often applies to companies that grow from small family businesses to mid-size organizations or from local mid-size organizations to national networks. “Before we started changes using coaching in the company I had lots of doubts. The changes were necessary but it looked as though nobody had energy to start moving ahead. But it worked. I never knew my staff could be so involved and take responsibility for so many issues” – the words of an Internet shop owner whose team increased performance by more than 25 per cent on average within two months during a team and individual performance coaching programmed. “We now know we are able to make dreams true together”.

## Summary

A massive period of transformation has affected Russia over the last two decades. The emergence of new business has created a strong demand for coaching in the emerging business sectors and world economical crisis made it obvious that business and people need to invest into leadership development, increasing the performance and creativity.

There is already a strong demand for coaching, and with the mutual efforts of Russian and international specialists coaching are getting more and more integrated into the Russian business culture. To move forward, coaching in Russia still needs to develop competent and local coaching solutions that match the psyche of Russia and the demands of Russian business. It needs to clearly distinguish itself from therapy and consulting by creating a new lexicon and with increased coach

training and professional standards including coaches' supervision and credentialing. Although Russia is a big country with the growing access to the Internet and Internet-based technologies and growing interest in work-life balance and high performance coaching has more chance to get spread in Russia as fast as in other nations.

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## Коучинг в России<sup>2</sup>

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В статье описаны условия и особенности, влиявшие на рынок коучинга в России с момента начала его формирования со второй половины 90-х гг. XX века. Автором выделены отдельные социокультурные факторы, оказавшие влияние на развитие рынка коучинга и влияющие на его восприятие в бизнес-среде России. Отдельное внимание в статье уделяется стереотипам относительно ведения бизнеса, отношения к бизнес-планированию, к деньгам, к личному и профессиональному развитию, существовавшим в обществе в целом и в сознании потенциальных клиентов в момент появления коучинга как отдельной услуги на рынке обучения и развития. Анализируя, кто становится потребителями услуг коучинга и с какими запросами клиенты обращаются к коучам, автор выделяет три наиболее типичных категории потребителей данных услуг, а также описывает, с какими вызовами коучи сталкиваются в своей практике. В статье рассматривается, какие специалисты приходят в коучинг, как развивается рынок услуг по подготовке коучей, какие из услуг коучинга являются наиболее востребованными. Приводя конкретные примеры, как коучинг работает в индивидуальной практике, как происходит внедрение коучинга в организациях различного масштаба, и соотнося наблюдаемые факторы с тем, что как происходит развитие профессиональных сообществ коучей, автор обозначает потенциальные перспективы и вызовы развития профессии «коуч» в России.

**Ключевые слова:** коучинг, рынок коучинга в России, социокультурные факторы, типичные клиенты коучинга, коучинг в организациях.

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